The Crying Game
Crossed lines

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On 17 February 1993, Neil Jordan's THE CRYING GAME (1992) crossed a significant boundary. A British-Japanese co-production distributed in the United States by New York's then-independent Miramax Film Corporation, this low-budget ($5 million) feature became one of the extremely few films with neither Hollywood financing nor a Hollywood distributor to be nominated for the Best Picture Oscar. The fact that Jordan had been unable to secure Hollywood funding for his screenplay (written back in 1983) lent the finished film a somewhat mythological status when it broke through its limited art-house audience to a more popular viewership.

The film also crossed a significant border in terms of content. Released the same year that a coalition of gay and lesbian organizations marched on the Academy Awards to protest Hollywood's homophobia (particularly in regard to THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS and BASIC INSTINCT), Jordan's film appeared in a context which rarely treated homoerotic issues respectfully. Judging by the overwhelming number of Hollywood movies which either actively marginalized or vilified questions of sexual ambiguity, it could be taken for granted that the mainstream screen was virtually off limits to any considerate contemplation of such "perversions" as homosexuality and cross-dressing. For THE CRYING GAME to raise these issues, it had to sell itself as a traditional genre picture, a mystery thriller. Then, halfway through, the movie ambushed its audience: after skillfully getting the viewer to empathize with an interracial heterosexual romance, the film — in a highly touted "surprise plot twist" — "turned the tables on audience expectations by revealing the woman in the relationship to be a gay male-to-female transvestite.

THE CRYING GAME's critical and commercial success triumphantly reclaimed the popular screen as a space for constructively questioning, rather than fearfully affirming, assumptions about sexual identity. The fact that the film found such a receptive audience — and six Oscar nominations — suggests that Hollywood's marginalization of homoeroticism isn't so much an honest response to audience demand as an imposition of viewer expectations, a reflection of the industry's frantic play-it-safe financing in the face of spiraling production costs. In this light, the sudden eruption of homosexuality and transvestism in Jordan's film ruptures both the ideology of Hollywood's "blockbuster" economics and the mainstream's denial of important homoerotic issues to a sexually diverse audience.

So, transvestism in THE CRYING GAME can't be reduced to a mere gimmick. The issue's powerful disruption of sexual "certainties" deprives the straight, white, non-cross-dressing, male viewer — such as myself — of a secure and superior identity. Moreover, transvestism's interrogation of sexual ambiguities throws into question other cultural constructs whose ambiguities are all too rarely recognized. But the film's use of transvestism, or cross-dressing, hasn't been adequately examined.

In order not to give away the plot twist, movie reviewers never even mentioned cross-dressing, and the film's few critical articles have downplayed the issue's importance. However, a closer look at transvestism's impact on THE CRYING GAME can also shed light the film's other crucial concerns: sexuality, nationality, race, and gender.

A(D)DRESSING CRISIS

In her far-reaching study, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*,
Marjorie Garber discusses transvestism as an important site of cultural activity. Disturbing the assigned sartorial boundaries between "male" and "female," transvestism exposes the artificiality of the assigned social regimes that clothing signifies. This creates what Garber calls "category crisis":

"By 'category crisis' I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/ white, Jew/ Christian, noble/ bourgeois, master/ servant, master/ slave. The binarism male/ female, one apparent ground of distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between 'this' and 'that,' 'him' and 'me,' is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism, and a transvestite figure...will always function as a sign of overdetermination — a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another."

Because binary thinking is so fundamental to Western culture, the social anxieties evoked and interrogated by the figure of the transvestite arouse "not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself" (Garber, 17).

What instantly distinguishes THE CRYING GAME from so many mainstream movies about cross-dressing — such as SOME LIKE IT HOT and DRESSED TO KILL — is the film's serious, respectful contemplation of transvestism as a positive catalyst for personal growth.

The story concerns Irish Republican Army guerilla Fergus Hennessy (Stephen Rea), who stands guard over a hostage, a black English soldier named Jody (Forest Whitaker). Hiding out near Belfast, Fergus finds himself growing fond of his talkative prisoner. But the hostage plan goes awry when British forces invade the hideout, killing some of the I.R.A. guerillas and accidentally killing Jody. Escaping the British troops, Fergus becomes obsessed with Jody and goes to London to look up the soldier's beautiful lover, Dil (Jaye Davidson).

Passing himself off as a Scotsman named "Jimmy," Fergus ingratiates himself into Dil's affections. However, just as he is about to make love to her, Fergus discovers to his horror that Dil is a gay man who dresses as a woman. Stunned, Fergus eventually decides that his affection for Dil overwhelms his initial revulsion to "her" lifestyle. He decides to continue an ambiguous relationship with Dil, only to have his ex-lover and I.R.A. compatriot, Jude (Miranda Richardson), suddenly appear and force him into an assassination plot, blackmailing him with Dil's life. Fergus tries to protect Dil by "disguising" her as a man, but Dil ends up tying Fergus to her bed, unwittingly foiling the assassination plot. When Jude arrives at Dil's flat to finish off Fergus, Dil kills her, both in self-defense and as vengeance for Jody. Acknowledging his love for Dil, Fergus voluntarily takes the rap for Jude's death and is sent to prison.

Given Hollywood's traditional squeamishness — if not outright hostility — towards openly homoerotic sexuality, THE CRYING GAME would stand as a subversive film simply because Fergus and Dil neither renounce their mutual attraction nor pay for their relationship with their lives. However, Jordan looks upon this homoerotic pairing as something beyond a model for social "tolerance," a powerful mainstream's condescending lenience, which may be withdrawn as easily as it's granted.[6] Instead, THE CRYING GAME implicitly asks its viewers to question sexual issues usually taken for granted in cinematic romances.

Jordan sees an "erotic possibility" in the Fergus-Jody relationship, "a sense of mutual need and identification" between the two characters.[7] Where his I.R.A. conspirators see only an alien prisoner, an "animal" whose life is of little value and at their disposal, Fergus sees a fellow human being in Jody. Jody wins Fergus over by calling him "the handsome one," suggesting sexual attraction. The erotic component of their rapport becomes most pronounced when Fergus reluctantly handles Jody's penis so that the hand-bound prisoner can urinate, after which Fergus jokingly says, "The pleasure was all mine." When Fergus begins his relationship with Dil, she initially serves as a "safe" object of transferral for Fergus' erotic fascination with Jody. Because she, like Jody, is both black and English, and because of their romantic association, Dil becomes Jody's stand-in. Even when Dil fellates Fergus (at a time when he still believes that she's a biological woman), his mind is filled by an image of Jody. But once Dil is revealed to be a biological man,
Fergus is forced to confront the homoeroticism which infuses his relationships with both Jody and Dil.[8]

In revealing Dil to be biologically male, THE CRYING GAME asks its audience not to accept codes of beauty at face value. After all, if Fergus can be sexually attracted to Dil, and if straight viewers can initially empathize with that attraction, then sexual desire can't be reducible to the reproductive urge, as some social authorities might wish us to believe. Moreover, by taking traits like monogamy and dependency — traits usually held in high regard when associated with heterosexual romance — and by applying them to a same-sex relationship, the film estranges these values and allows us to contemplate them with a questioning eye. Instead of being accepted uncritically, monogamy, dependency, and desire may be seen as culturally arbitrary, and the culture that prizes them may not lay claim to any "natural" authority.

Jordan's film powerfully visualizes this challenging concept when Fergus enters the Metro, the dusky pub where he and Dil cemented their relationship, for the first time since discovering that she is a man. Now knowing that the Metro is a gay bar, Fergus scans the neon-lit room and scrutinizes the patrons, whose gender and sexuality he — and many in the audience — once took for granted. It's presently clear that some of the "women" are men in drag, and the film's visuals stress the artificiality of commoditized "feminine" appearance. This casts the sex of all the bar's patrons in doubt and disrupts the comfort of readily identifying another' gender. But instead of fearing this uncertainty, Fergus confronts it in an effort to renew contact with Dil. Empathizing with Fergus, the viewer makes the journey with him. Rather than viewing the gay bar — the space of the transvestite, the space of the Other — as a prohibitive boundary that must not be transgressed, Fergus enters it and becomes part of it.[9] The bar becomes a channel to the Other side of himself.

Highlighting the arbitrariness of "male" and "female," the figure of Dil ruptures the cultural "certainties" upheld by these terms when they go unquestioned. Dil effectively throws open the perceptual spaces elided by uncritical acceptance of the male/ female binary. Moving beyond the binary's polarities and the comforting expectations of heterosexual romance, the figure of the cross-dresser unexpectedly intimate the latent perceptual realms synthesizing from this cultural rupture. In other words, Dil embodies what Garber calls the "third":

"The 'third' is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis...The 'third' is a mode of articulation a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge." (Garber, 11)

The idea of transvestism indicating a "third" becomes more pronounced, appropriately enough, in the film's third act. To disguise her from the I.R.A., Fergus talks Dil into cutting her hair and wearing Jody's old clothes. However, he won't tell her why he wants to alter her appearance. Assuring her that he doesn't want to make her look like Jody, Fergus only says that he wants "to make [Dil] into something new. That nobody recognizes." Ultimately, the sight of a shorthaired Dil in an ill-fitting cricket uniform isn't an effective disguise, because Dil frustrates Fergus' plans to conceal her from the I.R.A. So, her change in appearance never operates as a narrative device which directly pushes the plot forward. Instead, the disguise functions as a narrative excess, as a surplus of meaning that ruptures the "air-tight" storyline in order to stress Dil's sexual indeterminacy: she still looks like woman or androgyne in men's clothes. Dil's altered appearance is worth comparing to Garber's passage about the convention of removing the wig at the end of a drag show:

"When the wig is doffed, ceremonially, at the end of a transvestite stage performance, what is the 'answer' that is disclosed? Only another question: is this the real one? In what sense real? What is the 'truth' of gender and sexuality that we try, in vain, to see through, when what we are gazing at is a hail of minors?" (Garber, 389)

The interrogation of sex as a socializing construct emphasizes the inadequacy of the male/ female binarism and intimates the latent transformational power that might be released when binary thinking is defied. Neither turning Dil into a "man" nor affirming her "femininity," Dil's short hair and her adoption of male attire...
visually indicate the emergence of a "third": "something new," something that "nobody recognizes" — not yet.

QUEEN AND COUNTRY

Since "blurred gender indicates a category crisis elsewhere" in the narrative (Garber, 17), Dil necessarily becomes an indexical figure for THE CRYING GAME's other cultural anxieties. Just as Dil's cross-dressing questions sexual boundaries, Fergus' adoption of a Scottish identity questions national boundaries. At first, it seems ironic that Fergus, who once identified himself as an Irishman so strongly that he was willing to kill for the I.R.A., can so easily cast aside his Irish identity and pose as a Scotsman named "Jimmy." However, the Scots, a Celtic people like the Irish, got their name from a group of fifth-century Irish settlers. Claiming another Celtic identity, Fergus recalls a time before present-day distinctions were made between the Scottish and Irish peoples. And the fact that Fergus is drawn into this situation by Jody — whose status as a black man makes him an unlikely representative of Britain as a colonial power — troubles national identities even more.

In Europe, national identity is still closely associated with ethnic identity (as the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia tragically remind us). So issues of race and nationality intersect even more acutely in the context of Europe than they do in the United States. The growing racial diversity of Western Europe and the collapse of the old Soviet empire in Eastern Europe have now created new problems of national definition in relation to race and ethnicity. But domestic differences are also complicated by issues of international affiliation. In the case of the United Kingdom (itself an amalgamation of four distinct "countries"), the question of conforming its currency to that of the European Community created such a heated controversy over sovereignty and national identity in 1990 that it caused a legislative rupture: Margaret Thatcher was forced to step down as Prime Minister. Clearly, in the Europe of THE CRYING GAME, old "certainties" of nationhood are constantly threatened, reflecting yet another category crisis.

The conflict in Northern Ireland, a nationality crisis of long standing, spurs the film's narrative. However, Jordan's drama never probes the political complexities of this crisis: Ulster's "troubles" act as little more than a contrivance to draw Fergus and Jody together. Since the I.R.A. are noted for their brutal efficiency and dispatch, the guerillas' clumsy and amateurish capture of Jody begs credibility. Furthermore, it's highly unlikely that a volunteer as old as Fergus, a man in his early forties, would be experiencing sympathy for a hostage so late in life. He would have probably gone through these emotions at a younger age, when he was still a trainee. And even if the viewer accepts Fergus' empathy for Jody as a trait peculiar to his character, it would be just as unlikely for the I.R.A. to entrust a hostage to such a vulnerable individual. Jordan's unconvincing portrayal of the I.R.A. betrays THE CRYING GAME's disinterest in illuminating the politics of Northern Ireland.

Rather, Jordan uses the conflict in Ulster as an all-purpose backdrop for his exploration of nationality crisis. Fergus and the other I.R.A. guerillas are motivated by a certainty of national identity, a certainty which "justifies" Jody's abduction and planned execution. The limits of Fergus' national vision are expressed in this exchange:

JODY: What do you believe in?
FERGUS: That you guys shouldn't be here.
JODY: It's that simple?
FERGUS: Yes.

But of course, it's not that simple — it's just this kind of blind surety that Jody challenges. As Jody talks about the discrimination he faces as a black man, Fergus comes to see beyond their superficial differences. And the friendship Fergus develops with his hostage seems deeper and more rewarding than his relationships with his I.R.A. comrades, who are cold or hostile. Fergus, however, is disturbed by the contradictions Jody represents as both the oppressor and the oppressed.

As Paul Gilroy writes, the British national identity is frequently constructed along a "memory of imperial greatness" which excludes non-white Britons, so
On the other hand, Jody’s emblematically English traits — his London accent, his fondness for cricket — mark his inclusion within this exclusionary identity, thereby questioning its "limits." The knowledge that the role of Jody is played by a U.S. actor strains these limits further, asking to what extent nationality is a performance. Embodying a multicultural, multiethnic Britain, Jody breaks down the facile equation of nationality with race and ethnicity. And consequently, Fergus’ initial conception of Britishness and Irishness as mutually exclusive identities is broken down as well. After all, given the vast cultural and historical influence of the British in Ireland, and of the Irish in Britain, who’s to say where one culture ends and the other begins? Jody’s very presence disrupts the idea of Ireland — or any country — claiming a national identity by expelling a designated Other.

As he leaves Northern Ireland, and as he develops a love relationship with Dil, Fergus becomes willing to travel beyond his limited visions of nation and self. And when Fergus becomes an object of ethnic derision in London, he finds himself in circumstances not incomparable to Jody’s in Ulster. Fergus moves from wanting to expel Jody to internalizing him, from wanting to expel the other to acknowledging the Other as a part of himself.

Interrogating the concept of the country as self-contained and exclusionary, THE CRYING GAME questions the very ideas of nationalism and "foreignness." Focusing its narrative around those marginalized by the dominant ideology — in this case, white, heterosexual, Anglocentric Britain — Jordan’s film stresses the relationality not only of sexual identity, but also of national and ethnic identities and how they are shaped by cultural forces outside the mainstream. The camerawork visually suggests its concern with the margins by occasionally shooting the dialogue between Fergus and Jody with the characters at the edges of the widescreen frame, facing away from the center of the image (a visual tactic used to best effect by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet in 1965's NOT RECONCILED). Placing these characters — literally — in the margins (of the frame), THE CRYING GAME takes the emphasis away from the accustomed center of visual narrativity and frustrates the shot/counter-shot’s "suturing" power of diegetic closure.

Guiding the viewer’s attention to both the political liminality within the story and the formal liminality within the image, THE CRYING GAME intriguingly imagines a discourse close in spirit to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia. Robert Stain draws upon Bakhtin to articulate the notion of "ethnic dialogism":

"Ethnicity is relational, an inscription of communicative processes within history, between subjects existing in relations of power."[13]

Dramatizing the exchange of subcultures within a context of power — Britain’s external colonization of Fergus and its internal colonization of Jody — THE CRYING GAME also moves beyond the liberal conception of nationality as the gradual inclusion of subgroups within the dominant society. Instead, the film imagines a dialogic space within the margins, a site of reciprocity and commonality constantly interacting with and interrogating the dominant. Who dominates in this scene, the white Irish captor or the black English hostage? In the act of dialogue, the distinctions between the dominant and the marginal, the inside and the outside, are no longer so easy to draw.

DRAG/ RACE

In this dialogic context, it’s surprising that the film doesn’t overtly stress the interracial issues raised by Dil and Jody and by London’s multiethnic atmosphere. Jody refers to Northern Ireland as "the only place in the world where they call you nigger to your face," and he speaks with pride of cricket as "the black man’s game." Later, Jude describes Dil as "the wee black chick," but beyond these minor verbal acknowledgements race mains an unspoken, problematic presence.

For example, why would the I.R.A., citizens of (as Jody says) such a racist country, believe that a black soldier’s life would be valuable enough for the British authorities to ransom? Why wouldn’t they have kidnapped a white Briton instead? How has Irish racism left its mark on Fergus’ racial attitudes? What racial prejudices does he have to overcome to court Dil? And why doesn’t Dil have any
significant black companions besides the absent figure of Jody? The film elides these questions.

THE CRYING GAME chooses not to probe the anxieties aroused by interrogating racial identity. The cultural and national uncertainties evoked by racial issues — blacks as an integral part of the European population, black transformation of European culture, interracial couplings — are, instead, displaced onto the uncertainty of Dil's gender.

The representation of black drag in dominant white society arises from the contradictory image of the black male

"as both sexually threatening and feminized, as both super-potent and impotent" (Garber, 271).

So, the image of a black man in women's clothing implicitly expresses parallels of political disenfranchisement, a conflation of race and sex that may suggest a kind of solidarity between black people and women in general, but which also elides their historical and experiential specificities. Serving as a vehicle for the entry of a marginalized people into the mainstream (though not necessarily on a level of equality), the transvestite may be seen "as the figure of crossover itself" (Garber, 271). In this light, the viewer can read Dil, through her relationship with Fergus, as a figure both of black solidarity with the Irish and of insinuation into the white British mainstream, which is also a reflection of Fergus' political ambiguity.

More important, Dil's crossover status as a black — or given the lightness of her complexion, a biracial — transvestite intimates the constructed character of not only gender, but also race. As Gilroy puts it:

"Accepting that skin 'colour', however meaningless we know it to he, has a strictly limited material basis in biology, opens up the possibility of engaging with theories of signification which can highlight the elasticity and emptiness of 'racial' signifiers as well as the ideological work which has to be done in order to turn them into signifiers in the first place. This perspective underscores the definition of 'race' as an open political category, for it is struggle that determines which definition of 'race' will prevail and the conditions under which they [sic] will endure or whither away."[14]

The intersections of race, nationality, and sexuality are what make the film so compelling. However, collapsing these complicated areas of inquiry into realms of faulty binary thinking also risks reducing them to arbitrary and interchangeable categories lacking any historical specificity. Acknowledging the arbitrary character of national and racial identities is important, but this can't undo the very real and continuing history of Ireland's colonization by Britain or of Britain's discrimination against its own non-Anglo-Saxon populations. So, it may he said that the him trivializes the issues it raises as much as it illuminates them.[15]

Indeed, there's something disturbingly simplistic about the film upholding Fergus' fixation on Dil as the avenue for overcoming such deeply entrenched divisions. Since we never learn what drove him to join the I.R.A. in the first place, we're not sure what conscious political impulses Fergus is acting on when he seeks a relationship with Dil. Therefore, when he gives up his radicalism and begins an anonymous London, working for the very society he fought against, the choice between active political engagement and political conformity is made to appear equally arbitrary — even though Fergus' I.R.A. past highlights the subversively political character of his relationship with Dil. Also, in minimizing a black/gay/cross-dressing context for Dil, the film elides many political issues specific to these communities. For example, the issue of A.I.D.S. goes unconvincingly unmentioned throughout the film (ruptured, perhaps, when Dil abruptly announces late into the third act that she has a "blood condition").

Moreover, THE CRYING GAME evokes the colonialist model of pairing a white man with a non-white (Third World) "woman." The film accomplishes the extraordinary task of getting mainstream audiences to root for a homoerotic relationship, but only by convincingly disguising the partner of color so that the audience can still view the pairing as an unequal male-female relationship.[16] The construction of interracial romance as an affirmation of white, male primacy once
again collapses race and gender into a culturally arbitrary model of dominance and submissiveness. So, THE CRYING GAME arguably makes Dil "exotic," rendering the troubling political issues she poses less threatening to a straight, white audience. Or in the words of bell hooks:

"Straight white men want a mammy so bad, they will vomit up their homophobia if need be."[17]

Still, viewing Jordan's film only in this light overlooks its richness. In a strategy comparable to Garber's "third," Jordan examines racial power relationships beyond traditional representations of masculinity and femininity. Though arguably an "effeminate" black man, Dil still exercises power over Fergus by being the locus of his obsessive affections and, more obviously, by tying him up in her bed during the film's climax, Dil also assumes a place of power when she shoots and kills Jude (but more on that later). Most significantly, the momentous revelation of Dil's biological gender powerfully disrupts the colonial model of the white-male/ non-white-female pairing. The discovery of Dil's biological gender graphically and unexpectedly returns white, male erotic fascination with the Third World back to the penis, back to its own phallocentric source of masculine self-obsession. Dil's unveiling literalizes the feminization of the Third World in Western representation as a patriarchal construct of self-flattery that hides the — competitive, threatening, but also potentially connective — maleness of the non-white world.[18] Insofar as she disrupts erotic expectations, Dil doesn't affirm the colonial model, but on the contrary, she betrays its racist, sexist cultural limits and, in doing so, tacitly suggests that Western representation move beyond them.

WOMEN ARE A DRAG

However, despite its insightful probing of power relations, THE CRYING GAME still fails to cross another divide, the one between men and women as unequal social subjects. With the revelation of Dil's biological maleness, Jude stands as film's only significantly biologically female character. She also emerges as the film's primary antagonist, because she facilitates both the capture of Jody in the first act and the blackmailing of Fergus in the third. In both cases, Jude (Judas?) becomes a very disagreeable character, since her presence frustrates the utopian implications of not only her own coupling with Jody, but also Fergus' with Dil. Consequently, Jude's death (at Dil's hands) provides the film's "satisfying" climax, but it also leaves disturbing questions about the film's attitude towards biological women. THE CRYING GAME begins the vilification of Jude early on. After he's kidnapped, Jody singles out Jude as the "bitch" and "whore" who set him up (he spares the men similar criticism). During Jody's captivity, Jude is the only one to strike him, cruelly pistol-whipping him while he's blinded by a canvas hood. After the blow, Jody remarks to Fergus:

"Women are trouble, you know that, Fergus? Some kinds of women are...Dil wasn't trouble. No trouble at all."

And of course, the woman Jody upholds as his ideal is also a biological man. Fergus' subsequent relationship with Dil and his rejection of Jude as a romantic partner appear to support Jody's pronouncement.

Jude may be seen as a kind of double for Dil. When the audience first sees her in the film's first act, Jude wears a revealing mini-skirt, her long blonde hair in a soft, wind-blown cut. But when she reappears in the third act, her dress is a drab and suit-like, while her hair has been dyed black and given a shorter Prince Valiant cut that emphasizes the hard angles of her face. Jude calls this her "tougher look," a new guise apparently intended to help her elude the British authorities. Jude's drastic change in appearance, like Dil's, stresses the conventions of clothing as highly versatile, unfixed, arbitrary. More importantly, Jude's "tougher look" recalls the femme fatale of 1940s film noir (perhaps epitomized by the stern-faced, broad-shouldered Joan Crawford), whose "mannish" appearance frequently signaled a presumption of "masculine" power that aroused anxieties in many male characters (and viewers), anxieties traceable to the political empowerment of women on the homefront as men were called away overseas during World War II. So, Jude's intermediary crossdressing also evokes the category crisis of male/female.[19]

Jude and Dil, then, may be seen as two different kinds of "phallic women." Dil is the woman with a phallus (or more exactly, with a penis, the referent of phallic
power), while Jude is a woman who aspires to the power connoted by the phallus, and whose “tougher look” affirms power to be constructed as “masculine.” By having Dil shoot Jude (in a scene that sometimes provokes rousing cheers from the audience), the film implies that one kind of phallic woman is preferable to the other, that men may aspire to the “feminine,” but women must be punished for aspiring to the “masculine.” As the short-haired, gun-wielding Dil pumps bullets, one by one, into Jude’s body, she questions her human target: “You used those tits and arse to get [Jody], didn’t you?” Jude is reduced to writhing on the floor in front of Dii and her gun, crying out for help: “Get that thing off me, Fergus.” The phallic Jude dies pleading for her own castration.

Indeed, Dil’s transvestism and her dependent, needy personality (hooks’s “mammy”) emerge as safe, male-reliant substitutes for the not-always-calculable presence of the self-asserted, discontented woman. To the extent that it disempowers women, “femininity” may be regarded as a specifically patriarchal construct, as an aesthetic that reassures male physical and political might. Since women must learn how to be “feminine” from male desires and male-controlled media, it’s no surprise that biological men may become experts in embodying the “ideal woman.” Although transvestism may create a space for utopian connectedness between men and women, and perhaps imagine a discourse beyond patriarchy in the process, cross-dressing may also be used to uphold the political inequality between men and women. Rather than negating masculinity, male-to-female transvestism may be said prove that a man is still male “against the most extraordinary odds” (Gather, 96).

On the other hand, since patriarchy defines maleness as the norm, a woman who dresses as a man is only aspiring to be “normal,” but aspiring to an unattainable phallic power she will always lack. Therefore, the disparate receptions of the male cross-dresser and the female cross-dresser seldom create a space of equality:

“This is a critique frequently made of contemporary male transvestite theater, that it occludes or erases women, implying that a man may be (or rather, make) a more successful 'woman' than a woman can…
[C]rossed-dressed men are emblematic of cultural crisis (or even of the 'human condition'), but the cross-dressed woman is a risible or in the case of THE CRYING GAME, an expendable] sign of failed 'femininity.'”

(Garber, 249)

So, as it stands, the film, while upholding a multicultural world of transgressed boundaries among biological men, appears to argue for the eradication of biological “tits and arse.” However, like the veiled phallus, whose signified power is always elsewhere, Jude’s power is also somewhere else. She emerges as the de facto representative of degraded anti-colonial struggle — she ultimately exemplifies the misdirected power of the I.R.A., eliding the organization’s male-dominated past. In other words, the I.R.A.’s complex history of violence is displaced onto a negative, misleading archetype, the femme fatale. This displacement suggests THE CRYING GAME’s greatest cultural anxiety, the one it can’t traverse: the growing political empowerment of women.

THE WRAP-UP

The failure to more positively include biological women, however, doesn't negate THE CRYING GAME’s constructive interrogation of sexuality and other cultural anxieties. At the film’s conclusion, when Fergus is separated from Dil by prison Plexiglass and a long sentence, the nascent utopia latent in their relationship remains suspended, hopefully poised to appear, but for the moment, unrealized. While Jordan’s film can’t envision the total transformation of a divided society — the complete coming-together of Fergus and Dil, the transcendence of patriarchy — it can still imagine a microscopic true first step: the transformation of an individual through the homoerotic transgression of social barriers. With its respectful portrayal of the Fergus-Dil relationship, THE CRYING GAME suggests that the social changes worked upon the dominant culture by marginalized cultures resonate profoundly on the most intimate levels.

Multiculturalism, a concept once artistically and academically viewed as positive and progressive, has recently been criticized from both the right and the left. This criticism frequently reduces multiculturalism to either a fractious "identity politics" or the ineffectual division of institutional spoils between sharply defined racial groups.
The concept is seldom viewed dialogically, as intercultural interplay with the possibility of profoundly affecting everyone involved in the exchange, including the dominant society. But THE CRYING GAME hints at the connective possibilities of cultural heterogeneity. As the film stresses the arbitrary character of rigid cultural division, it illuminates culture as relational, interactive, and always changing. The constant transformation orally given culture by its neighboring cultures thereby discourages clinging to cultural identity as a vehicle for separatism or supremacism.

Viewing ourselves as cultural, and therefore relational, we may question the ideology of the "natural" as equally cultural, as a society's attempt to reify itself. So, it's ironic that THE CRYING GAME, a film that deeply questions the viewer's conceptions of human "nature," should frame its story with a fable about a frog and a scorpion, a fable with the maxim that everything "does what's in its nature." The audience first hears this fable when the imprisoned Jody is trying to persuade Fergus to remove the canvas hood from his head. The tale is repeated at the end of the film as Fergus, now a prisoner himself, explains to Dil why he's serving time for her. The words, "I can't help it. It's in my nature," are the last to be spoken before the credits roll. In another context, these words might have served to uphold a dominant social structure, one that views its ideology as the logical outcome of immutable "natural" forces. But in the context of Jordan's film, with its disruptions of sexual attraction and gender identification, "nature" takes on a different connotation, a meaning closer to Garber's "third": a human impulse that may rupture the binary barriers of cultural conditioning.

When it ruptures ideological definitions of "nature," eroticism serves as a perceptual channel towards a greater human connectedness. Like Fergus' relationship with Dil, the ideal manifestation of this connectedness has yet to be realized, yet to transcend completely the structures of separation. However, leaving the characters' relationship poised on the brink of possibilities, the openness of Jordan's ending invites imagining the commensurate possibilities of the erotic beyond present-day cultural "boundaries."

Like the best of gay art-house cinema (exemplified by filmmakers like Pasolini, Fassbinder, Almodóvar, Jarman, andFrears and Kureishi), THE CRYING GAME intimates a polymorphous eroticism that embraces the deepest commonalities among all humans as fellow living creatures. Jordan similarly suggests a new erotic relationship to others (and Others), an interpersonal bond to break down the constructs of identity that uphold difference as inequality. The film, then, carries the seeds to subvert its own misogyny.

When such connective possibilities are frustrated in THE CRYING GAME, the society of division and demarcation makes itself felt. This frustration is marked by the dialogue's almost incessant use of the word "luck." The utopian potential of erotic connection is degraded and displaced onto a hostile, divisive epithet.

But homocroticism as a perceptual channel need not express itself in the physical act of sex. Just because it can be a means of self-discovery within the social, the homoerotic doesn't necessarily become a practiced end. After all, once Fergus discovers Dil's biological gender, he doesn't have sex with her. For the straight viewer, heterosexual acknowledgement — rather than the condescending allowance — of the homoerotic as part of the human fabric requires unraveling the socially unequal cultural segregation between sexualities, imagining a heterosexuality beyond heterosexism. THE CRYING GAME's inability to envision a complete coming together of Fergus and Dil also reflects the limits of the film's heterosexual authorship. (And this article's defense of those limits partly reflects my own hard-dying homophobia.)

THE CRYING GAME's commercial success affirms the importance of examining the sometimes disturbing social resonance of the erotic. If the revelation of Dil's maleness hadn't been positively received by most of the audience, the film wouldn't have generated positive word-of-mouth and wouldn't have been financially rewarded. Just as Dil, through her transvestism, may be seen to cross over from the marginality of a black, gay community to the mainstream of straight, white culture, so Jordan's film may be seen to cross over from the art house to the Academy, from a marginal cinema to Hollywood. THE CRYING GAME's self-contradictory standing — as a work that both criticizes and affirms the dominant
culture, as a production that both shocks and soothes the general audience, as both an art-house film and a Best Picture nominee — reminds us that the space between the "mainstream" and the "margins" remains a site of contest and negotiation, a terrain of crossed boundaries, constant interplay, and endless possibilities.

NOTES

Thanks to Grigoris Daskalovrigorakis and Áine O'Healy for their input and feedback.

For more on the issues surrounding the gay and lesbian Oscar protest, see Robin Podolsky, "How Do We Look? Some Queer Ideas About the Politics of Representation," L.A. Weekly, 19 June 1992, pp. 14-2. To some, the term "transvestism" is objectionable because it connotes negative judgment, so they prefer the more value-neutral "cross-dressing" instead. However, in the interest of a varied vocabulary, I'll be using the word "transvestism" — non-judgmentally, I hope — simply as a synonym for "cross-dressing." For more on terminology, see Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. vii.

3. For example, even though she acknowledges that "gender is a performance," Frann Michel writes: "To describe Dil as a transvestite, crossdresser, or drag queen is implicitly to describe her as 'really' a man…" See "Racial and Sexual Politics in THE CRYING GAME," Cineaste, 20, No. 1 (1993), p. 32.

4. Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p. 16. All further quotations from this book will be referenced in the text. All italics in the quotations are from the original.

5. Outside the Hollywood mainstream, one can find more considerate portrayals of transvestism, films such as Edward D. Wood Jr.'s GLEN OR GLENA? (1953), Toshio Matsumoto's FUNERAL PARADE OF ROSES (1969), Jennie Livingston's PARIS IS BURNING (1991), and John Waters' work with Divine. For all examination of transvestism's compromised representation in Sydney Pollack's TOOTSIE (1982), see Deborah H. Holdstein, "TOOTSIE: Mixed Messages," Jump Cut, no. 28 (1983), pp. 1, 32.


8. Because Dil identifies herself as a woman, I shall refer to the character as female. And while I understand that the terms "biological man" and "biological woman" are objectionable to some cross-dressers, the phrases are currently the most helpful to distinguish gender as a biological occurrence from gender as a social identity. So, a character like Dil can be described as a biological man who chooses to be identified as a woman.

9. This scene stands in marked contrast to one from the Hollywood movie RISKY BUSINESS (1983), which Garber discusses (p. 299). In that film, the fleeting figure of a black male-to-female transvestite is quickly used to suggest an area beyond the limits of the youthful protagonist's formative sexuality, limits he never transgresses.

10. This, of course, is a very complex issue, since many Protestants in Northern Ireland are of Scottish ancestry.

11. I owe these observations to Áine O'Healy.


16. Referring to Jaye Davidson, the male actor who plays the role of Dil, producer Stephen Woolley remarked that many viewers "still insist that Jaye is a girl." Richard Corliss, "Don't Read This Story!" *Time*, 1 March 1993, p. 57.


18. On this issue, Jordan's film is worth comparing to David Henry Hwang's compelling 1988 play *M. Butterfly* — now a disastrous David Cronenberg film — which is another disruption of the colonial romantic model by transvestism. Garber's book includes an extended analysis of this play (pp. 235-251).

19. It would be intriguing to apply some of Garber's observations about sartorial codes to the figure of the *femme fatale* in 1940s *film noir*. Unfortunately, space doesn't allow for further discussion. Garber briefly touches on the 1940s image of Joan Crawford (p. 157), but mainly as a co-opting image of "virility" for straight women.

20. For example, see such diverse negative assessments of multiculturalism as Paul Gray, "Whose America?" *Time*, 8 July 1991, pp. 12 ff; and a special issue of the *L.A. Weekly* titled "Multiculturalism: The New Racism?" 5 June 1992.