

## **Closure, Body, and Norms:**

The role of closure in the normativization of non-normative bodies

Thayse Madella<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article aims to investigate the relationship between a narrative closure and the normativization of bodies in films. In this sense, this article will be divided into two parts. The first one is going to discuss how narrative closure adjusts a character into the current social norms of gender. For that, I will analyze the films *This Must Be the Place* (Sorrentino, 2011) and *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015). The selection of these movies takes into consideration characters who are introduced to the audience as non-normative, but are brought into a certain normativization in the end. The second part of the article intends to bring an example of a movie in which the openness of closure allows the character to maintain a non-normative subjectivity. In this case, the film chosen to be analyzed is the Argentinian *XXY* (Puenzo, 2007). My hypothesis is that, by the intrinsic characteristics of narrative closure, which is, according to Susan Hayward, that "the narrative must come to a completion", the necessity of bringing any resolution for the fact that a character does not fit the norm ends up by reinforcing the normativization of the very same characters who are intended to be non-normative. Although narrative closure may be used as a form of coping with social norms, *XXY* functions as an instance that this is not always necessarily the case.

**Keywords:** Affective-performative cinema; Queer theory; Narrative closure.

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<sup>1</sup> Doutora em Letras Inglês pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC). Professora de Literaturas em língua inglesa da Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS). Email: [thaysemadella@academico.ufs.br](mailto:thaysemadella@academico.ufs.br)

## Introduction

This article aims to investigate the relationship between the narrative closure and the normativization of bodies in films. In this sense, it will be divided into two parts. The first one is going to discuss how narrative closure adjusts a character into the current social norms of gender. For that, I will analyze the film *This Must Be the Place* (Sorrentino, 2011) and *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015). The protagonist in the latter, a male-to-female transgender, is introduced to the spectator as non-normative; however, as the film comes to an end, she is brought into a certain normativization through the construction of a legible supposedly complete woman who aligns her discourse about sex, gender, and sexuality according to social norms. In the former film, Cheyenne is a famous rockstar who cannot adjust himself to the expected norms of gender and age. The embodiment of a non-normative individual is resolved and, by solving his identity conflicts, he can respond positively to the same norms that he was previously disrupting. The second part of the article intends to bring an example of a movie in which the openness of closure allows the character to maintain a non-normative subjectivity. In this case, the film chosen to be analyzed is the Argentinian *XXY* (Puenzo, 2007), which brings as the protagonist an intersex character, Alex, who, with the help of the family, refuses the surgical procedures that could delineate Alex in one of the two poles of a binary gender system. My hypothesis is that, by the intrinsic characteristics of narrative closure, which is, according to Susan Hayward, that "the narrative must come to a completion" (2001, p. 65), the necessity of bringing any resolution for the fact that a character does not fit the norm ends up by reinforcing the normativization of the very same characters who are intended to be, at a first glance, non-normative. Although narrative closure may be used as a form of coping with social norms, *XXY* functions as an instance that this is not always necessarily the case.

Gender norms are contingent and open to transformations that may come to realization through the re-production of non-normative embodied practices. In this sense, the concept of gender takes the shift from being regulated by the symbolic law to being regulated by social norms, as suggested by Judith Butler, in *Undoing Gender* (2004). Departing from Lévy-Strauss' concept of culture, the Lacanian perspective of the symbolic order understands culture as that which is unalterable and universal in society. As Butler (2004, p. 45) puts it, "[i]n Lacan, that which is universal in culture is understood to be its symbolic or linguistic rules, and these are understood to support kinship relations". Although the symbolic law separates the symbolic from the biological and social, its authoritative regime makes any transformation in the law difficult, or even impossible, even when giving room for contestation.

Thus, for an understanding of gender that allows for transformative practices to take place, it is important an approach to gender that interprets it as a set of norms that regulates social relations, "a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted" (Butler, 2004, p. 48). Hence, following this line of reasoning, gender is a constant articulation between the independent fields of realization and idealization, which is contingent and open to subversion and transformation. The reiteration of gender norms may reinforce their normativity; however, at the same time, the reiteration, rearticulation, and reidealization of such norms bring to the fore possibilities for transformations.

According to Butler (2004), then, social norms regulate how we read gender and create the idea that the rules and the social practices are, to a certain extent, coherent. However, "the norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstated in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life" (Butler, 2004, p. 48). In this sense, "[g]ender is, thus, a regulatory norm, but it is also one that is produced in the service of other kinds of regulation" (Butler, 2004, p. 53). For gender is not only reproduced by such norms but also produced through its embodiments and actions, some bodily practices may convey possible transformations

of that which regulate and are regulated by the idealized dimensions of gender. For the extent that measurement characterizes the constitution of norms by producing common standards to which any abnormality is compared to, the author argues that the "abnormal does not have a nature which is different from that of the normal. The norm, or normative space, knows no outside" (Butler, 2004, p. 51). Thus, those who are the abnormals are considered as such by the measurement of the same norms that reserve for them only the margins; they must necessarily be continuously rearticulated because and through the existence of the supposed abnormals and their non-normative embodiments.

Elena del Río, in *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (2009), drawing from Spinoza's theory of potency, considers the performativity of the body a powerful site for transformation through its affective performances. Although del Río reads Butler's theory on performativity as a negative, predetermined, form of repetition whereas she approaches repetition through its "positive force of difference" (Del Río, 2009, p. 5), they both perceive the body as capable of subverting and transforming gender norms:

instead of attending to the positive force of difference in repetition – the uniqueness of each performative event – Butler submits the repetitive gesture to a culturally predetermined phantasmatic ideal that reinstates a transcendental logic of sameness and a notion of desire based on lack and negativity. From the perspective of performance as an affective event, I argue, the body's expressions are not exhausted by the pressures to perform according to cultural, linguistic, or ideological requirements. (Del Río, 2009, p. 5)

While Butler focuses on the rearticulation and reiteration of non-normative embodiments, del Río aims attention at the affective power of body expressions. For Del Río (2009, p. 6), "the body's movements and gestures are capable of transforming static forms and concepts typical of a representational paradigm into forces and concepts that exhibit a transformative/expansive potential". The transformative potential

of body expressions, according to del R o, emanates from the force of becoming (from Gile Deleuze's theory), to which she calls "affect" (2009, p. 10), "a force perpetually in the making" (2009, p. 12). The present body in a movie has its power in its own expressions and movements, which, for both authors, may carry the possibility for transformations. Del R o (2009) discusses what she calls "affective-performative cinema", in which affective-performative events in a film maintain an opening possibility for questioning binary norms already socially imposed.

In her work, del R o analyzes these "affective-performative events" in films from the *Classical Hollywood Cinema*. She demonstrates that, even in considerably conservative movies, certain body expressions give room for subversive interpretations of the norms by which they are governed. From a Spinozian perspective, bodies undergoing pressures that may oppress them transform that which would be a site of vulnerability into potency, from where they take their power of resistance. For del R o, a cohesive narrative structure is disrupted by the performance and expressiveness of bodies that resist imposed norms and coherence. At this point, I might ask, for the sake of this article, what if it is the other way around? How does the expressiveness of the body come into action in a narrative that aims to bring a non-normative performance but may align the body under a normative perspective? This article focuses on the normativization that closure may bring upon the narrative.

Closure is constantly defined as a characteristic of the *Classical Hollywood Cinema*; however, this is not an exclusive characteristic of such films. According to Susan Hayward (2000), the tradition of the *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, although the term is used to define films that dominated the Hollywood production from the 1930s to the 1960s, "is still present in mainstream or dominant cinema in some or all of its parts" (Hayward, 2000, p. 64). Still, according to Hayward (2000, p. 65, author's emphasis), "Classic narrative cinema, no matter what *genre*, must have closure, that is, the narrative must come to a completion (whether a happy ending or not). Any ambiguity within the

plot must be resolved". Hayward's definition of the concept departs from David Bordwell's discussion on Classical Hollywood Cinema. For him,

there are two ways of regarding the classical ending. We can see it as the crowning of the structure, the logical conclusion of the string of events, the final effect of the initial cause. This view has some validity, not only in the light of the tight construction that we frequently encounter in Hollywood films but also given the precepts of Hollywood screenwriting. Rulebooks tirelessly bemoan the pressures for a happy ending and emphasize the need for a logical wrap-up. Still, there are enough instances of unmotivated or inadequate plot resolutions to suggest a second hypothesis: that the classical ending is not all that structurally decisive, being a more or less arbitrary readjustment of that world knocked awry in the previous eighty minutes. (Bordwell, 1986, p. 21)

Thus, although the happy one is not the only possible ending for the structure of the dominant film, necessary readjustments are needed to the ending in order not to fall far apart from the rest of the film. Closure, then, is used to align the ending to what would be expected from the narrative.

Bordwell repeatedly emphasizes that these films follow some extrinsic norms, which are not necessarily rules nor formulae nor recipes, "but a historically constrained set of more or less likely options. [...]The stability and uniformity of Hollywood narration is indeed one reason to call it classical, at least insofar as classicism in any art is traditionally characterized by obedience to extrinsic norms" (Bordwell, 1986, p. 28). If closure and norm are close to each other, it seems quite evident to argue that the former may work for the normativization of characters. However, is this always the case? How does the body figure in the process of the normativization of such characters? Bordwell (1986, p. 32) concludes the chapter about Classical Hollywood Cinema emphasizing that "[e]ach film works with, or with and against, ideological and economic protocols". The films to be analyzed here are not part of the traditional Classical Hollywood Cinema; nevertheless, their structures and narratives "each bears traces of social-historical processes" (Bordwell, 1986, p. 32) extrinsic to the films and

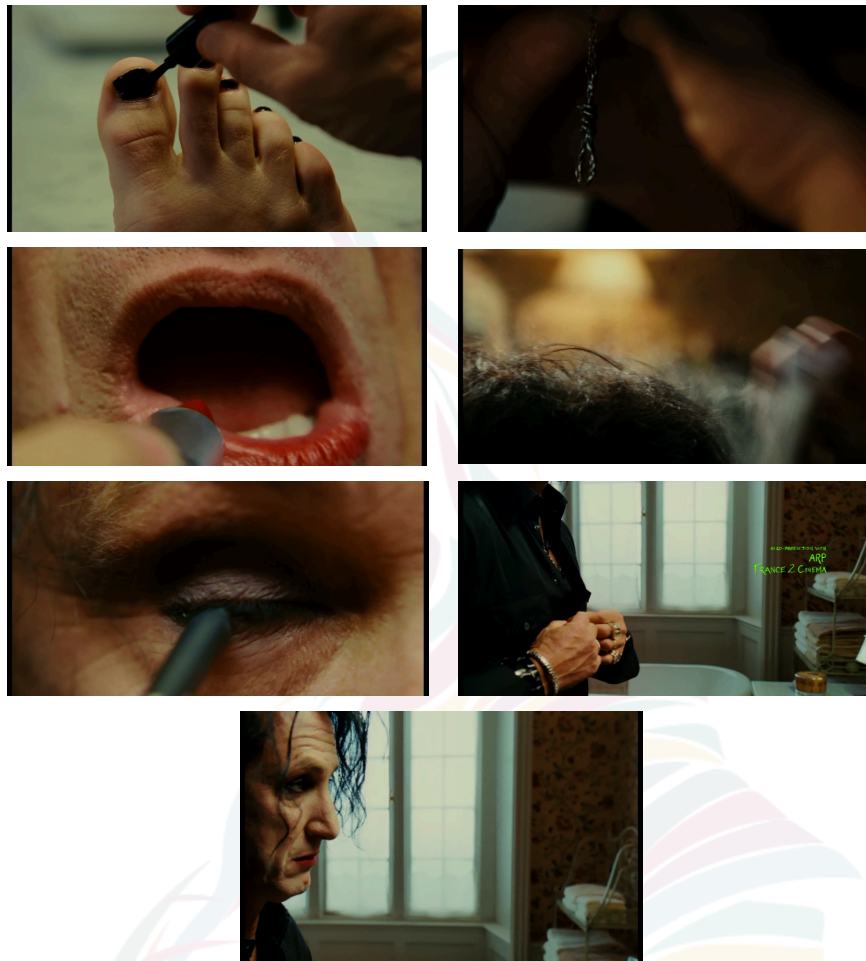
part of social norms, and the way narrative closure appears in them can be related to the definitions brought up by Susan Hayward and David Bordwell.

Thus, for the narrative and cultural analysis of the films, I will draw on del Río's concept of "affective-performative cinema" and Butler's theories on normativity and queer bodies. These perspectives will be analyzed in contrast to the traditional view of cinema structure as discussed by Bordwell. In this article, I will consider the presence of the body in a shot or scene and the dialogues they carry on. Additionally, I will scrutinize the endings against scenes from other parts of the films to articulate the possible normativization of subjectivities brought about by the narrative closure in contrast to the construction of non-normative characters throughout the movie.

### ***This Must Be the Place and The Danish Girl***

The analysis of the film *This Must Be the Place* (Sorrentino, 2011) may help in understanding the connections between body, norm, and closure. Sean Penn stars this film as the protagonist, Cheyenne, a middle-aged former rock star, who is introduced to the audience as a kind but weird individual, married to a woman who loves him. Although he falls into the aligned intelligibility of sex, gender, and sexuality according to social norms, his habits, clothes, and make-up provide him with a status of an outsider in society, a queerness of sorts. When introducing Cheyenne, the film presents the audience with a sequence of extreme close-ups showing details of him while he is dressing up. First, he is painting his toenails black, then, putting his long earrings, lipstick, hairspray, and eyeliner on, and, at last, buttoning his shirt. Only after this sequence of extreme close-ups that the audience can see the face of the character in a medium shot, while he looks at himself in a mirror with a melancholic expression (Image 1).

Image 1 - *This Must Be the Place*



Source: Sorrentino, Paolo. *This Must Be the Place*. 2011.

The actions taking place in this scene at the beginning of the movie are usually associated with femininity, which is, more often than not, associated with women. The fact that the face of the character only appears by the end of the sequence does not necessarily mean that it is a surprise for the audience whom the person dressing up is. Posters, covers, and different publicity materials introduce Sean Penn as Cheyenne to the public even before one enters the movie theater to watch the film. Thus, this sequence does not intend to build a suspense upon the identity of the character;



however, it does build up, in fact, a displacement between who is dressing up and the process of dressing up itself. The audience has no option except paying attention to the fact that this is a middle-aged man wearing make-up. His melancholic expression looking at a mirror by the end of the sequence may reinforce the fact that his identity is troubled for himself. Mirrors tend to appear as a mark of disconnection between one's own self, a search for recognition, self-understanding or unity. After the last frame depicted above, the camera turns and the audience sees Cheyenne, still in a medium shot, looking straight at the camera – which is, actually, the image that he is seeing by looking at the mirror (Image 2). The audience, then, sees not only the character but how he sees himself.

Image 2 - *This Must Be the Place*



Source: Sorrentino, Paolo. *This Must Be the Place*. 2011

The film explicitly makes clear that Cheyenne does not correspond to social expectations. First, he is friends with a teenage girl who dresses up quite similar to him, from clothes to make-up, then, in some scenes, more than one character mentions in different moments how childish he is, and he also has to deal with stares and comments about him. Fear is also a feeling related to the protagonist, to the point of an old lady asking him if he would kill her. Cheyenne does not fulfill certain social norms, which construct him as a non-normative character. Such non-normativity is visible on his body. In one specific scene, he is shopping at a supermarket and two women are startled by his appearance; as soon as they realize that he is a man dressed up as he is, they start

laughing at him. At this moment he becomes clearly affected by the women's reactions. Even after having crossed his way and getting out of focus in the scene, they still disturb him as he is still hearing them laughing and giggling (Image 3). The women's reactions haunt him as they are relegated to the background in the frame but remain in the back of his mind.

Image 3 - *This Must Be The Place*



Source: Sorrentino, Paolo. *This Must Be the Place*. 2011.

After thirty years without any communication between them, Cheyenne receives the news that his father is sick and dies before being able to reach out to him. The death prompts the protagonist into a quest for the Nazi persecutor of the father. Towards the end of the movie, Cheyenne humiliates his father's tormentor and, after that, is ready to go back home. Throughout the journey, he better understands his father and, as a consequence, himself as well. By doing so, Cheyenne can grow up and stop being the childlike figure that is associated with his non-normative behavior. In the very last scene of the movie, Cheyenne appears, in a long shot, in the street of a friend's house. As he approaches the sidewalk in front of her window, she recognizes him. This is the last scene of the movie and the first one that he smiles. They exchange glances while the close-up shot switches from him to her (Image 4). The characteristics that have first constructed this character as non-normative is not embodied by him anymore. His non-normativity becomes associated with unsolved problems with his father. Once he

grows out of his father's issues, he can adjust himself to the norms, to what society expects from a person like him, a person of his gender and age.

Whereas the film spends at least one-fourth of the time to construct Cheyenne as a non-normative individual, it takes one last scene with less than two minutes to adjust him to the norms he first could not fit. Not only is the time longer, the narrative also takes a variety of scenes and different interactions, conversations, and characters to state it. The characters in the last scene do not speak; they do not need to explain anything; the clear image of the star, Sean Penn, is enough to state the character as the now normal Cheyenne (Image 4). Norms are taken for granted; they do not need explanation, it seems. In the first sequence hereby analyzed, Cheyenne looks for recognition in the mirror, trying to identify himself with the image he sees in a game of displacement between him and himself. In the last scene, recognition comes as if it was natural from another person. He displays in his own body that now he follows the expectations for his age and gender.

Image 4 - *This Must Be The Place*



Source: Sorrentino, Paolo. *This Must Be the Place*. 2011.

Not only is Cheyenne completely recognizable as someone who fits in, Sean Penn, as the star of the movie and a well-known celebrity, is also there, completely on display for the audience. Sean Penn participates in the realm of the alluring objects, discussed by Steven Shaviro (2010, p. 9, author's emphasis): "the alluring object explicitly *calls attention* to the fact that it is something more than, and other than, the bundle of qualities that it presents to me". Because celebrities are "affectively charged", as Shaviro affirms, the audience may respond to someone with a certain level of recognition and intimacy. Although Sean Penn is always there and always recognizable, it is only in the end that he appears in the form the audience is used to seeing him. The narrative comes to a resolution, there is an explanation for the non-normative behavior of the character. The recognizable star and the now norm-abiding character are, in the last scene, completely aligned. The character gets the closure he needs to surpass his father's issues and the film gives a closure to the narrative. Normativity is complete, the film may come to an end.

In the case of *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015), differently from *This Must Be the Place*, the protagonist does not rely solely on clothes and make-up to embody individual non-normativity. The film narrates the story of Lili Elbe, the first person to undergo a sex reassignment surgery, telling, by extent, the story of an individual who is not aligned to what is socially expected in relation to the coherence between sex, gender, and sexuality. Although based on a true story, it is important to remember that it is an adaptation of a fictionalized version of Lili Elbe's life. Adapted from the homonymous book, by David Ebershoff (2000), the film depicts Einar Wegener's transition into Lili Elbe, ending shortly after Lili's death due to complications from her second reassignment surgery.

There is an ambivalence between the context of production and the cultural context of the diegesis. Many of the discursive language used today to discuss issues related to non-normative subjects emerged from feminist, gender, LGBTQ, and queer studies, primarily from the second half of the twentieth century onward. However, the

film centers on a subject who did not participate in most of these debates, as the story ends in the 1930s. Nonetheless, it is itself a cultural product of the 2010s, and thus it must balance between depicting a historical period and incorporating contemporary discussions.

The film is celebratory of this woman who pioneered, in the 1930s, experimental surgery, impacting the lives of many people after her. By depicting this story, *The Danish Girl* pays tribute to Lili Elbe and inscribes itself in the history of LGBTQ representation. The intention here is not to question Lili's importance or the validity of commemorating her life through art. This analysis begins with the premise that Lili Elbe's story deserves to be remembered.

Additionally, it is not the objective of this article to analyze adaptation choices or explore the liminalities between reality and fiction. Instead, the focus here is exclusively on the film's meaning-making regarding the relationship between body, norms, and narrative closure. The audience is first introduced to Einar and Gerda Wegener as a loving modern artist couple, who have a passionate relationship. At the beginning, gestures and clothing typically associated with women constantly appear in the frame almost as interacting with Einar, i.e. when he goes through costumes, in the backstage at a theater, or when he is set against a large painting of a ballerina in the couple's apartment. However, the first time the protagonist puts on woman's clothings in the film is to assist the wife with a painting.

In this scene, the camera plays with the body parts to produce affect between the character and this different way of seeing one's own body. The audience looks at the shoes, stocks, and the dress from Einar's perspective. The focus switches from the shoes to the edge of the dress, a close-up shot shows the expression on the face of the protagonist when looking down at the clothes on the body; Einar slightly touches the sewing edge of the dress (Image 5). The scene is intense and builds the tension until it is interrupted by the arrival of Ulla, a friend of the couple. This is a particularly touching sequence with a deep effect on the feelings of the character and, presumably, of the

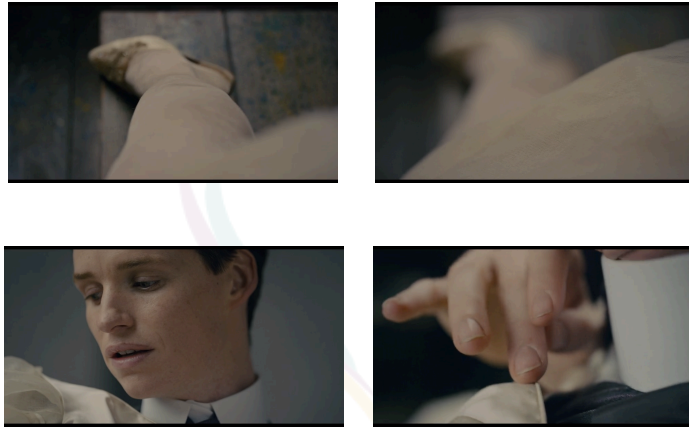
audience as well, although it may be difficult, or even, venturing to say, impossible, to describe the emotions produced by it. According to Shaviro (2010, p. 03),

affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a 'content' that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject. Emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they have or possess their own emotions.

In this sense, this scene is producing the feelings that constitute itself, without encapsulating emotions but working its powers of affect both on the character and on the audience.

The body acts upon the character, creating a simultaneous process of unrecognizing and recognizing. The character detaches from the surrounding space and concentrates in the space of the body. This performance brings forth a body that “simultaneously figures as a normative structure regulated by binary power relations [...] and as an excessive, destabilizing intensity responsive to its own forces and capacities” (Del Río, 2009, p. 09). The bodily presence in the scene causes an instant of normative destabilization. Del Río considers that affective-performative moments are constant with varying degrees of intensity (2009, p. 15). This scene is particularly for analysis because it is highly intense and disrupts the structures of norms for both the audience and for the character.

Image 5 - *The Danish Girl*



Source: Hooper, Tom. *The Danish Girl*. 2015.

The film follows the protagonist on the quest to understand the complex feelings that give life to Lili. In the process of transitioning, the character studies the gestures, the position of hands and body, the way women talk, and starts imitating and repeating the studied movements, gestures, and behaviors. The first time Einar dresses up as Lili is to perform a game in a ball. With the help of Gerda, Einar learns how to pose and pass as a woman. As Butler states, performativity is reinforced, produced, and materialized by reiteration: "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 02). In the film, what starts as performance, through repetition and internalization, is transformed into performativity. By copying body movements and gestures of women, the construction of Lili produces something more than just a copy. The internalization produces a new self. Performance, in this case, is not for the sake of art, but for the process of materialization of Lili's body. However, this is not a straightforward process, and the protagonist goes through a series of turmoil to understand what is happening.

The character has to use the language at disposal to explain these feelings that are intense, complex, and beyond the words to describe them. By doing so, sometimes

the description the protagonist gives of Lili and Einar resembles a split; for instance, when saying that, in the ball, there were times that "I wasn't always me, there was a moment I was just Lili", or when Lili explains to the doctor that "I am a woman inside". As half of the film goes by, the protagonist affirms that "there is so little of Einar left", marking Lili as the protagonist. For language cannot convey the a- and pre-subjective meanings of affect, it constantly fails its own objective, that is, naming that which cannot be named. Her body, on the other hand, acts beyond the restrictions of language. Mirrors and glass windows reflections play the game of self-recognition and misrecognition, identification, and dis-identification. In the scene when Einar watches the movements of a naked woman in a peep show, both bodies almost overlap in the window reflection (Image 6). Einar is not interested in fulfilling any sexual desire – the reason why men usually look for these places; rather, the character desires the body for one's self. When the woman realizes the reason for being watched, she starts performing for Einar's intention, promoting the space for repetition and partaking in the game; both are acting in the scene. The imitation of the woman's movements produces something beyond the mere junction of both bodies in the window. Desire is still key for Einar but it has a different connotation. Moreover, the encounter of these bodies subverts the use of the place itself. The place used for satisfying male desires over objectified women is, then, used for the constitution of a woman in a body that was not supposed to be feminine according to social norms.



Image 6 - *The Danish Girl*



Source: Hooper, Tom. *The Danish Girl*. 2015.

Differently from *This Must Be the Place*, due to the complexity of the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, in the case of *The Danish Girl* normativity cannot be reinstalled only by one last scene, without any apparent explanation. In this sense, as the film moves on to a resolution, its last quarter shows Lili after the first surgery, as, in the words of another character, "a real woman" (my emphasis). As Einar transitions into Lili, she is no longer a painter; she considers herself only a woman, and being a woman is her goal: "I want to be a woman, not a painter". Her considered docile and girly characteristics, such as her smile and tilted head, are well appreciated as a perfume saleswoman. Before going to the second surgery, she states to the doctor that "[she] want[s] a husband who looks just like [him], maybe a child one day, like a real woman". Her lines align her sexuality and desires to a projection of a future that is socially expected from a woman (getting married and having kids). The real woman, mentioned more than once in the film, is for these characters one who performs physically and socially the roles imposed over women.

As the film comes to an end, the complex feelings of dis-identifications of the character are replaced for the desires of being a woman within the heterosexual matrix: she wants to be, in her words, "entirely" a "real" woman, to find a husband, and have children. The resolution of the narrative culminates in her death due to complications from the second surgery. A weak Lili states, after the procedure: "I'm entirely myself". In the garden, where she has her last conversation with Gerda, her body appears, at the

beginning of the sequence, half covered by a blanket, from a medium long shot. After that, the sequence switches between a close-up of Lili's face to Gerda's face. The audience does not see Lili's body anymore (Image 7). The gestures and postures of her body are no longer as important as they were up until half of the movie. Lili dies after rewriting her own story in a dream, by telling that she dreamed of being a baby and her mother calling her Lili. The freedom and liberation from the reassignment surgery are represented by a bodiless scarf that flies over Lili's native village in a long shot, in the very last scene. The scarf then functions as Lili's symbolic representation. Death comes as a completion, which is only possible for she dies right after the surgery that made her, in her words, "entirely [herself]". In other words, she is entirely a woman in a normative concept of womanhood.

Image 7 - *The Danish Girl*



Source: Hooper, Tom. *The Danish Girl*. 2015.

It is important to emphasize that Lili's presence destabilizes, to a certain extent, the normative timeline, as her life does not follow the linearity of traditional heterosexuality. This disruption of conventional time and space emerges throughout the film. For instance, Lili queers the peep show, transforming a place designed for

heterosexual male pleasure into a space for the desire of becoming. Another example, already discussed here, is the powers of affect in the scene where Lili dresses to pose for a painting. These feelings directed towards pieces of clothing disturb the normative perspective of sex and gender.

What these two scenes have in common is the presence of Lili's body. The body is the site where queerness is constructed. However, by reducing the presence of Lili's body at the end of the movie, the narrative relegates queerness to an off-camera position. This is evident in the scene where Lili and Greta are talking, with Lili's body hidden under a blanket and out of the close-up sequence, and in the final scene where the scarf represents a bodiless Lili. By minimizing the physical presence of Lili's body, the film shifts away from the tangible, embodied experience of queerness. This transition from a bodily presence to symbolic representation signifies a retreat from the disruptive potential of Lili's queerness, aligning the film's conclusion with traditional, heteronormative temporality.

*The Danish Girl* follows the traditional linearity of a cinematic narrative, where linear time adheres to a cause-and-effect sequence, reaching what Bordwell describes as "the logical conclusion of the string of events" (1986, p. 21). Because Lili dies in real life, this approach gains even more relevance as the film aims to replicate what would be considered real historical events. Consequently, this closure creates the impression that there is no other possible ending to her story and, thus, no other possible ending for the film than to conclude with Lili's death following one of the sex reassignment surgeries. This alignment between reality and fiction is reinforced by the film's narrative structure. Brandão and Sousa question this necessity of considering the "[f]ilmic discourse [...] a transparent medium revealing reality" (2015, p. 162). Although they are specifically discussing realism in "Brand New Brazilian Cinema", they emphasize the value of bodily presence as a means of blurring the frontiers between fiction, reality, and representation (2015, p. 164). Assuming there is no other

way to end a movie would limit the possibilities for creative expression and overlook the potential to queer narrative structures.

The linearity of the film follows a normative temporality that conflates – and confuses – the end of the movie with the end of Lili’s life. According to Jack Halberstam (2005, n.p), “[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction”. On one hand, we have a character who starts as a married man, becomes a woman, gets a divorce, undergoes reassignment surgery, dreams of having a husband and children, and then dies. This storyline, by itself, disrupts normative temporality. On the other hand, by ending with Lili’s death shortly after she reinforces the idea that a “real” and “entire” woman dreams of marriage and children, *The Danish Girl* re-establishes traditional chronology. As Halberstam (2005, n.p) affirms, “[r]eproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs”.

Thus, Lili’s dream participates in restoring queer time and place into the normativization of the narrative by reinforcing the logic of maturation and reproduction. Becoming a woman is depicted as connected to marrying a man and accessing reproductive means to have children. Through the necessity of a narrative closure that provides a logical conclusion within the heteronormative parameters, the film fails to offer, in the end, a queer space where queer temporality can flourish. In other words, the classic, traditional narrative struggles to support a queer space and temporality exactly because it requires the logical conclusion that reiterates normative temporality.

The film gives the impression of a happy ending, even though she dies, for she can call herself "entire" and "real", and with an apparent feeling of freedom promoted by the last scene, with the flying scarf. At the same time that Lili reidealizes and rearticulates the social gender norms by the constitution of a woman in an individual that was formerly considered male, denaturalizing normative concepts of gender and sex, she also reinforces these very same norms by the coherent practices and discourses

produced by her in the constitution of a realization that endeavors the alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality in a normative fashion.

### *XXY*

Closure is not necessarily normative by nature, even though commonly used in this sense. The Argentine *XXY* (Puenzo, 2007) is an instance of a closure that does not work in the normativization of the character. The resolution follows the characteristics associated with closure – it is not an open-ended film: the narrative comes to a completion and the ambiguities from the plot are eliminated. However, what *XXY* does, in the end, is eliminate the ambiguities from the plot, not from Alex's body and character. The narrative accompanies the story of a family struggling to decide if the 15-year-old intersex teenager Alex should undergo surgical procedures. As Butler recalls, surgery has distinct connotation for intersex and transgender people, at the same time that both challenge binarisms:

“Although intersex and transsex sometimes seem to be movements at odds with one another, the first opposing unwanted surgery, the second sometimes calling for elective surgery, it is most important to see that both challenge the principle that a natural dimorphism should be established or maintained at all costs.” (Butler, 1993, p. 06)

Hence, while Lili Elbe, in *The Danish Girl*, strives to be recognized as a woman, with the surgery being an act of choice that defies certain social norms, Alex, in *XXY*, strives exactly because escapes "correctional" surgeries. Unlike *The Danish Girl*, which must navigate the ambivalence of both the context of production and the historical context of its diegesis, *XXY* benefits of a diegesis that coincides with the time of production. Consequently, the latter can inform its characters with contemporary discussions that former cannot.

Neither Alex nor the film is afraid of Alex's body. The persistence of the half-naked body in a variety of scenes has the potency of making the audience also familiar with the non-normative embodiment of the intersex character. For example, the first time Alex appears half-naked, the character is laying down on the front, with the back visible to the camera, in a medium shot; when Alex turns, without any cut, it is possible to see the supposed female body. After that, there is a cut and a close-up of the bottle of medicine in the drawer on the bedside. When the camera cuts back to Alex, the character is staring at one pill. Alex does not take it; rather, a close-up shot focuses on the pill between the breasts, from which Alex flings it. The sequence finishes with Alex reading a book about sexual differences (Image 8). The scene makes a close connection between the body and medicine, but also refuses this very same connection. Alex can only maintain a considered feminine body by taking the pills, but the act of looking at and flinging it demonstrates that the character wants the control of the body distant from its medical control. Such a decision of not taking the pills is an informed, conscious one, represented by the reading of a book on the subject at the end of the scene.

Image 8 - *XXY*





Source: Puenzo, Lucía. *XXY*. 2007.

Several other scenes work in reinforcing the control, knowledge, and recognition of Alex's body from the part of the protagonist. When Alvaro, Alex's love interest, asks if Alex is a boy or a girl, for instance, the answer is: "I am both", to which he responds that this is not possible, and Alex completes: "so you are going to tell me what is possible for me to be or not to be". The film positions itself against the binary system of gender and coercive "correctional" surgery, calling it a castration and a traumatic experience. The narrative does not provide for a simple alignment of gender, sex, and sexuality. Gender is not only a social constraint inscribed over a biological body; instead, gender and sex continuously rearticulate themselves in a non-normative fashion. As Butler (2004, p. 01) argues, "the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim". Alex's non-conformativity forces both gender and sex to become undone, becoming part of this "newer one with greater livability".

By the end of the film, Alex declares the decision to stop taking medicine and not undergo surgery, at least up until that moment: "I don't want it anymore, no more medicines, no operation, nor changing schools. I want things as they are". Alex has the possibility of choice, although it may seem there is no choice to be made. When the father expresses that Alex should decide when and which procedures to undertake, the answer is: "What if there is nothing to choose?" This keeps the possibilities open for

the protagonist, making it evident that no "correctional" surgery and no procedures altogether are viable options.

When broadening possibilities, the film questions the use of the adjective "correctional" for gender-reassignment surgeries in intersex individuals. The protagonist's body does not need correction. In the very last scene, Alex shows her genitalia to Alvaro, the boy she fell in love with. The protagonist remains unafraid and ashamed of one's own body, possessing and controlling it. The audience does not see what Alvaro sees; it remains an intimate moment only between them. This shared instant allows the performative forces of the body to manifest in the tender, watery looks that they exchange. As Brandão and Sousa argue, "[s]ubtlety can look like weakness, impotence. But only if we ignore the powers of affect" (2015, p. 169). This image is charged with complicity. In this case, they do not need words to express their feelings, but the recognition does not constitute normativity; rather, the scene is expressive exactly in recognizing the difference, allowing its idealization and realization.

After that, Alex runs to the father, embraces him, and both walk side-by-side, in a medium close-up (Image 9). They do not say anything, but they look at each other and, then, looking ahead, produce the affectivity that made possibility real for them. The camera, then, moves slower, while they walk passing through, out of the diegetic frame, and the focus is, in the end, in the ocean (Image 9). Future is open with possibilities beyond the binary system of gender and sex. Therefore, closure in the film focuses in aligning Alex's romantic story and in choosing not pursuing any treatment for her body and self, once they do not have any problems in need of correction. However, the film does not resolve the sexual ambiguity that exists from a binary perspective of the sex, gender, sexuality matrix. The options "either...or" do not work for Alex, so the choice is exactly not to choose, and just to be. Thus, there is an openness in the process of closure.



Image 9 - *XXY*



Source: Puenzo, Lucía. *XXY*. 2007.

According to Butler, autonomy in relation to one's own body, gender, and sex, is also socially constituted. The "I" seeks recognition; livability is only possible when social norms allow its idealization and realization: "I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me" (Butler, 2004, p. 32):

To say that the desire to persist in one's own being depends on norms of recognition is to say that the basis of one's autonomy, one's persistence as an "I" through time, depends fundamentally on a social norm that exceeds that "I," that positions that "I" ec-statically, outside of itself in a world of complex and historically changing norms. (Butler, 2004, p. 31)

In this sense, the openness of closure in *XXY* creates the possibility for a future that is also open with possibilities, including the possibility of changing norms. Both Alvaro and Alex's father work together with the protagonist in constituting different norms of recognition.

### **Final Remarks**

Closure, as part of the traditional narrative structure, by definition should bring the narrative to a completion, resolving any ambiguity in the plot. Because it is so closely related to extrinsic norms, narrative closure tends to normativize the body, which, from its part, might resist resolution. However, the bodily presence of non-normativity and the powers of affect can complicate this obedience to the norms. In

this article, I analyze three distinct closure outcomes: one with the completion of bodily normativization, in *This Must Be the Place*; another that, despite resisting, in the end (pun intended) realigns the matrix sex, gender, sexuality in a temporality that follows a linear traditional structure, closing with a bodiless image, in *The Danish Girl*; and lastly, a film that, while using narrative closure, keeps the presence of the body alive and leaves the ending open for future possibilities, in *XXY*.

The ambivalence in *The Danish Girl* reinforces some norms while complicating others. As a transgender woman, Lili Elbe disturbs gender norms. However, the presence of a non-normative body diminishes to provide a logical conclusion for the events. Although *The Danish Girl* honors Lili Elbe's pioneering role in reassignment surgeries, its narrative structure and heteronormative temporality present in some statements merge closure with the normativization – or at least the absence – of non-normative bodies.

In contrast, for Cheyenne in *This Must Be the Place*, the nature of his non-normative embodiment simplifies his normativization, making it comfortable and silent, requiring no explanation. The plot resolution implies that non-normativity stemmed from unresolved past issues and inner turmoil. To wrap up the plot successfully, the body is presented in a normative, recognizable form. The body, then, symbolizes that the character's disturbance was eliminated.

Although the intrinsic characteristics of narrative closure may reinforce normativization, Alex, in *XXY*, demonstrates that this is not necessarily an unbreakable rule. There is resolution in *XXY*, but the decision not to undergo surgery, at least up until that moment, leaves the protagonist's future open, and by that, maintaining the possibility of changing norms as well. In *XXY*, narrative closure does not lead to normativization; instead, it allows openness to the existence and recognition of non-normative bodies.

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#### Fechamento, Corpo e Normas:

#### O papel do fechamento na normatização de corpos não-normativos

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar a relação entre um fechamento narrativo e a normatização dos corpos em filmes. Nesse sentido, este artigo será dividido em duas partes. A primeira vai discutir como o fechamento narrativo é usado para ajustar uma personagem às normas sociais de gênero vigentes. Para tanto, analisarei os filmes *This Must Be the Place* (Sorrentino, 2011) e *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015). A seleção desses filmes leva em consideração personagens que são apresentadas ao público como não-normativas, mas que acabam sendo levadas a uma certa normatização. A segunda parte do artigo pretende trazer um exemplo de filme em que a abertura do fechamento permite que a personagem mantenha uma subjetividade não-normativa. Nesse caso, o filme escolhido para ser analisado é o argentino *XXY*

(Puenzo, 2007). Minha hipótese é que, pelas características intrínsecas do fechamento, que é, segundo Susan Hayward, que "a narrativa deve chegar a um final", a necessidade de trazer alguma resolução para o fato de uma personagem não se encaixar na norma acaba reforçando a normatização das mesmas personagens que se pretendem não-normativas. Embora o fechamento narrativo possa ser usado como uma forma de lidar com as normas sociais, *XXY* funciona como um exemplo de que nem sempre é esse o caso.

Palavras-chave: Cinema performativo-afetivo; Teoria queer; Fechamento.

Fecha, cuerpo y normas:

El papel de la actualidad en la normalización de organismos no normativos.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar la relación entre un cierre narrativo y la normativización de los cuerpos en las películas. En este sentido, este artículo se dividirá en dos partes. El primero discutirá cómo se usa el cierre narrativo para ajustar un personaje a las normas sociales de género predominantes. Para ello analizaré las películas *This Must Be the Place* (Sorrentino, 2011) y *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015). La selección de estas películas tiene en cuenta personajes que se presentan al público como no normativos, pero que acaban siendo llevados a una cierta normativización. La segunda parte del artículo pretende traer un ejemplo de una película en la que la apertura del cierre le permite al personaje mantener una subjetividad no normativa. En este caso, la película escogida para ser analizada es la argentina *XXY* (Puenzo, 2007). Mi hipótesis es que, debido a las características intrínsecas del cierre, que es, según Susan Hayward, que "la narración debe llegar a su fin", termina la necesidad de aportar alguna resolución al hecho de que un personaje no se ajusta a la norma. hasta reforzar la normativización de los mismos personajes que se pretende que sean no normativos. Si bien el cierre narrativo se puede utilizar como una forma de abordar las normas sociales, *XXY* sirve como ejemplo de que este no siempre es el caso.

Palabras clave: Cine performativo-afectivo; Teoria queer; Cierre.

**Recebido: 03/07/2023**

**Aceito: 09/08/2024**