

## **Psycho Killers, Circus Freaks, Ordinary People: A Brief History of the Representation of Transgender Identities on American TV Series**

### **Abstract:**

In 1965, popular TV Series *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (NBC) aired the episode “An Unlocked Window”, in which it is revealed that the nurses killer in the area is a transvestite. It was the first time a transgender character appeared on a TV series, and until the late 80s that was the most stereotypical and basic – because it was minimal – representation of transsexuals on broadcast TV series and films: as psychopaths and serial killers. Other examples are Aldo Lado’s *Who Saw Her Die?* (1972), Brian de Palma’s *Dressed to Killed* (1980), Robert Hiltzick’s *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Throughout the 90s the paradigm changed completely and transsexual characters became much more frequent. However, the change was not for good, as they were turned now into objects of mockery and disgust in comedy TV series and films, in which the protagonist heterosexual male was “deceived” into kissing or having sex with an “abhorrent” trans just as a comic device. In the comedies *Soapdish* (1991), *Ace Ventura* (1994), and *Naked Gun 33 1/3* (1994), the male protagonist ends up literally throwing up when he realizes that the girl he had been kissing was not born a female. *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) are also series of the late 90s in which the way transgender characters are represented is far from being appropriate. It has not been until the Golden Globe and Emmy awarded TV series *Transparent* (2014-2016) when transgender issues have been put realistically on the front line with the accuracy and integrity that they deserve. This article traces back the evolution of the representation of transsexual identities on American TV series in the last decades by exploring the ups, downs, twists and turns that this representation has undergone in its long and hard road.

**Keywords:** Transgender characters; TV series; Hitchcock; *Friends*; *Transparent*

## **Asesinos psicópatas, monstruos de circo y gente corriente: Una breve historia de la representación de las identidades transgénero en las series de televisión estadounidenses**

### **Resumen:**

En 1965 la popular serie de televisión *La hora de Alfred Hitchcock* (NBC) emitió el episodio “Una ventana mal cerrada”, en el cual se descubre que el temido asesino de enfermeras de la zona es un travesti. Fue la primera vez que un personaje transgénero aparecía en una serie de televisión, y hasta finales de los 80 esta fue la representación más estereotípica y básica (porque era mínima) de transexuales en las series de televisión en abierto y en el cine: como psicópatas o asesinos en serie. Otros ejemplos fueron *¿Quién la ha visto morir?* (1972) de Aldo Lado, *Vestida para matar* (1980) de Brian de Palma, *Campamento de Verano* (1983) de Robert Hiltzik y *El silencio de los corderos* (1991) de Jonathan Demme. A lo largo de los años 90 el paradigma cambió por completo y los personajes transexuales se hicieron mucho más frecuentes. Sin embargo, el cambio no fue para bien ya que ahora se les había convertido en objetos de burla y asco en series cómicas y comedias en las que el varón protagonista heterosexual era “engañado” para que besara o se acostara con un “engendro” trans como recurso cómico. En las comedias *Escándalo en el plató* (1991), *Ace Ventura* (1994) y *Agárralo como puedas 33 1/3* (1994), en algún momento u otro, el protagonista varón acaba literalmente vomitando cuando se entera de que la chica que acaba de besar no nació hembra. *Friends* (1994-2004) y *Ally MacBeal* (1997-2002) son también series de finales de los 90 en las que el modo en que los personajes transgénero son representados está lejos de ser el adecuado. No ha sido hasta la serie *Transparent* (2014-16), premiada en los Globos de Oro y los Emmy, cuando asuntos transgénero se han puesto de manera realista en primera línea con la precisión y la integridad que merecían. Este artículo traza la evolución de la representación de identidades transexuales en las series de televisión estadounidenses en las últimas décadas explorando las subidas, bajadas, giros, y maniobras que dicha representación ha sufrido en su largo y arduo camino.

**Palabras clave:** personajes transgénero; series de television; Hitchcock; *Friends*; *Transparent*

**Article:**

It is nighttime. A nurse walks back home all alone after caring for an elderly woman at her house. Recently there has been a rash of nurse killings in the area at night, but this doesn't seem to scare this nurse... until she hears footsteps closely behind her. The camera quickly cuts to her feet walking, then to a man's feet walking behind her, back to hers, back to his, back to hers, back to his, back to hers... Suddenly, we hear a male voice saying "You are such a beautiful nurse Freda", and the unknown man strangles her while he laughs snidely. This is the opening of the cult episode "An Unlocked Window", regarded as the most popular and memorable one in the entire TV series *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (Metzinger, 2013: par. 3). Aired by NBC on February 15, 1965, "An Unlocked Window" also holds the record of being the first commercial broadcasting TV series that included a transgender character in one of its episodes. However, this media representation of the T in LGBT couldn't be less appropriate.

After the initial murder of the nurse, the plot of "An Unlocked Window" focuses on another night nurse called Stella (Dana Wynter) who is assisting Mr. Baker (John Kerr) since he is temporarily in bed and under oxygen in his dark old house in the outskirts of town. It is darkly foreshadowing how Mr. Baker starts saying that "there had never been a murder, a suicide or any kind of violence within these walls... It's too bad a hideous old house like this has no hideous history to go along with it". His words are ironic indeed considering that the exterior set of the Baker residency had already been used by Hitchcock five years before as the Bates Motel in the film *Psycho* (1960).

The news reports on the recent nurse murders in the area scare Stella but she calms down as soon as an older and more experienced nurse, Miss Ames (T.C. Jones), arrives to assist her. Aside from the two nurses and Mr. Baker, the housekeeper and her husband are also in the house. When the housekeeper's husband is sent to a hospital to

get an oxygen tank for Mr. Baker, they start receiving intimidating phone calls from the murderer: “I’m going to get into the house and kill you all.” So, the three women look over the entire house locking all doors and windows... all except for “an unlocked window” which gives the episode its title. The topic of “defenseless women without the protection of a man” permeates the episode from then on. It is interesting how Stella insists on turning off the lights because “the darkness protects us, now [with the lights on] if there is someone outside he can see in, and see that we are alone.” As Metzinger remarks in her review of this episode for *Silverscenes*, “three women in a house are not alone.” (2013: par. 8).

I don’t like giving away spoilers when I write about films or TV episodes, but in this case it is mandatory since the transphobia that this article addresses appears in the climatic ending of the episode. After the housekeeper falls downstairs and gets unconscious, Stella thinks the killer is behind a curtain. She stabs him several times but then she realizes that the body she has just stabbed is the corpse of the housekeeper’s husband who was already dead. Then, a giggle is heard behind her that little by little is turned into an evil male guffaw. Nurse Miss Ames walks slowly toward her while talking with a very deep male voice, and when she is beside Stella, Miss Ames takes off her wig, reveals her bald head and strangles Stella. Not only is objectionable – and sadly foreshadowing – the fact that the first time a transgender identity appears on TV is as a psycho killer, but also the horror in the episode is created through the idea of the lie, the cheating. “He has been there with us all the time, deceiving us, pretending to be a woman!” That’s transphobic.

Where does this fear come from? As Susan Stryker explains in *Transgender History*,

People who feel the need to resist their birth-assigned gender have tended to encounter significant forms of discrimination and prejudice – even religious condemnation. Because most people have great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person’s gender, the gender-changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness. That gut-level fear can manifest itself as hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust, which may then translate into physical or emotional violence directed against the person who is perceived as not-quite-human. Such people are often shunned and may be denied such basic needs as housing or employment. (2008: 5-6)

Indeed, introducing transgender identities on TV as psycho killers is not the best way to erase that “gut-level fear” that Stryker refers to among the heteronormative population. Nor does it prevent but rather encourage all that hatred and violence directed against anyone who defies the cultural reduction of the “wide range of livable body types into two and only two genders, one of which is subject to greater social control than the other” (Stryker 2008: 12).

T.C. Jones, the transvestite artist who interpreted the killer in “An Unlocked Window”, was known in the cabaret world for her impersonations of actresses such as Bette Davis, Mae West, Marilyn Monroe and Katharine Hepburn. She used to finish her shows by taking off her wig the same as in Hitchcock’s episode. In 1958 she was interviewed in Los Angeles Times and was – so inadequately – described as “a medium size fellow in his thirties with a Yul Brynner coiffure and a most affable manner” (Stinson 1958: 53).

Apart from the episode’s misrepresentation of transgender identities as violent sociopaths and its stereotyping portrait of women as vulnerable simply because they are

women, “An Unlocked Window” is technically perfect. Produced by Alfred Hitchcock, directed by Joseph M. Newman – who also directed some episodes of the iconic series *The Twilight* –, it masterly carries out all the tropes of horror stories that it approaches: the lonely country house, the night scenes, the claustrophobic atmosphere of confinement inside the house... The photography and the game of light and shadows are wonderfully achieved by Stanley Cortez, who had already worked as the cinematographer in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Hitchcock’s personal style can be perceived in every scene of “An Unlocked Window”, as in the initial chase sequence of the man’s shoes contrasted with the woman’s. The acting is excellent. But still... its representation of women and transsexual identities is far from being positive. This will be a constant in the following years. Magnificent thrillers in which the psycho killer turns out to be a transsexual, as in Aldo Lado’s *Who Saw Her Die?* (1972), Brian de Palma’s *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Robert Hiltzick’s *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). In 1985, “An Unlocked Window” was remade twenty years after its original release now for the TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and the representation of transgender subjectivities was even worse in the 80s than in the 60s. This time it is Stella who violently takes off the transvestite killer’s wig revealing her transgender identity. The nurse even tears her enemy’s top apart to expose that she doesn’t have breasts but a hairy chest, which is shown as an aberration. Once again, the lie, the cheating carried out by the transsexual character in relation to her gender identity, is the element that is supposed to create fear in the audience. A forced revelation of her gender identity, by taking off her wig and ripping her female clothes, is presented as the right thing to do to solve “the mystery”.

Fortunately, not all transgender identities that appeared on TV in the 70s and 80s were psycho killers, in spite of Hitchcock’s starting point that set the precedent so

negatively in 1965. Producer Norman Lear created in 1971 the TV series *All in the Family*, which, aired by the CBS, introduced the Bunkers, a working class family from Queens, NY, into every American home. The father of the family, Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor), a cranky bigoted World War II veteran who is prejudiced against anyone or anything different to himself, starred this popular sitcom whose main asset was Archie's ideological arguments with his hippie son-in-law Michael Stivic (Rob Reiner), who on the contrary represented the values of the counterculture of the 60s. *All in the Family* became the king of TV sitcoms, and between 1971 and 1976 it was the most watched TV program in the US. In September 1975, the series introduced in the fourth episode of its sixth season the character of Beverly LaSalle (Lori Shannon), a transvestite artist who became the first recurrent transgender character in a TV series as she would appear in three episodes: "Archie the Hero", "Beverly Rides Again", and "Edith's Crisis of Faith". Although this time she was not a psycho killer, Beverly also takes off her wig to convince Archie and his wife that she had not been born female. This gesture, instead of being the scaring peak in a thriller, is now turned into the comic climax in a comedy sketch. Although it was quite an achievement to present a "female impersonator", as Beverly introduces herself, happily interacting with the most loved American family, her ending in the series was not happy at all: she and Mike are attacked in a mugging and she dies while defending him. Heroic, but again, street violence and transsexuals are presented to walk hand in hand. As TV critic Jim Halterman remarks in "The Road to Transparent", "the first trans characters on TV were often stereotyped as prostitutes, murderers and/or victims" (2015: par. 19).

Due to the enormous success of *All in the Family*, Norman Lear was given free rein to create what would become an icon in LGBT representation on TV while also fronting women's rights issues in the media. In April 18, 1977, the first episode of *All*

*That Glitters* was aired in broadcast syndication. The series was set in a world of complete role reversals: while women were the executives that ruled the world, men were considered sex objects who either worked as secretaries or stayed at home as “househusbands”. One of the protagonists of the series was Linda Murkland (Linda Gray) who was the first transgender regular character in American television, and who starred the first LGBT wedding on TV by marrying a cisgender man at the end of the season. The series got negative reviews in conventional media and as soon as its audience ratings decreased it was canceled. It only lasted thirteen weeks until July 15, 1977.

In October 1977, Norman Lear tried it again and introduced another trans character – this time in just one episode – in the popular series *The Jeffersons*, which was a spin-off of *All in the Family* and which had been running since 1975. The Jeffersons were the Bunkers’ African American neighbors, and also their counterparts, as they were equally prejudiced against anybody different to themselves. Lear made the father of the family, George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley) meet up with a former army buddy, Eddie, who had transitioned from male to female and was now Edie (Veronica Reed). Norman Lear was without any doubt ahead of his time regarding LGBT representation, and his inclusion of transgender identities as recurrent or regular characters in his series set the first step of visibility not related to murder and crime settings.

Not many scriptwriters understood LGBT issues as well as Norman Lear. As Halterman underlines, “Some scriptwriters didn’t seem to know that being transgender and being gay were different” (2015: par. 19). This is the case of the TV sitcom *Soap* which, aired by ABC since September 1977, mocked the soap operas of the moment by portraying the amusing lives of two sisters and their families, the Tates and the

Campbells, in the fictional Dunn River, Connecticut. Mary Campbell's son was Jodie Dallas (Billy Crystal), who was one of the first gay regular characters on American television. In the first season, Jodie wants a sex change because he wants to marry a professional football player with whom he has a secret affair. The series conveys the idea that being gay means that you want to be a woman, which is a terrible mistake. Moreover, despite of being gay, Jodie becomes the father of a child through a one-night-stand and has several love relationships with women throughout the entire series. The character of Jodie Dallas was quite controversial for that period: it was criticized by religious groups because of his openly gay lifestyle, but also by gay rights activists because of the stereotypical and confusing portrait the series made of gay people. Despite this fact, *Soap* was considered in 2007 by TIME magazine as one of the "100 Best TV Shows of all Time" (Poniewozik 2007: par. 1). Indeed, its scriptwriter Susan Harris redeemed herself by creating years later the TV series *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), which was one of the first series that openly talked about the AIDS on TV when not even the Reagan Administration dared to do it.

As for the rest of the 80s, not a lot of transgender characters appeared on TV apart from some episodic ones, as in the popular *The Love Boat*. In the fifteenth episode, called "Gopher's Roommate", of the series' fifth season, Mackenzie Phillips plays a former classmate of Gopher (Fred Grandy) who has transitioned from male to female. Aired on January 23, 1982, the subplot line of this episode mimics to the letter that one referred above in *The Jeffersons* aired five years before in 1977. An outstanding exception to this minimal transgender TV representation was the two-hour TV movie *Second Serve* aired by CBS on May 13, 1986, in which Vanessa Redgrave plays Renee Richards, a real tennis player who fought for the right to play professional women's tennis after her transition. For her excellent performance of this spokesperson



for the transgender community, Vanessa Redgrave was nominated for an Emmy Award and a Golden Globe, although she didn't win any of them.

The 90s were terrible for transgender characters in both films and television. If previous portraits had been minimal and often dehumanizing and murder-related with few exceptions, in the 90s the established tone was of “disgust” for comic purposes. The heterosexual cisgender man who vomits as soon as he realizes that the woman he has just kissed or slept with was born male, became a too recurrent trope in a lot of comedies of the 90s. It appears in *Soap Dish* (1991), when actress Montana (Cathy Moriarty) turns out to have been Milton, and the producer he had slept with (Robert Downey Jr.) leaves the set with an attack of retching while she runs away humiliated and crying because she has been discovered. In *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), when the protagonist (Jim Carrey) realizes that the police woman he has just kissed was a man, he vomits twice, uses an entire toothpaste tube and cries in the shower as if he had been raped. When she is forced by Ace Ventura to show her penis to the rest of police officers, all of them start to throw up. In *Naked Gun 33 1/3* (1994), when the protagonist detective (Leslie Nielsen) realizes the woman he has been flirting with (Anna Nicole Smith) has a penis, he cannot help vomiting inside of a saxophone. And so on and so forth. As TV critic Meredith Talusan remarks in “25 Years of Transphobia Through Comedy”, the biggest mistake that these transgender women make in all these films seems to be that they didn't reveal their trans identity. The fact that they were terrorists, blackmailers or criminals in the past is less important than the fact that they were born male. There is not significant difference between discovering that a woman is trans and realizing that she was a criminal (Talusan 2016: par. 11). Moreover, as soon as their transgender identity is revealed, trans characters are turned into disgusting circus freaks in the public discourse by making heteronormative men vomit for having

had contact with them, and all for comedy purposes. In her article “(De)Subjugated Knowledges”, Stryker reflects on this aspect by asking the reader uncomfortable questions:

I’m tired of being the scapegoat for the gender trouble of everyone else. Ask yourself: Why do you look when we transsexuals make spectacles of ourselves? Is it the curiosity of the freak show? Ask yourself, too, what is it that you see, monsters, mutants, cyborgs, perverts, exotic objects of queer lust? Or just men and women by other means? (Stryker 1995: 40)

This derogatory tendency so popular in the comedy films of the 90s was also adopted in iconic TV series of the same period such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) aired by FOX or *Friends* (1994-2004) aired by NBC. In the second episode of the fourth season of *Ally McBeal*, the one called “Girls’ Night Out”, Lisa Edelstein plays the role of a transsexual client who was fired when she refused to take the mandatory physical examination that would have revealed her transgender status in her company. When she tells her lawyers that she has not transitioned yet from male to female, both lawyers interpreted by Luci Liu and Greg Germann spit their coffees nosily and Ling Wu (Lucy Liu) says aloud: “I can spot a he/she a mile away! There’s no way!”, a comment that would be unacceptable on television today. In fact, this was not the first time that the series *Ally MacBeal* included a transgender character in one of its episodes. In the tenth episode of its first season, called “Boy to the World” and aired on December 1, 1997, Ally (Calista Flockhart) is forced to defend a transsexual fashion designer (Wilson Cruz) who turns to prostitution to pay the bills and ends up murdered. This episode was strongly criticized by LGBT activists for “insensitive remarks” directed towards this character and the way transgender identities were once again indissolubly linked to prostitution and blood crimes (Halterman 2015b: par. 10).

There is little doubt that *Friends* was the most paradigmatic TV series of the 90s. However, it was rather backward concerning the representation of gay or transsexual issues, neither African American nor other minority identities. Focused on the lives of six white attractive heterosexual upper middle class Americans in their late twenties who share two magnificent apartments in Manhattan, the series could not be more “normative”. In the fourth episode of the seventh season, “The One with Rachel’s Assistant” aired on October 26, 2000, Monica (Courteney Cox) tricks Chandler (Matthew Perry) into telling her an embarrassing anecdote about Ross (David Schwimmer) in Disneyland. Ross finds out and responds by revealing Chandler’s “shameful” secret story in which he once kissed a man thought to be a woman in a nightclub in Atlantic City. Both Monica and Ross make fun of Chandler’s unforgivable “mistake” and the three of them end up spilling “embarrassing” secrets which they use one against another.

However, it is the twenty second episode of that same seventh season of *Friends*, “The One with Chandler’s Dad”, which addresses directly transgender subjectivities, since in it Chandler reveals that he doesn’t want to invite his father to his wedding because he is a transsexual. Chandler recalls his shameful boyhood and everything he had to go through due to his father’s “condition”, as when his father used to go to all Chandler’s swim meets in high school dressed as a woman. Monica convinces Chandler to go to Las Vegas where his father lives to invite “him” to the wedding. Not to leave stereotypes behind, Chandler’s transgender father sings in a cabaret. When a trans waitress asks Monica if somebody has taken their order, Monica answers: “Oh yeah, she did. Umm, he did. She? I’m sorry, I’m new”, followed by canned laughter. Chandler says he has just ordered a beer with a very deep voice to make it clear he’s straight, as the trans waitress notices. The first thing Monica says

when meeting Chandler's father, splendidly played by Catherine Turner, is: "That can't be your father", to which Chandler answers: "I've been saying that for years". After a tense meeting between Chandler and his father, Monica asks for her drinks resorting again for the second time to the same "he/she" kind of joke, saying: "Can we have our drinks, please? Waiter? ... tress?". Again the joke is followed by canned laughter.

The entire episode indeed revolves indirectly around gender issues. Another subplot line in the same episode follows how Joey (Matt LeBlanc) accidentally discovers that Phoebe's (Lisa Kudrow) boyfriend is wearing women's underwear. When Joey tells Phoebe his discovery, Phoebe answers that they are hers. Joey says: "That's weird". When Phoebe says she dared her boyfriend to do it, Joey insists on the weirdness of the situation. However, when Phoebe responds that she's wearing his boyfriend's briefs, Joey on the contrary responds: "That's kind of hot". When Phoebe tells Joey that her boyfriend thinks that women's underwear is more comfortable than men's, Joey responds: "Next thing he'll say that your high heels are good for his posture". Phoebe tells Joey that only a man completely secure with his masculinity could walk around in women's underwear. Having been Joey's security on his masculinity put into question, Joey ends up trying on women's underwear. "How much of a man am I?", Joey asks Phoebe later on while showing her his pink lacies. "Manly and also kind of a slut", she answers. Joey is thrilled and tells Phoebe how good the feeling of the silk on his skin is. However, when he tells her that he is going to try pantyhose too, she looks at him with disgust. "I should go take these off", says Joey, which Phoebe confirms by saying "I think it's important you do".

Finally, in the same episode, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) avoids being fined on the highway by flirting with a police officer in front of Ross (David Schwimmer). When later on it is Ross who is driving, another male officer makes them stop, and Ross tries

to get rid of the fine by flirting with him, pretending that he is gay. The situation is presented as so embarrassing to the extent that Rachel cannot help shouting: “You have a son!” The entire episode does nothing but underline how shameful having a trans father can be, or enjoying wearing women’s underwear if you are a man – not the opposite –, or flirting with a police officer to avoid being fined, again only if you are a man. And it’s not a question of just this episode. In the following one, “The One with Monica and Chandler’s Wedding: Part 1”, aired on May 17, 2001, Monica’s father (Elliott Gould) introduces himself to Chandler’s mother (Morgan Fairchild) by saying “So are you his father or his mother? What? I’ve never seen one before.” When Monica tells her father to go and talk to other people, he responds: “I didn’t even have a chance to act as if I’m okay with it!” It is surprising how some series that were great in their time have aged so horribly, especially regarding LGBT issues. It is a victory indeed of the LGBT community that we as spectators have become so conscious of how important non-derogatory fictional representation is to achieve non-derogatory behavior in the real world. TV series are not just the product of history. They actively make history.

The uneven road of transgender representation on television is full of ups and downs as we have seen, and one of these ups was aired in the same year that the seventh season of *Friends* mentioned above. On September 23, 2001, CBS released *The Education of Max Bickford*, in which Richard Dreyfuss plays a college professor of American studies at an all-women’s school in New Jersey, and whose best friend is Erica (Helen Shaver), previously Steve before her transition. This series set the course of integration and respectable representation of transgender identities that had remained so hard to find for so many years. From then on, and especially in the last seven years,

transgender characters, either guest or regular, have mostly been represented as people with whom spectators can empathize.

In 2007, Candis Cayne was the first transgender actress who played a recurring transgender character. It was in the primetime television *Dirty Sexy Money*. In July 2010, Jordan Todosey played Adam, a female to male transgender teen at the school, in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. In April 2012, the glee club welcomed Wade “Unique” Adams (Alex Newell), a trans teen who became a regular in *Glee*. In January 2013, the series *The Bold and the Beautiful* introduced the character of Maya Avant (Karla Mosley), who revealed to be transgender in March 2015. Maya married Ridge Forrester (Thorsten Kaye) in August 2015, holding the record of being the first trans wedding on daytime television. On April 4, 2013, trans actress Laverne Cox debuted as Sophia Burset, the trans hairdresser inmate in *Orange is the New Black*. Not only was she the first regular trans character on television, but she was also the first transsexual nominated for an Emmy for her performance in the show. On June 3, 2013 *The Fosters* started being aired. Starred by a lesbian couple with a family of adopted, biological and foster children, the show introduced on January 20, 2014, the character of Cole, a trans who undergoes a medical transition, starts hormones and has chest surgery. The actor himself paralleled his character’s journey: Tom Phelan transitioned from female to male at the same time as his character.

On February 6, 2014 *Transparent* aired for the first time. Produced by Amazon Studios, it represents the triumph of television made by an Internet company, as it was the first time that a show produced by a streaming media service wins the Golden Globe for best series. Moreover, it is definitely “the” series with capital letters in regards to transgender representation. It tells the story of a retired male college professor and parent of three, who decides to carry out her transition later in life from Mortimer to

Maura Pfefferman (Jeffrey Tambor). One of the biggest assets of the series is that Maura's coming out literally shakes the foundations of the gender identity and the gender role adopted by each member of the family: Sarah (Amy Landecker) is the eldest daughter, who being married to a man and with two children, starts an affair with a woman she had fallen in love with at university years before. The first time Sarah sees her father as a woman is when Maura catches Sarah making love with her female lover; Josh (Jay Duplass) is the middle son, a music producer with conflictive relationships with women since he had a disturbing sexual story when he was a teenager with his babysitter; and finally, Ali (Gaby Hoffmann), the youngest daughter, unemployed and immature for her age, and who sees her father as a woman for the first time when Ali is high on MDMA after having a threesome with two African American men. It is then when Ally decides to start calling her father "mapa", a mix of "mama" and "papa". Equally important are the characters of Maura's ex wife, Shelly Pfeffermann (Judith Light), who has known Maura's inner existence for years, and Maura's new best friend, Davina, a trans woman played by trans actress Alexandra Billings.

Transparent addresses the everyday life of a transgender person, both their good or bad moments such as when Maura is insulted for using the ladies toilet at a shopping mall, or when she moves to a "gay" neighborhood but feels little connection with newer generations of party animals. The series has won so far two Golden Globes for best comedy series and best actor (Jeffrey Tambor), and eight Emmy Awards, twice for Jill Soloway as best director, and twice for Jeffrey Tambor as best actor. However, its biggest achievement is that it has introduced "real" transgender questions into every home through the TV set, making the spectators put themselves in a transgender person's shoes.

How has the representation of transgender identities on television evolved after *Transparent*? As we saw above, by including little by little but more and more transgender characters in TV series in the way as in the last seven years. On June 7, 2014, the series *Orphan Black* added a female to male trans clone named Tony to all those interpreted by Tatiana Maslany, who in 2016 won the Emmy for best actress for her performance in this series. In a TV interview, Maslany, who is an LGBT rights advocate, denounced violence against trans people saying that “It’s shocking, it’s horrible, and it’s disgusting that it’s happening in such large numbers” (Haltermann 2015: par. 22). On June 26, 2015, *Sense8* debuted introducing Nomi (Jamie Clayton), one of the eight protagonists, who is a male to female trans character in love with another woman. Through this character, the series demonstrates – and teaches the audience – how being transgender doesn’t necessarily mean being straight. It is certainly a success, considering that 38 years before the character of Jodie Dallas in *Soap* taught us just the opposite, that being gay meant necessarily being transgender.

Finally, an article about transgender representation on TV would be incomplete without referring to Caitlyn Jenner. On April 24, 2015, the TV world was taken by surprise when 66-year-old Bruce Jenner, former medal-winner athlete and TV star of the most followed American reality show *Catching up with the Kardashians* made public the culmination of her transition into a woman. On June 1, 2015, Caitlyn Jenner was on the cover of the magazine *Vanity Fair* with the head “Call me Caitlyn” and a photographic report made by Annie Leibovitz. On July 26, 2015, the TV show “I am Cait” debuted as a spin-off of “Catching up with the Kardashians” but with a complete different tone. The eight one-hour-episodes documentary series chronicles Caitlyn Jenner’s life after her transition. In the first episode, “Meeting Cait”, she denounces the high suicide rates among transgender teens and visits the parents of Kyler Prescott, a



trans teen victim of transphobia who had committed suicide. In the second episode, “The Road Trip”, Caitlyn invites six transgender activists and leaders to dinner and they discuss important questions for the transgender community. In the fourth episode, “Family Interference”, Caitlyn visits a support group for families with children that are transitioning. It is clear that the program’s serious and engaged style is very different from that of the Kardashians. Indeed, Caitlyn Jenner received in 2015 the Arthur Ashe Courage Award. Given to Billie Jean King or Muhammad Ali in previous years, it is awarded to the year’s sport figure whose contribution is considered to have “transcended sports”.

It can’t be denied that we are living now in the golden age of transgender representation in the entire history of television. However, as the 2016 GLAAD “Where We Are on TV” report proves, things are not as good as they may appear. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is a very renown American organization dedicated since 1985 to “promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia based on gender identity and sexual orientation” (GLAAD 2016: “Mission”). Every year this media advocacy group issues a report on television diversity called the “Where We Are on TV” report. According to this year’s report, out of the 895 regular characters on prime-time broadcast TV series, 43 are LGBT. That’s a 4.8%. The representation is much better in cable television, with 142 LGBT characters in HBO, and 65 in Netflix. GLAAD says the number of transgender characters has more than doubled since last year. However, out of 16 transgender characters, only three are on broadcast networks. This year has been especially bad for queer women: Lesbian representation has decreased dramatically from 33 percent last year to 17 percent this year. As GLAAD’s Chief Executive Officer Sara Kate Ellis writes in her introduction to

the report, “Make no mistake, there has been remarkable progress made on television over the past two decades, but there is still a great amount of work to be done to ensure fair, accurate and inclusive stories, and we know there are plenty of diverse and groundbreaking stories yet to be told” (GLAAD 2016: “Report”).

There are a lot of conclusions that can be drawn from this research article. Considering that the theatre world has been since medieval times the space of freedom in which transgender subjectivities have flourished like in no other place, it is surprising that a celebratory representation of sexual difference had found so many obstacles in another artistic medium such as the field of fictional television. Even so, it is also revealing that the current television discourse in this respect is even more advanced than the scientific one, since in 2016 the ICD (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) and the WHO (World Health Organization) still include the transsexual gender identity as a mental disorder.

In this research it can also be seen that there are still very few trans actors and actresses working on TV series: most transgender characters are played by cisgender actors and actresses. Besides, most transgender characters are “male to female” rather than “female to male”, which, together with the invisibility of lesbian characters on TV series today, seems just another sexist consequence of the patriarchy that still exists in the entertainment media, in which some male TV stars still earn double than their female counterparts.

The role of television is key to promote respect for and inclusion of minority groups of any kind just via offering a positive representation of people whose voice had traditionally been silenced. In 2016 media star and America’s sweetheart Ellen DeGeneres was awarded with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her significant contribution to a “more fun, more open and more loving world”. Indeed, she has done a

lot to fight homophobia in the US just by being herself, open and honest regarding her lesbian identity on TV, and therefore by giving visibility to the entire lesbian community in the public discourse. In Spain, popular TV host Jesús Vázquez did the same in the late 90s and early 2000s, talking publicly about gay issues and introducing his boyfriend and later husband into all the TV sets in Spain. His contribution to making homosexuality visible and well-respected did his bit – among many other reasons – to make Spain in 2016 be the least homophobic country in the entire world with 88% of acceptance according to the latest poll on the topic carried out by the Pew Research Center in Washington DC (Lipka 2015). Indeed it is a significant change for a country that in the 50s submitted gays to lobotomies and shock therapies as part of reeducating programs, as Marcos Paradinas traces back in his excellent research *El fin de la homofobia* (2016).

Finally, the trans fight for visibility has been so hard because paradoxically “normalization” seemed the right track for years, and it wasn’t at all. The more a trans woman looked as if she had been born female, the more invisible her transgender identity becomes. Gay men and women don’t get rid of this problem either: the more feminine a lesbian is and masculine a gay man is, the more accepted she and he are in the heteronormative society, precisely because their “homosexuality” remains invisible. We LGBT people must not fight for being accepted for how much we look straight and cisgender, but for who we are the way we are. I would like to conclude this article by citing what Jacob Hales identifies as the eleventh rule in his foundational transgender text “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals”: “Focus on what does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, and transsexualism tell you about yourself, not what does it tell you about trans.” (Hales 1997).

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