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Stage Seven:

Trans Representation and Gregory Stanton's Ten Stages of Genocide

Why do you keep secrets? Do you do it for comfort? For greed? Have you ever had to keep a secret in order to keep yourself safe? The documentary film, *Disclosure*, directed by Sam Feder, released in 2020, explores the representation of trans people in the media throughout history and delves into an all too well known phenomenon around the trans community: the presumption that trans people have a secret, and the expectation that they share it. We've seen in exponential frequency over recent years how quickly a place once thought to hold refuge can be turned into a prison and the insidious consequences that tend to follow. This essay will examine the connections between the topics of discussions in *Disclosure* and the dwindling safety of the transgender community in the United States.

Disclosure is made up of a collection of interviews with trans performers and filmmakers and sets a conversational tone as each of these creators discusses their beliefs and reasonings based on personal analysis and lived experience. The conversation of the film begins with the one and only Laverne Cox talking about her first introduction to transness through film and the way in which the concept of it “existed in the realm of humor” for her as she watched her family members react with laughter to cross-dressed images on screen. Here, in the first three minutes of the film, we see the first of many examples of what representation means to children, which is a topic that reappears consistently throughout the film. From there the film moves on to begin

discussing some of the earliest images of transness on screen, diving into the birth of stereotype in cinema, also known as D.W. Griffith's filmography. D.W. Griffith is known mainly for his film *The Birth of a Nation*, known for its wildly racist rhetoric and imagery which was originally titled *The Clansman* for the first few months of its release. His film *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) portrays one of the earliest images of a gender non-conforming character on screen, where the character is made to be the silent comedic relief that lingers around the cut in the narrative with historian Susan Stryker stating "it's like trans and cinema have grown up together." The same point applies in discussion of the film *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) in which the fatal combination of transphobia and blackface are displayed in full force when a white woman swallows a seed that turns her into a man and she becomes an upstanding member of society, she then forces her maid (a white woman in blackface) to swallow the seed as well to which she becomes violent and aggressive, both making trans people the butt of the joke and emphasizing racist stereotypes of Black men being violent people.

The speakers in the film go on to discuss *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), two of the most famous films in which the killer is portrayed as a "trans person." This stereotype has spread far and wide contributing to fear and hysteria fixed on the trans community and it has managed to significantly mold public perception of trans people, which actress Jen Richards makes a direct point to when she tells the story of coming out to her close friend who reacted by saying "you mean like Buffalo Bill?" The film also talks about subjects such as intersectionality, the harm of misrepresentation and a lack of representation, personal experience, family, referencing several other pieces from both film and television like *The Crying Game* (1992), *The L Word* (2004), *White Famous* (2017), *In Living Color* (1990), *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), *Psycho* (1960), *M. Butterfly* (1993), *Soapdish* (1991), *Yentl*

(1983), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), *Just One of the Guys* (1985), *Ace Ventura* (1994), *Nip/Tuck* (2009), *Pose* (2018) and many more important and nuanced pieces that contributed both positively and negatively to trans representation throughout media history. All together *Disclosure* speaks to the audience, with a focus on what it means to be a trans kid looking for a representation of yourself on screen, and provides a deeper history for people searching for images of transness throughout history.

While *Disclosure* is a beautiful production and shines light on several overshadowed conversations, it is not a perfect film, and there are several conversations or pieces of them that were left out or only briefly touched on throughout it. Some queer scholarly writers and critics like Caden Mark Gardner and Blu Buchanan have reviewed *Disclosure* and shared their thoughts on its successes and shortcomings. In his review, “*Disclosure* and Pursuing the Trans Film Image,” Caden Mark Gardner, a trans film critic with Reverse Shot, shares his rather passionate take on the conversations *Disclosure* failed to adequately explore. Gardner states that while the film is an important step towards increased visibility and understanding of trans experiences, it also highlights the limitations and challenges of pursuing a trans film image in a society that prioritizes cisgender narratives. One of the main arguments Gardner has against *Disclosure* is their choices in sources, he provides multiple very good examples of pieces that could have better fit the narrative being told and the ways in which the use of some choice other pieces instead was a bit outlandish. One example of this that I particularly agreed with was the comparison between *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *By Hook or By Crook* (2001) in the discussion about key instances of transmasculine representation on screen. *By Hook or By Crook* is a film that never got much attention in mainstream culture and it tells the story of two trans-masc partners in crime and their journey through a kind of outlaw-hood. Created by two trans men,

Harry Dodge and Silas Howard, who also play the lead roles, *By Hook or By Crook* is an endearing buddy drama that lets you into the lives of two trans-masc individuals as they create a support system between themselves. No violent revealing angles, no twisting of a prewritten story, just two trans men existing and building a world for themselves. *Boys Don't Cry* on the other hand, is a mainstream movie *about* the true story of the murder of Brandon Teena, a 21 year old trans man. The film, written, produced, and directed by cis people, turned down both Harry Dodge and Silas Howard when they auditioned for the role that won Hillary Swank her oscar. The movie is a classic example of queer trauma narratives being told by cishet voices. With harsh, looming scenes that feel like personal assaults and some shots that only belong in police evidence folders, *Boys Don't Cry* shows some of the most uncensored violence ever seen in the history of trans representation and if it didn't serve a specific purpose other than speaking to trans-masc experience I would have completely agreed with Gardner's belief that the inclusion of this film was outrageous. However, *Boys Don't Cry* was included in *Disclosure* also because it flawlessly represents the erasure of Blackness within trans violence with the erasure of Phillip DeVine, a black man who had been an unbending ally to Brandon Teena, from the story. Tiq Milan, one of the speakers in *Disclosure*, a Black trans author and activist, put into words beautifully his feelings of invalidation when faced with this erasure saying, "... so it's like you can't have queer trans people and Blackness in the same space at the same time. So what's that to say about my queer trans Black ass? Again this is taking away representation and telling me I can't exist in my Blackness in my transness in my queerness, I can't bring all of that in." Even though I do agree that *Boys Don't Cry* was focused on more than it possibly should have been and took space away from discussion of more positive and inclusive works, the discussion

created from that one major detail is a necessary one and the words Tiq Milan was able to put that experience into are too important to brush over.

It surprised me in my search for reviews of *Disclosure* how many people had dichotomous opinions of the positives, negatives and neutrals of the film and that led me to my own research through the history of trans representation. One piece Gardner didn't talk about that I believe would have been immensely beneficial to talk about in *Disclosure* is the TV show *The Love Boat* (1977-1987). The show features an episode that follows a worker on a cruise, Gopher, played by Fred Grandy, when he meets a beautiful trans woman, Rachel, played by Mackenzie Phillips, and assumes that she must be his college roommate's sister because they look so similar and when she tells him the truth it seems, at first, that he's not okay with it. Later on in the episode, however, when Gopher brings the situation to the captain for advice and he refers to Rachel as one of "those people," Gopher takes great offense and immediately speaks up for Rachel, this means that a straight, cisgender male character yelled at his superior in defense of a trans woman on screen... in 1982. These somewhat lesser known instances of trans representation can often be looked over and forgotten in the grand image of trans bodies in the media because it is so overwhelmingly filled with violence and hatefulness that they are swallowed by it.

I, myself, am a big fan of *Disclosure* and the conversations had in it in a different yet similar way to how a few of the speakers of the film feel about some of their first encounters with transness on screen; I know it has its flaws, but it was one of the first times I saw a piece of widespread visual conversation about my existence that was made up of people like me, looking at me before looking at the cis people behind me, and talking about what it meant to live as *us*. So while I do love this film and it will always hold a place in my heart and in my journey, I also have some thoughts on what adjustments could have given the film a more well rounded and

encompassing conversation. We all know the attention span of the average American isn't very remarkable and it's fair to say the less interest one has for a topic, the smaller that attention span gets. It would be fantastic if Disclosure could have been a continuing docuseries in which each episode could be focussed on a different conversation around trans bodies and different examples of representation on screen throughout media history, but when a piece of media starts to become more academic than entertaining, depending on the topic, its target audience tends to get increasingly niche. Also, when having discussions around silenced topics, demographics matter, and sadly, the more you use a platform to speak directly to minority individuals' lives and personal lived experiences without the dramatization of mainstream media, the more majority ears stop listening.

So if we ignore the technicalities and logistics for a minute, and say any and all adjustments could be made to the film without losing any of its audience, I would expand the conversation around the dangers trans people face today and the ways in which visibility has put us in more danger than ever before. According to studies done by the Human Rights Campaign, at least 44 trans and gender non-conforming individuals were murdered in 2020, the study says "at least" because hate crimes against trans people, especially trans women of color, go overwhelmingly underreported and many trans people are misgendered in police and news reports so it can be a difficult statistic to accurately track. Violence against the trans community is becoming normalized as it once was and with the 555 anti-trans bills proposed since the beginning of 2023, it is getting easier to get away with it. Of those 555 anti-trans bills, according to the Trans Legislation Tracker, 373 are still active, 104 have failed, and 78 have been passed with the most devastating residing in Florida under the hateful eye of Ron DeSantis. These bills range anywhere from new and improved bathroom bills to the removal of trans children and their

cis siblings from supportive parents and revoking the parental rights of trans people all together, some even going as far as reviving the trans panic defense as a valid plea in court, which has the power to deem a defendant innocent of the murder or attempted harm of a trans person because when they realized the victim was trans they “panicked.”

The UN has five definitions of genocide in Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, these include: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and last but not least, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. Several eerie similarities are already visible between this list and the current list of bills racking up against our community and when looking at Gregory Stanton’s Ten Stages of Genocide the threat seems even more imminent. The Ten Stages of Genocide give a more comprehensive non-linear timeline of genocide, starting with Stage I: Classification, the establishment of “us and them.” Then comes Stage II: Symbolization, giving names or symbols to the classifications, in the Holocaust it was “the Jews and the Christians,” in Rwanda it was “Hutu and Tutsi,” here it is “Transgender people and Cisgender people.” Stage III: Discrimination, the dominant group uses law and political power to deny rights to the other group, currently most clearly being portrayed by the bills barring trans people from receiving specific or all forms of healthcare and forcing doctors to medically detransition both minors and adults in their care (ie. SB 150 in Kentucky). After Discrimination comes Stage IV: Dehumanization, where one group begins to deny the humanity of the other, sometimes comparing them to animals, monsters, or disease. We see a combination of this stage and the previous one in the newly passed anti-trans bathroom bills denying trans people the use of public

restrooms when children are present. Next is Stage V: Organization, oppressive groups and leaders begin to organize, this is often begun by the state using militias or by terrorist groups. Examples of this today can be seen when branches of The Proud Boys show up at drag shows and states and leaders organize to pass similar bills. Stage VI: Polarization, extremists start to drive the groups apart with propaganda and misinformation, directly pitting the groups against each other with an “us vs. them” mentality. Targeted groups are disarmed or structurally disadvantaged in an attempt to incapacitate them for self defense, examples of which can be seen with bills targeting cities and municipalities ability to pass non-discrimination ordinances and extremist groups making claims that trans people are a danger to children.

Then comes Stage VII: Preparation, where leaders of the dominant group plan the “Final Solution” to the problem that is the oppressed group, often using euphemisms to sugarcoat their intentions such as “counter-terrorism” or “purification”. Many leaders make claims of a “kill or be killed” status with the oppressed group labeled as dangerous. This is where we are today. Stage Seven. Several “Final Solutions” have been proposed under the cover of fine print and bills proposed in sessions behind closed doors. There is a beautifully written, devastating book called “We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories From Rwanda,” in it Philip Gourevitch writes, “Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community building.” This quote rings both encouragingly and disparagingly true in today’s conflict, we see this fight bringing oppressed communities together in ways we haven’t always seen before, there is a beautiful video that took my breath away of the moment the San Francisco Trans March and the Abortion Rights Protest crossed paths and people cried and embraced one another, signs and flags waving overhead, human beings fighting for almost completely different things on a common battlefield embracing each other in a moment of blissful togetherness. The problem

comes in what Philip Gourevitch was speaking to, the unity found in the kill, when different hate groups start rallying together and statements like “Transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely,” (Michael Knowles, speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference in March of this year) are made on broadcasted political stages and met with uproaring applause from the audience.

After that is Stage VIII: Persecution, as the Ten Stages of Genocide website states it, is the stage when “Victims are identified and separated out because of their national, ethnic, racial or religious identity. The victim group’s most basic human rights are systematically violated through extrajudicial killings, torture and forced displacement. Death lists are drawn up. In state sponsored genocide, members of victim groups may be forced to wear identifying symbols. Their property is often expropriated. Sometimes they are segregated into ghettos, deported to concentration camps, or confined to a famine-struck region and starved. They are deliberately deprived of resources such as water or food in order to slowly destroy the group. Programs are implemented to prevent procreation through forced sterilization or abortions. *Children are forcibly taken from their parents.* Genocidal massacres begin. All of these destructive acts are acts of genocide outlawed by the Genocide Convention. They are acts of genocide because they intentionally destroy part of a group. The perpetrators watch for whether such massacres are opposed by any effective international response. If there is no reaction, they realize they can get away with genocide.” So far we have stayed within the bounds of Stage Seven on all counts but one, the children, SB 254 is a bill in Florida that was officially passed into law by governor Ron DeSantis that legally permits the kidnapping of trans children. Described on the Florida Senate website as “Granting courts of this state temporary emergency jurisdiction over a child present in this state if the child has been subjected to or is threatened with being subjected to

sex-reassignment prescriptions or procedures [etc.]” It is in these details, hidden behind child welfare and innocent semantics, that the most precarious dangers await, in the attempt to erase trans people as a species.

Continuing on to the last stages there is Stage IX: Extermination, the violent eradication effort begins and quickly turns to a mass killing event. It is referred to as “extermination” because perpetrators believe their victims are not fully human. And finally Stage X: Denial, the party responsible will deny any wrongdoing often blaming the victim party for what happened, bodies are burned to cover up evidence and witnesses are threatened. This stage can be seen in the extreme example of the Nanjing Massacre, with soldiers, officials, and national records denying to this day that the event ever took place. The problem with these ten stages is that they are defined in terms that prioritize one of the five definitions of genocide over the rest and while they do acknowledge throughout that there are several different methods of genocide the stages themselves focus on the attempted violent eradication of a people as the ultimate peak a genocide reaches. However, while these definitions don’t match up to our current situation to the letter, according to both the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and George Stanton’s Ten Stages of Genocide we are currently living in a genocide against trans people in the United States.

Something difficult to grasp about genocide is the speed in which it mutates and grows from an idea into a massacre. Hitler came to power in 1933 but it wasn’t until 1935 that the Nuremberg Race Laws against Jewish people were decreed, in 1937 and 1938 Jewish people were banned from the professions of teaching, providing healthcare, and their businesses were forced to register. Then later that year Jewish passports had to be stamped with the letter “J” and Jewish people were forced to wear identifying bands and markers. One year after that Heinrich

Himmler was tasked with finding the “Final Solution” which he proposed in 1941 and in 1942 the massacre of Jewish people began. On March 28, 2022 Ron Desantis signed the first “Don’t Say Gay” bill into law and this month it became legal to remove well cared for children from their loving families. Most of these issues hadn’t shown their true colors when *Disclosure* was released in 2020 so it makes sense that the genocidal process wasn’t the primary focus of the film, but the signs were there and even when it feels like we are taking big steps forward we still need to be prepared for the fall of the other shoe.

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