

## **Masquerade: The Female Body in Post-Modern Films**

*By Kathleen Barbara*

Throughout film history, the female body has been gazed upon, lusted after, protected, admired, and murdered. A sampling of post-modern films, including *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, *The Swimming Pool*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Orlando*, *The Piano*, and *The Ballad of Little Jo*, divulge new and complex views of the female body, including gender transformation. The mother-body, the clothed body, and the psychological and cultural body display the evolving female psyche. Monique Wittig posits,

At this point, let us say that a new personal and subjective definition for all human kind can only be found beyond the categories of sex (woman and man) and that the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the categories of sex, ending the use of them [ . . . ]. (2020)

The female protagonists in these films, whether rewriting their own stories (*Swimming Pool*), finding methods to transform their sex within a patriarchy (*The Piano*), or altering their femininity (*Orlando*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and *The Ballad of Little Jo*), redefine their gender. In doing so, the postmodern female body surpasses her assigned gender role.

Fredrich Jameson provides one of the characteristics of postmodernism by describing it as a schizophrenic experience:

In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers that fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time. (1961)

The protagonists in these films struggle with sense of identity in different ways. Jo (*The Ballad of Little Jo*) attempts to survive in the West, while the mute Ada (*The Piano*) communicates with those around her with a piano and a notepad and takes a lover to avoid becoming the person her historical period determines she must be. These movies depict women persisting in their quest for the "I." Furthermore, as Linda Hutcheon emphasizes, "The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate or resolutely provisional and limited-often undermining their own seeming omniscience" (277). In that context, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* exists outside sequence, unfolding in random order as The Bride expresses her murderous intentions. Viewers accept the reality of Ada's declaration of muteness and the voice heard is "not my speaking voice, but my mind's voice," though her mind "speaks" in a carefully modulated Scottish accent. In *Orlando*, a voiceover proclaims, "There can be no doubt about his sex, despite the feminine appearance every young man of this era aspires to." Moreover, at times Orlando interrupts the narrator and gazes directly at the viewer, raising questions as to who actually tells the story. Maggie Humm theorizes about the characteristics of postmodern film:

The key feature of postmodern cinema, then is this new signification of gender. The degree to which postmodern signs differ from other cinematic effects also may mark the possibility of new figurations of individual and collective histories. For example, the too readily available plot of boyhood to manhood, and its metonymic brothers—the emerging nation and the last frontier—have little place in postmodern films. The power of a national history, or a delimited, gendered life story, is denied in favour of the pleasures of parody, pastiche and the spectacular. Leads in postmodern cinema are neither models of all-American manhood nor clues to men's desires. (143)

Thus, films such as *Swimming Pool*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, and *Boys Don't Cry*, along with the other films referenced above, all bear the marks of postmodernism. All depict women who, both psychologically and culturally, either strive to change their gender, de-gender themselves, or somehow rise above their gender to find a more complete existence.

The female body in these films represents the psychological gaze. In *Swimming Pool*, Julie (Ludivine Sagnier) invites the audience to gaze on her naked form for most of the film, while in *Boys Don't Cry*, the female body becomes stripped and exposed in a horrifying way. Laura Mulvey suggests,

But in psychological terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. (35)

For instance, the viewer of *Boys Don't Cry* first sees Brandon reflected in a mirror as his cousin cuts his hair. When Brandon demands that his cousin cut his hair shorter, he establishes his desired gender to the audience. Brandon's reflection always shows his female body rejecting itself; his replica binds his breasts and stuffs a sock down his pants, grinning engagingly in the mirror. These reflections signify Brandon's reassignment of his gender, forcing viewers to accept him as a male. Lacan's mirror stage theory aids in understanding the direct and reflective female body in these films: "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification [. . .] namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image-whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (1286). The use of reflection in these films helps establish "the transformation of female identity as the woman revises her relationship to her body as self" (Natharius and Dobkin 6). Mirror and reflection play important roles *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *The Piano* and *Swimming Pool*. Jo gazes into a mirror as she scars herself, disassociated herself from her femininity. In *The Piano*, the mirror reflects Ada preparing for her wedding, thus portending her place as Stewart's wife. Natharius and Dobkin theorize, "The central characters 'see' in the mirror their 'self' as the member of a gendered order and the condition of their own identity

dependent on their attachment to another" (10). The female body presents itself in these films both to its owner and to the viewer:

It is precisely this opposition between proximity and distance, control of the image and its loss, which locates the possibilities of spectatorship within the problematic of sexual difference. For the female spectator this is a certain over-presence of the image-she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism-the female look demands a becoming. (Doane 135)

This also holds true for Charlotte Rampling's character, Sarah Morton, in *Swimming Pool*. Sarah peeks out the window to spy on Julie but instead views her own reflection. The pool constantly reflects Julie's image, but Sarah will not swim, claiming the pool is "too dirty." Sarah's reluctance to view her own image symbolizes her opposition to accepting her own image.

Clothes make the man...and the woman...and the woman into a man...and the man into a woman. Cross-dressing in films, especially male-to-female transformations, has provided countless moments of laughter, with comedic films such as *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Some Like it Hot*, and *I Was a Male War-Bride*. However, the films featuring female-to-male cross-dressing, notwithstanding the 1985 teen sex comedy *Just One of the Guys*, portray the protagonists in more serious circumstances. Clothing transforms, manipulates and reveals the female body in many ways in these films, providing the viewer with a masquerade of the body. In *The Piano* and *Orlando*, tight corsets and large hoops mask the natural shape of the body; in *The Ballad of Little Jo* and *Boys Don't Cry*, femininity remains concealed as well, but for reasons of survival rather than of fashion. Mary Ann Doane speculates,

Thus, while the male is locked into sexual identity, the female can at least pretend that she is other-in fact, sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its cultural constructions. The idea seems to be this: it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position. (138)

While the protagonist (Tilda Swinton) of *Orlando* accepts her new female body with aplomb, she soon discovers that her new garb restricts not only her body but also her options. Archduke Harry (John Wood), at first stunned by Orlando's sudden gender change, soon gazes lustfully upon her, inducing him to declare fervently, "I confess, Orlando, to me you were and always will be, no matter your sex, the pink pearl, the perfection of your sex." Her feminine dress grants permission to his lust, whereas the male costume forbade it. Humm comments, "Orlando's gender, in biography and film is free-Swinton negotiates gender and lacking any consistent and core gender identity, Swinton's cross-dressing becomes, not a trendy fashion choice, but a conspicuous visible site of play and spectacle" (167). Orlando continues to "play" with dress, until as a modern woman, she adopts an androgynous style of dress and chooses to dress her female child in the same way.

Brandon Teena's masquerade in *Boys Don't Cry* serves as her entrance into the exclusive male world. Brandon's quest for masculine results in excessive stuffing, goading his cousin to proclaim him "deformed." Brandon must distort and hide his natural female body. He even steals tampons to avoid detection. Furthermore, he wears heavy flannel jackets to continue his subterfuge. Brandon happily endures injuries while "bumper skiing" because these injuries serve as further costuming for his male persona. Elizabeth Cowie proposes that masquerade "is a disguise of appearing castrated" (234). If so, Brandon certainly fits this perspective, as he carries an artificial penis around with him, one of the props he uses in quest for maleness. Brandon's unmasking by Tom (Brendan Sexton III) and John (Peter Sarsgaard), then, becomes a painful exercise in realization for all concerned. Tom and John react violently to the discovery, probably because they experience a sense of loss and betrayal by Brandon's deception: "In the social realm, the concept of a man does not rest only on his sexual identity. Therefore, to base the singularity of individuals on their gender identity means something different for the man and the woman since a woman has a lower place in the symbolic hierarchy" (Walker 88). By dressing and passing successfully as a man, Brandon violates this hierarchy and Tom and John assault her in order to regain their place in it: "Attitudes to sexual norms are anchored by the external evidence of gender offered by clothing, hairstyle, physical bearing and so on. Wearing clothes considered as inappropriate to one's sex is often read as a disruption of sexual boundaries, a rebellion against the constricting conformity of societal norms" (Young 275). Brandon's unmasking proves as painful as the rape because he must surrender his masculine "costume."

Unlike Brandon, who adopts masculine clothing in order to adopt his gender, Jo (Suzy Amis) in *The Ballad of Little Jo*, dons her male duds for survival purposes. Josephine Monagan's upbringing as a proper Eastern woman leaves her unsuited for the West-as either a man or a woman. Her feminine dress attracts unwanted attention, as a peddler Jo trusts sells her to two soldiers. Jo's skirts hamper her escape, until, wet and bedraggled, she enters a dry goods store and asks the proprietor if any of dresses are ready-made. The proprietor responds with contempt, "Not ready made. This is what we got-needles and thread." Jo wanders over to the male clothing, prompting the proprietor to interject, "It's against the law to dress against your sex." Jo assumes her male persona, removing her corset "that symbolizes her place in a gendered order" (Natharius and Dobkin 6). While becoming a man, Jo remembers the most significant moment of her female life-her seduction by the photographer, and the reason she was cast out of her family. The image suggests that Jo will have more control and advantage as a male, as long as her deception remains undiscovered. As Doane conjectures, "Masquerade [. . .] involves a realignment of femininity, the recover, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image" (139). However, like Brandon Teena, a friend, Percy (Ian McKellen), discovers her masquerade and responds by attacking her and

attempting to rape her. Jo has fortunately learned how to use a gun and can defend herself. She maintains the pretense until her death; the undertaker executes the final unmasking, showing her naked body to all of Jo's friends and acquaintances. They take pictures to commemorate the event, unable to believe that a woman could have fooled them all. Masquerading as a man allowed Jo to act outside her assigned cultural boundaries, including taking a Chinese lover, an absolute taboo in the Old West.

*The Piano's* period clothing serves to tantalize both the male characters in the film and the viewer. Corsets, heavy petticoats and stiff skirts enclose Ada's body, ostensibly making it available only to her husband, Stewart (Sam O'Neill). However, the bargain that Ada strikes with Baines (Harvey Keitel) includes the removal of some of her clothing. The clothing becomes a fetishistic object as Baines lifts and smells her removed jacket:

In representation, therefore, the fetish is the signifier of an excess of meaning, becoming thereby a signifier of excess. The fetish also signifies that the 'proper' object-the object in proper use, is not the 'real' object, which is indeed the case, for it is only through fantasy, if at all, that a man or a woman can come to be brought to stand in the place of the object that will satisfy. (Cowie 266)

Inevitably, Baines grows weary of these objects and longs for the real desire that Ada cannot initially provide. He eventually gives Ada her piano, putting an end to her striptease.

Naturally, the female body, in cultural terms, involves more than just clothing. The women in these films redefine their bodies in a cultural sense. Susan Bordo provides a view on how the female perceives her body:

The body-what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we tend to the body-is a medium of culture. The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture. (2362)

In *The Swimming Pool*, the clashes between English and French cultures really meet in the way that Julie and Sarah display their bodies. While Sarah wraps herself in her clothing, Julie freely displays her wares to all and sundry. Quentin Tarentino's heroine uses her body to kick some major ass, and the protagonists of *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, and *Orlando* attempt to redefine their gender culturally, with sometimes tragic results.

The Bride (Uma Thurman) of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* awakes from a deep coma and becomes aware of her body immediately when a mosquito penetrates her skin. Her awareness increases as she overhears the hospital orderly promising two crude men "the cutest little blonde pussy you ever saw." The Bride dispatches the two men plus the orderly, drags herself out to the orderly's truck, and wills her legs, atrophied from years of disservice, to walk. By discovering that the orderly

used her body for commerce and then destroying him (she repeatedly bangs his head, the center of his intellect, in the door; crushing it). How appropriate then, that The Bride, now in full command of her body, should use her "cute blonde pussy" to command the orderly's yellow car, named the "pussy wagon," thereby owning a term of expression normally offensive to women. The Bride utilizes her body as a weapon of vengeance, wreaking havoc on her enemies that slaughtered her family and her bridegroom. The Bride's appearance embodies the ideal of the slender, beautiful blonde, hardly what one envisions as an efficient assassin, therefore fulfilling the "appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey 2186). Thus, The Bride simultaneously thwarts and fulfills the male gaze. When the Bride lies comatose, characters such as Elle (Daryl Hannah), focus only on her appearance, "Look at you, you're not so damn pretty. Yeah, you got that Venus thing going for you, but [. . .] you're kinda weird looking. You got this big nose that doesn't fit with the rest of your face. Your eyes are two different sizes. And look at your skin...my complexion is way better than yours." Elle's jealousy further enforces the importance of The Bride's beautiful countenance:

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement.' (Bordo 2362)

The Bride's body, docile in its coma state, becomes strong as she exerts her will upon her body and transforms herself into a being that surpasses the feminine "docile body." Part of the masculinization of The Bride rests with Tarentino's fascination with martial arts films. Lenuta Guikin provides this insight on the martial arts film:

The split of the gender roles along the lines of the "natural" originates in a longlasting [sic] cultural construction that equates femininity with reproduction and domesticity, passivity and submissiveness [. . .]. But in the action movie, especially the Hong Kong cinema of the eighties and nineties [. . .] the strong masculinization of the heroine often creates a break with the classical representation of the feminine passivity in cinema, a transformation that affects her body representation to a degree that questions the received notion of gender. In order to control the more and more fluid boundaries of gender, the hero or heroine's more and more ambiguous body is frequently marked as feminine or masculine through costumes and/or other techniques, such as the masquerade. (55)

Thus, The Bride's wearing of a reproduction of the track suit that Bruce Lee wore in his last film, *The Game of Death*, is not just a tribute but also a way to further blur gender lines.

In *Orlando*, the body merely serves as a conduit for the spirit. Orlando's beginning period of life commences during Elizabeth I's reign, where he becomes a favorite of the Queen (Quentin Crisp). The Queen bestows Orlando property,

admonishing, "Do not fade. Do not wither. Do not grow old." Orlando, his body staying young and firm, proceeds through that century and the next. In the previous scene, Orlando fights in the rebel forces for the Khan. He recoils in horror from the shooting and dying around him, and when he attempts to aid a man a wounded man, the emissary orders, "Leave him." Orlando protests, "This is a dying man," to which Harry replies, "He's not a man, he's the enemy." Orlando falls into a deep sleep and upon waking, reveals his now fully female body to the audience. Orlando, with his now womanly body, informs the viewer, "Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex." Orlando's personality, although she now struggles with the complexities of restoration women's clothing, remains the same: "That 'man' and 'woman' cannot designate naturally distinct entities, that gender representations will inevitably draw on/be drawn by their effective social place, has been a constant theme in feminism of the past decade" (Humm 144). Orlando's psyche, unable to cope with the grimness of the war, willed his body to transform into a woman's: "Not chiefly through ideology, but through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity" (Bordo 2363). The change, influenced by the battle Orlando suffered, has cultural roots. Orlando has learned masculinity through his culture; he will learn to be female in the same way. Judith Butler hypothesizes,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movement, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (2501)

Although not as dramatic as Orlando's reinvention, Jo (Suzy Amis) also chooses to transform her gender. *The Ballad of Little Jo* appears to be a traditional western, but the film "reshapes the classic Western in a way that asks viewers to reevaluate stereotypes both about the old West and women's role within it (Natharius and Dobkin 6). Jo hails from the East, where she has given birth to an illegitimate son. In the West, Jo escapes a near-rape and apprehends that her obviously female body has placed her in great danger. Realizing that she cannot remain an attractive and available female with no male protection, she chooses instead to become a man herself rather than barter her body for a strong man's protection. She dresses in men's clothing and rids herself of her long hair and flawless face: "If the creation of values, that historical mode of signification, requires the destruction of the body [. . .] then there must be a body prior to that inscription, stable and self-identical, subject to that sacrificial destruction" (Butler 2492). Jo understands herself fully, but her immediate society proves a danger to her well-being. She must annihilate her female body in order to survive within the patriarchy:

Greenwald thus uses the imagery of the western to express the feminist insight that capitalism and patriarchy are intertwined and that women are

positioned as objects of exchange within that economy. She refuses to let the image of Suzy Amis as Jo itself become part of that economy, as in close-up Jo slashes her face with a razor while in the process of disguising herself as a man, a gesture designed to thwart the voyeuristic gaze, both of the male characters in the film and of the male spectator. (Grant 192)

By divesting herself of her skirts and braids, she sheds the nineteenth-century woman "idealized in terms of delicacy and dreaminess, sexual passivity, and a charmingly labile and capricious emotionality" (Bordo 2366). Jo then mimics the male behaviors of her time, learning to smoke, drink, and shoot like a man.

*Swimming Pool's* Sarah Morton (Charlotte Rampling) embodies the image of the sexless and boring middle-aged British woman. She dresses mannishly, de-emphasizing any pleasing features of her figure: "The pressure to be defined, in social terms, as either male or female remains; and that the gender identity assumed brings its own, often momentous, consequences" (Humm 144). When asked by a curious train passenger if she is the author Sarah Morton, Sarah denies her own existence. Sarah unwillingly inhabits the female body, as evidenced by her denial of her body and almost all of its pleasures. However, her dependence upon her publisher's approval betrays a stunning lack of belief and confidence in herself. She becomes mulish and almost desperate in seeking his esteem, not only for her work, but also for her personal gratification. Her publisher and lover John (Charles Dance) offers Sarah his villa in France, declaring, "It has a swimming pool." Sarah journeys to France but resolutely buys a grim yogurt concoction and drinks tea, refusing to let her body sample any of France's pleasures: "In the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of appetite the traditional construction of femininity intersects with the new requirement for women to embody the 'masculine' values of the public arena" (Bordo 2366). She keeps her body under wraps and stays away from the swimming pool. Far from fulfilling herself as a female, her denial of her appetites has pushed her farther away further away from her femininity: "Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about-perhaps even loathing of-her own flesh" (Gubar and Gilbert 2133). When beautiful, provocative Julie (Ludivine Sagnier) arrives unexpectedly, her exhibitionist behavior awakens all of Sarah's senses. Sarah extravagantly consumes truffles and dances provocatively with Franck (Jean-Marie Lamour), an admirer who Julie brings to the villa. Sarah's discovery of her full sexuality can be attributed to the flagrantly excessive Julie; she strolls around most of the time topless and couples with strangers. Initially repelled by this behavior, Sarah spies on Julie and becomes obsessed with her actions, feelings and thoughts. The obsession with Julie leads Sarah to a fuller understanding and acceptance of her own body; she transforms into a woman who can divest her clothing and lure a decrepit gardener to her bed in order to protect Julie. In doing this, Sarah discovers her personal power; she can then tell her publisher that she does not care about his opinion of her novel-she has already anticipated his reaction and found a new publisher. She emerges from her experiences fully confident in her body and her new femininity.

Holly Hunter (*The Piano*) portrays Ada, a mute Scottish woman forging a new life in colonial New Zealand:

I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me. My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last. Today he married me to a man I've not yet met. Soon my daughter and I shall join him in his own country. My husband said my muteness does not bother him. He writes and hark this: God loves dumb creatures, so why not he!

Ada's body works both for and against her; her father gives (or perhaps sells) to a man but manages to maintain some control over her body by not speaking. She brings with her to the desolate land her piano, an instrument that serves as her voice, her art and her love. Ada truly awakens when she plays her piano; her whole body responds with joy. However, Ada puzzles her new husband Stewart (Sam O'Neill) with her muteness, her stubbornness, and her need for her piano. He desires her and does not know how to express or command his desire. Jane Campion, the director and writer of *The Piano*, comments on her script:

I have enjoyed writing characters who don't have a twentieth-century sensibility about sex. They have nothing to prepare themselves for its strength and power. We grew up with all those magazines that described courtship, giving us lots of little rules and ways of handling it. But for them...the husband Stewart had probably never had sex at all. So for him to experience sex or feelings of sexual jealousy would have been personality-transforming. The impact of sex is not softened, it's cleaner and extremer for that. (138)

Ada uses Stewart's jealousy and curiosity against him, manipulating him with his own desires. Therefore, she uses her body to gain control in a patriarchy where she ultimately has no control at all. Luce Irigaray proposes, "Man endows the commodities he produces with a narcissism that blurs the seriousness of utility, of use. Desire, as soon as there is exchange, 'perverts' need. But that perversion will be attributed to commodities and to their alleged relations" (qtd. in Humm 167). Baines demonstrates this hypothesis when he barter keys to the piano in exchange for sexual favors from Ada: "You see, I'd like us to make a deal. There's things I want to do while you play. If you let me, you can earn it back. What do you think, one visit for every key?" Ada initially balks but realizes that she can retrieve her piano back from Baines. She then manipulates Baines by making him feel awkward and clumsy; his voice seems almost hesitant in his requests, and he often hovers around Ada, impotent with his desire. Although Baines has forced her to become an object of his desire, she has found a way to manipulate the situation to her advantage:

Baines also calls attention to patriarchal conventions in an attempt to subvert them. When he gives Ada her piano, he says he wants to end their relationship because "the arrangement is making (her) a whore." In the larger world they both inhabit, open expression of her desire is not accepted outside the boundaries of prostitution. (Natharius and Dobkin 9)

Ada loses interest in her piano after she repossesses it; she wants Baines now in emotional ways. Stewart has evolved into an object of desire; she willingly touches his body, but she cannot bear for him to return the touch. He has used her as a commodity, and therefore, has no right to her free desire. As Marx postulated, "In our social order, women are 'products' used and exchanged by men. The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as 'subjects'" (qtd. in Jameson 1938). Ada controls the only thing she can within this patriarchy-her own desires.

Kimberly Pierce's *Boys Don't Cry* represents the male/female body division most disturbingly. Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank) demonstrates the most confusion about gender identity. While Orlando accepts his gender change matter-of-factly and with little struggle, Brandon cannot accept the female body into which he was born. He insists he is a heterosexual male; when confronted with the angry boys whose sisters he has courted, his cousin pleads, "Why can't you just admit you're a dyke?" "I'm not a dyke!" Brandon replies. This insistence perplexes the cousin; he believes that Brandon denies his lesbianism and cannot understand why he does not just embrace it. Brandon's dilemma derives from the still sharp division of male and female categories, but Monique Wittig theorizes, "By doing this, by admitting that there is a "natural" division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that "men" and "women" have always existed and will always exist" (2015). Clearly, Brandon cannot be placed in either category; Nicole, his date, comments, "You don't seem like you're from around here." "Where do I seem like I'm from?" Brandon replies. "Someplace beautiful," Nicole insists. Nicole recognizes that Brandon has created a persona beyond gender. Brandon fights vigorously against his own biological identity: he straps down his breasts and reluctantly attends to his menstruation cycle. He has to hide these artifacts of his womanhood; the cultural signifiers that might eventually betray him: "'Woman' is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates 'women' (the product of a relation exploitation). 'Woman' is there to confuse us, to hide the reality 'women'" (Wittig 2018). Brandon cannot bring himself to even name his female body parts; he informs Lana that he has "both girl and boy body parts." Tom and John reinforce Brandon's gender assignment with constant derogatory terms, calling him a "pussy" even when they still believe in his biological masculinity. As repulsive as John and Tom find Brandon's deception, they still cannot help referring to him as a male; they call him "little buddy" even after brutally raping him. "What the fuck are you, motherfucker?" they exclaim perplexedly. Finally, as they search for Brandon, they reduce him to an object, void of gender association, by asking, "Where the fuck is it?" Brandon's insistence on his identity as male leads to his death: "According to Irigaray a masculine gender identity depends on the death drive which is unavailable to women who are unable to symbolize their drives, merely act as representations of men's death drives in the symbolic" (Humm 4). Brandon's flashing, uncertain smile and his attempt to engage in "what guys do around here" reinforces the notion that "gender is always performance" (Humm 43).

Brandon performs his chosen gender role to the point of danger; his insistence on his maleness ends tragically.

In some of these films, motherhood functions to define the female body. In *The Piano*, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, *The Ballad of Little Jo* and *Orlando*. Nancy Chodorow conjectures, "Shame and guilt [. . .] often seem central to women's feelings and fantasies about mother, self, and gender" (15). Jo's life as a man has given her more freedom than her former role as female, but she pays a price for it. She cannot reverse the transformation; when she tries to dress as a woman and make a pie for her lover (David Chang), he scoffs, "What kind of girl are you? No man would want you; you have no hair and that ugly scar-you can't even make a pie." Shortly after this scene, Jo receives a letter from her sister which informs Jo that her sister has told the son that Jo is dead. Natharius and Dobkin offer, "Various feminist thinkers have suggested that understanding the control of patriarchy over women lies in the basic mother-child relationship (23). In the *Ballad of Little Jo*, relinquishing motherhood means overcoming the patriarchal oppression of femininity by becoming a man" (7). Jo's motherhood remains forever lost, as evidenced when she looks out the window at a mother and son and the image, blurred and indistinct, offers little glimpse into maternity. Her land substitutes for her child; she finally refuses to relinquish it to the big cattle company, even killing for it in the end.

The Bride's lost child operates as a catalyst for her revenge. Upon waking, she touches her stomach in order to ascertain if her child remains. When she finds her empty body and telltale scar, her lost child becomes the impetus for moving, living and killing. However, she does not engage in senseless killing and only goes after those who killed her husband-to-be and her child. She maintains her maternal image even while she kills Vernita (Vivica A. Fox), because she makes every attempt to arrange a duel rather than kill Vernita while the child is watching. "It was not my intention to do this in front of you. For that I'm sorry. But you can take my word for it, your mother had it coming. When you grow up, if you still feel raw about it, I'll be waiting," the Bride informs the little girl. In a "society that tries to make us all [. . .] forget our mothers" (Kaplan 201), the Bride's maternal instincts spur her to apologize to the child and encourage her to seek revenge. Chodorow adds, "Guilt and sadness about mother are particularly prevalent female preoccupations and as likely to limit female autonomy, pleasure, and achievement as any cultural mandate" (20). Keeping this idea in mind, it seems likely that if Tarantino made *Kill Bride: Vol. 1*, the film would depict Vernita's daughter seeking the Bride in order to avenge her mother.

The mother-daughter relationship between Ada and Flora (Anna Paquin) obtains its complexity from the fact that Flora functions as Ada's interpreter. At times the two females appear to almost be the same character. At first, Flora declares that she will not call Stewart "Papa." This changes as Ada and Baines' relationship threatens Flora's bond with her mother. Mary Gentile suggests, "Woman, as mother, represents to the child a unity of subject and object, of desire and gratification, of self and other. When this unity is necessarily severed, the woman

becomes the representation of lack, or desire unfulfilled, to the child" (15). Flora, frightened by the intimacy she has voyeuristically observed between Baines and Ada, betrays Ada to Stewart because she "accomplished her own fit within patriarchy by her identification with Stewart [. . .]" (Natharius and Dobkin 10). Flora gives Ada's love message, intended for Baines and written on a piano key, to Stewart. Flora then literally loses a piece of her mother, as Stewart, enraged by Ada's betrayal, chops off her finger. Stewart then hands the severed finger to Flora, instructing her to give it Baines, while Flora murmurs, "Mama," in a brokenly horrified way. Flora realizes that she has injured her mother by aligning herself with Stewart. Part of Flora's defection probably stems from her illegitimacy in an era where such things provoked society's displeasure. Ada, as a single mother, was "forced to invent new symbolic roles, which combine positions previously assigned to fathers with traditional female ones. The child cannot position the mother as object to the Law of the Father, since in single-parent households, *her* desire sets things in motion" (Kaplan 204). Thus, Flora seizes the opportunity to bond with a male, Stewart, whom she perceives as Papa. However, since Baines replaces her mother's finger, essentially restoring Ada's motherhood, Flora comes to accept him.

Orlando's motherhood punctuates and complements her journey from man to woman. Orlando must have a son in order to keep her inheritance, so motherhood could easily be simply a means to an end. She has lost her estate, but as they roam through the shroud-covered trees, the narration proclaims, "She is no longer trapped by her identity." Motherhood has completed Orlando's gender transformation, and she "rejects cultural constructions of male and female, and retains an androgynous identity [. . .]. She chooses 'female' for her sex" (Natharius and Dobkin 14). Although one cannot presume that Orlando was capable of choosing her child's sex, her child's femaleness signifies that to Orlando, gender has become irrelevant, even if it means losing her property. In one scene, Orlando flees through a field replete with bombs exploding, pregnant and panting, the implication being that motherhood represents new dangerous territory. However, Orlando's motherhood provides her with the ability to choose her identity as more female than male, and to "at last be free of the past."

Directors continue to depict the female body in countless ways. Analyzing these images of women reveals multiple visions of the representative female body, including cultural and psychological interpretations. It can function as a desirable object, a gender battlefield, or a maternal icon. In the films *Orlando*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, and *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, the female protagonists at times combat their own instincts in order to construct a new, non-patriarchal society. Similarly, in *Swimming Pool*, Sarah gains control of her life and sexuality by finally claiming ownership of her mature body, and Ada in *The Piano* uses her body as a bargaining chip to reclaim her identity (her piano). All of these movies depict women who transform their bodies and their minds to move forward into uncharted, non-gendered territory.

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