

The Danish Girl

Director: Tom Hooper. Author (novel): David Ebershoff. UK release date: 1 January 2016

The Danish Girl features a story of trans woman Lilly Elbe and partner Gerda Wegener, and with its worldwide distribution I (a trans guy from Birmingham) went along to watch it in my local cinema. Being trans has rather a special relationship with the visual – with being seen and appearing in the world. The many trans stories out there come in an array of formats such as paperbacks, broadsheets and tabloid newspapers, magazines, television series, documentaries and feature films. Most of these routinely feature the trans subject in transition, in journey as it were – going away from one ‘thing’ and becoming ‘something else’. This aspect of trans life really lends itself to storytelling – trans is a road movie but without the actual road. Within many of these trans stories there are also what I would call ‘dominant tropes’ (the sorts of things you get to see come up again and again). I’m thinking of things like looking in the mirror (a lot), putting tights on, the hero surgeon and the baddy shrink, the key concept of being ‘real’, and ‘killing off’ the old self. Oh, and putting tights on some more. *The Danish Girl* was no exception. But there is always something to note that is unique about each trans representation and this film offered some compelling ideas around identity (who we are), art (how are we represented) and love (who is there through thick and thin).

Whilst the world of painting reflected the autobiographical ‘truth’ of Lilly Elbe and Gerda Wegener’s life, it also served as an important metaphor. The film was about looking – looking and being looked at. It is evocative, visceral and beautiful in places – the colour and the costumes, the scenery and the general coveting existence of the European bourgeoisie in the 1920s. Whilst watching the film I found myself focusing rather a lot on the depicted binaries – the portrait and the landscape; the subject and the object; selfishness and selflessness; homosexuality and heterosexuality, and of course men and women. The film also speaks quite evocatively of the feelings that are so deep inside of (all of) us, burning, aching and raging to get out because –well it’s who we are. But it also shows how we copy one another (not just trans people) in the ways we sit, walk, cup our hands around our faces or bat our eyelids. It’s interesting how once-awkward affectations become natural through repeated copying and fine tuning.

Representing trans lives in films or elsewhere is a nightmare task for anyone and I applaud anyone who gives it a shot. But this film made by cis (non-trans) people and performed by mostly cis people (did you spot the wonderful Rebecca Root?) will be mostly watched by cis people. Claudia Rankine recently argued in *The Guardian* that “Blackness in the white imagination has nothing to do with black people” (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/27/claudia-rankine-poet-citizen-american-lyric-feature>), and I kind of want to make this parallel. These films are not

for ‘us’ trans people and yet ‘we’ view them nonetheless. What kind of politics emerges specifically from a trans perspective? We are living in very interesting political times right now when it comes to trans equality. We need to make films like *The Danish Girl* (and the public encounter that comes with it) count. The story of Lilly and Gerda is extraordinary, challenging and painful. So talk about it. Discuss with friends over dinner, colleagues at work, family members, in the classroom. And when you do this ask yourselves “What is the politic here?”, or to put it another way: “Who gets to say what about whom – to whom?”.

It’s also worth noting that I watched *The Danish Girl* in deep suburbia amongst the locals, who, like me, were having a regular Friday night out. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) is mainstreaming – and not just in an art house kind of way. This isn’t about left-wing liberals ‘accepting’ us. It’s about your run-of-the-mill people who are choosing between seeing a Danish period drama about gender diversity and a half-naked Daniel Craig. Now that is progress.

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