

# Analysis on the Self-Identification in Lesbian Relationships and Potential Stereotypes Portrayed in Films

Xinwei Zheng<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *School of Visual Arts, New York, NY . the U.S., 10010*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: xzheng8@sva.edu*

## ABSTRACT

The six films to be analyzed in the paper all portray the relationships of lesbian people, and can be briefly categorized into two types, which are respectively masculinized lesbian characters, also known as “butch” in lesbian self-identification, as well as feminine characters, known as “femme”. This paper explores how the chosen lesbian films reveal butch and femme genders in their respective self-identification process and it also attempts to investigate whether there exist stereotypical characterization and presentations. As can be told from the analytical results, some of the characters are with stereotypical constructions whereas others are more complex ones than purely being categorized into such dichotomy.

**Keywords:** *Lesbian, Butch, Femme, LGBT, Self-identity, Lesbian movies, Stereotypes*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Within the scope of lesbian culture, the slangs of “butch” and “femme” refer to the masculinized and feminine characters in the context of lesbian genders, which were first seen to the public in the Post World War II American communities for butch and femme [4]. According to Levitt & Hiestand, butch and femme as two major types in lesbian roles and genders, are intrinsically understood to be internally linked with the respective senses of self, underneath their external representations that are socially constructed [5]. Since stepping into the 21st century, in the cinematographic world, lesbian-themed films centering around butch and femme characters are becoming quite commonplace. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham (2018), abundant commentary, film reviews and academic papers seem to focus more on the dimension of cinematic technique and narration, or the lesbian community and culture as a whole, with very limited ones would zoom in on the representation of butch and femme characters in their exploration of self-identities [10].

However, as stated by Cater & Noble, it should be also noted that a variety of studies have pointed out the fact that before reaching the age of 18, adolescents’ sexual orientation is in an unstable period as they can

carry good feeling for both the opposite and the same gender as they are, leaving self-identification in this stage of life a tough task [2]. Via capturing six lesbian films including *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Tomboy*, *Saving Face*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, *Mulholland Drive*, this research intends to investigate how do lesbian films build butch and femme gender images and more important to explore whether there exist stereotypical characterization and presentations. On top of the importance in terms of film and culture study, this study carries broad significance with regards to the potential linkage between stereotypical mass media image and self-identification for those, particularly teenagers, who have not yet identified their sexuality.

## 2. ANALYSIS ON THE FEMME’S SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN FILMS

*Blue Is the Warmest Color* features the love story between a femme character Adèle and a butch character Léa, which functions more as the process of self-cognition for Adèle as her knowledge towards her own sexuality at the very beginning is vague. She is not sure about her affection towards her boyfriend and seems to be only following the general direction of society. A kiss from a female student to Adèle serves as the beginning of the awakening of her sexuality, when she is turned

down by the girl, it is then another collapse after her self-awareness. The construction of Adèle's and Léa's family backgrounds is interesting as well since Adèle's family is humble whereas Léa's quite wealthy-off, accordingly and symbolically, the sex scene depicted in Adèle's is a repressive and concealed one in contrast to the free and emotional one at Léa's.

It is true that the differences in terms of characterizations may carry with the purpose to achieve the sense of beauty and versatility in its artistic complementarity, and yet if viewed fundamentally from the perspective of dichotomy suggested by Rothblum, Balsam & Wickham, such set-ups are closely intertwined to their butch and femme lesbian genders [10]. Adèle is a femme, which explains why she is a relatively weak and obedient character. Her self-consciousness is vague, and full of cognitive doubts about sex; when she seems to be hit hard when rejected by others. Her family is not that rich, and she does not breathe under free air alongside her growth, thus all of these contribute to a traditionally typical feminine image. Léa is the right opposite – her colored blue hair indicates the sense of coolness in her strong personality; she is well-experienced in such relationship and is not troubled by her sexuality; her family is rich and she has all the support from her family, which altogether contributes to a masculine character. It thus indicates that such self-identification is placed in the context of gender dichotomy that is commonplace in a heterosexual relationship [10].

Similarly, Rita in *Mulholland Drive* showcases quite typical characteristics as a femme gender in a lesbian relationship. Apart from all the jumps and flashbacks in the plot, the lesbian couple Betty (quasi-butch) and Rita are carried with different identities that symbolize their ego, identity and superego. Compared with depicting gender identity with stereotypes, the film portrays a very commonplace relationship based on the key word of jealousy. Betty longs for Rita to stay loyal as she is, but the attitude of Rita is to keep dodging even though she needs help, which is the protection and comfort of Betty. The other identity of Rita, Camilla, is a blonde who pursues success in Hollywood and is a highly stereotypical role as she seduces the director in order to get a better role.

It can be fairly argued that although the category of butch and femme are within the same context of heterosexual genders, they also possess such complexity of it since butch and femme to a certain extent are the counterparts of traditional characterizations of men and women in heterosexual relationships. It further echoes the saying of Nestle (1992) that femme gender roles are often criticized as objectifying themselves [8]. As claimed by Levitt & Hiestand (2004), on top of the innate components that contribute to lesbian genders, there are also important constructions from the cultural dimension

[6]. To a certain extent, it is the social pressure that pushes Rita to demonstrate more of traditional feminine characteristics so that here demand between personal safety, interrelationship and authenticity can be well-balanced. In other words, the self-identification process of Rita goes under the social expectation and cultural comprehension on females traditionally, and she trades her sex for keeping personal safety in the patriarchal society where she does not have any power.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the director expresses a kind of creative view in the female discourse through depicting the love story between the painter Marianne (butch) and the model Héloïse (femme). In the beginning, the purpose of Marianne is simple, as she approaches Héloïse to secretly paint a portrait of her in order to please the fiancé of Héloïse, her commissioner. Such kind of creation is almost with none-subjectivity since Marianne is a craftsman who works with money whereas Héloïse is the victim of arranged marriage. At this stage, there is a male gaze from Marianne to Héloïse since the latter is merely the object of gaze, and they represent unequal power. Héloïse turns to be furious when she sees the portrait, while what makes her angry more is not the deception from Marianne but that the portrait does not look like her at all, which is just a clumsy imitation under the examination of male gaze [7]. The action of Héloïse to refuse the portrait is her loud denial to be the vassal and object to be examined under a patriarchal perspective, which helps tear down the invisible power relationship between them too and her viewpoint guides the creation process of Marianne, leading to sublimation of her artistic concepts. So as for their love story, which takes place in amidst of equal communications, the self-identification process comes along with the equivalent awakening of self-awareness.

To analyze the character Héloïse, it can be said that the personality and self-identification illustrated by her resonate well to the core spirit of the so-called “political lesbianism” raised by Faderman (1991), which argued lesbianism was more based on the intrinsic motivation to get rid of oppression in gender instead of sexual desires, allowing the construction of her self-identity to be filled with more space for agility [4].

### **3. ANALYSIS ON BUTCH' S SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN FILMS**

Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* is a trans man who comes to a small city in Nebraska and becomes a quite popular amongst girls, while it is not known to all that ‘he’ is actually a woman with an original name of Teena. The reason why that Brandon comes to the city is due to exactly that lack of self-identity as Brandon would rather be a ‘man’ and thus decides to embrace his new role and life in a strange land. Also, Brandon falls in love with a local girl Lana and becomes a good friend to

Lana's ex-boyfriend, from whose acceptance Brandon is able to get a sense of self-identity whereas Lana's ex-boyfriend becomes extremely furious upon finding out that Brandon is actually a woman biologically [12].

The definition of butch, as pointed out by Levitt & Hiestand (2005) in their explanation of the lesbian relationship, is stated to be sort of mimicking the patriarchal one [6]. In this context, butch is thus alluded to as the ones to 'play' the manly role, and yet the character of Brandon is more like authentically sticking to his own self. Therefore, Brandon is more understood as a transgender role, which explains well why he hates his physically female body and why he gains so much pleasure when accepted by Lana's ex-boyfriend and enters a man's gang. However, such a portrait of the image of Brandon is highly stereotypical, as the binges and violence serve as how Brandon intends to associate with himself in order to obtain that sense of self-comfort.

Same as the anxiety and struggle experienced by Brandon, the 10-year-old girl named Laure in *Tomboy* is also troubled by such negative feelings originated from self-identification. With short hair, a monochrome T-shirt, men's big underpants and a pair of sneakers, Laure looks like a boy at the very beginning of the film. Same with Brandon, Laure hides away the biological gender and calls herself Michael in front of Lisa, the girl she likes, and other mates. When Laure is playing around, the uneasiness and melancholy can be told from her eyes. However, different from Brandon, even though Laura does appear as a boy, it does not mean that Laure cannot identify with her gender [11]. In fact, she does not deliberately refuse Lisa to make up for her, nor does she feel awkward or comfortable when Lisa's other praises her as a beautiful girl, since she cracks a shy smile upon hearing that.

From this perspective, it thus indicates that Laure has no cognitive impairment about the nature of her gender, it is just that she does not agree with the additional constraints imposed by society and culture on different genders. As argued by Raley & Lucas (2006), the lesbian genders are established within a community and can change over time and place, which thus can be adopted to explain on why there is much sense of agility in the self-identification of Laure [9]. As a kid, she only has some vague ideas on appearance and sex. It is thus that the character of Laura is adorable since she is not a die-hard butch but only a lovely girl who is a bit different from the mainstream girls at that age.

Chinese American Wil in *Saving Face* shows an epitome of a quasi-butch who is born and raised in a comparatively conservative culture and society, as she is troubled with her love with lesbian dancer Vivian and cannot face up to her mother who is busy with making arrangements for her wedding. In the relatively free cultural background of the West, traditional concepts and ideas are even more tightened and prominent, resulting

to the flinches of Wil as she keeps distance with Vivian. She tries to make a move by coming out in front her mother but receives a cold denial on her self-identity. Vivian also leaves sadness and go to Paris to chase after her ballet dream. Therefore, in the whole process Wil has been too attentive to the eyes of people around her but she inadvertently loses something really important to her life.

Under the examination of Gibson & Meem (1996), the butch and femme genders are filled with a sort of rebellious value via the recognition on the differences between genders [5]. However, when cultural influence plays a major role, Wil is no longer able to recognize or at least to speak out that she is able to recognize such differences by avoiding direct confrontations brought by gender awareness. She is neither weak nor strong, clear-minded nor confused, but just a mixture between the two. People like Wil is too much overshadowed by the tradition and culture that overwhelms her.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

By zooming on six films capturing lesbian relationships via analyzing the gender roles of butch and femme, this paper tries to find out whether these two groups of lesbian genders are featured in a stereotypical way through their respective characterizations. The femme roles in some films, such as *Blue Is the Warmest Color* and *Mulholland Drive*, are quite stereotypical since they are both comparatively weak and fragile characters who are either easy to get hurt or prone to trade her body as a female to gain the attention of the patriarchal world. However, the femme role in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is different as she is highly self-aware and proactively fights against the male gaze on her instead of merely serving as an object, demonstrating the tendency of "political lesbianism". With the butch roles, *Boys Don't Cry* shows a die-hard butch image as the association with masculinity in a traditional sense. While for *Tomboy* and *Saving Face*, they show more possibilities in butches due to the profound agility that may arise from either insufficient gender awareness and construction or the complex social and cultural backgrounds and prejudices. Therefore, it can be concluded that the lesbian genders are with a certain extent of flexibility but not completely stereotypical.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently accomplished by the author.

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