Teaching Notes

BOYS DON'T CRY

Directed by Kimberley Peirce. 114 minutes. Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Over the past three years I've taught Kimberley Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) to my undergraduate literature and composition classes at the University of Texas at Austin. The film is a fictional recreation of the life and death of Brandon Teena, a young transgendered man living in Nebraska who was brutally murdered when he was discovered to be biologically female. There is a political efficacy in films which position viewers to identify with queer characters, something *Boys Don't Cry* does very well.

My students had a range of reactions to the film. Their comments included: "Brandon was sick; that is a disease; we learned about it in psychology" and "Poor, uneducated people in those rural places are so messed up." On the other hand, one student wrote in a freewrite: "*Boys Don't Cry* positioned me in terms of Brandon. Everything we see is from Brandon's point of view. At first this made me uncomfortable because I have never seen a movie from the point of view of a sexually ambiguous character before. It took a little adjusting to at the beginning, but throughout the movie I found myself hoping things would work out for Brandon."

Others wrote that they identified with Brandon, they liked Brandon, and they felt his pain. They described his struggle as "universal"; he wanted to find himself and to be with the girl he loved. Interestingly, the female students also wrote about wanting to protect and care for him. This identification provides a way into a story some wouldn't normally want to enter. It also makes for a great discussion on how we construct masculinity culturally and what makes Brandon so appealing—his James Dean bad-boy quality and sensitive masculinity, his desire to please, his all-American white-boy looks, etc. (See Craig Wilse's review in *Make 2* [Spring 2000]: 17-20 on the film's treatment of race, including its erasure of Phillip Devine, an African-American man murdered with the real Brandon Teena.)

Another exercise that I found useful in class discussions asked students to think about what the "truth" of gender is in the film. To facilitate this, we drew up a list on the board of all the different ways in which Brandon was perceived. He is referred to as a boy, a girl, a "dyke," a lesbian, a "faggot," a hermaphrodite, someone with a sexual identity crisis, and "it." Then we tried to get at what definition of Brandon's gender the film was privileging, and from there we moved on to discussing if there is a "truth" of gender. It was a very spirited discussion because people ranged from diehard women's studies students who believe gender is a performance and cited Judith Butler in class to students who argued that biology is destiny and anyone who has female genitalia is a woman. At least this discussion made everybody realize that the truth of gender is contested, and that other definitions besides their own exist—though some people, obviously, do not need their eyes opened to transgendered identity or the hate directed at those who don't conform to gender norms.

Alexandra Barron
University of Texas at Austin

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"BOYZ DO CRY: SCREENING HISTORY'S WHITE LIES"

By Jennifer DeVere Brody. In *Screen* 43:1 (Spring 2002): 91-96.

I teach a first-year course at Bates College called "White Redemption: Cinema and the Co-Optation of African American History." It examines what I call "white redemption" narratives that resolve the ethical and moral dilemmas whites face as members of a dominating and oppressing group by figuratively liberating whites from racism. Most of the films I use make explicit reference to African Americans; however, I also use some films that are noteworthy for their omission of black people.

This year I paired Kimberley Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* with Jennifer DeVere Brody's essay "Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies" in order to encourage students to think critically about the representation of race and gender in an independently produced film that had garnered mainstream critical and commercial success and had been lauded for its progressive viewpoint.

I approached this assignment with trepidation, anticipating strong resistance from students. *Boys Don't Cry* had played a pivotal role in galvanizing youth and queer activism around transgender issues and in alerting the public to the severity of hate crimes. Since I knew that several queer students and their allies would be in this class I wondered especially if they would assume I would damage their cause by giving arguments to homophobic interests. Fortunately, my worst concerns did not materialize.

Brody's essay is a rather short and clearly written polemic that is quite accessible to an undergraduate audience. Brody makes a compelling argument that the success of *Boys Don't Cry*

may have been due to the omission of Philip Devine, an African American man who was present and slain at the same time as Brandon Teena. The omission of Devine from the story allowed for the emergence of a traditional romantic narrative in which white women are sympathetic victims. Further, Brody calls attention to interviews in which Peirce revealed that she was concerned that showing the murder of an African American man might draw audiences' sympathies away from the murder of the white females. Brody's essay brings to light how difficult it is to discuss simultaneous oppressions without creating a hierarchy about whose oppression is worse.

The students—most of whom are white New England American, suburban, straight identifying, and middle-to-upper class—were very resistant to discussing race in the film. The typical comment was that the omission of Devine was not racially motivated, merely a plot device. Filmmakers, these students argued, could not be expected to put everything into one film. Even students who agreed that the omission might be racially motivated were inclined to excuse it because Devine's presence might have taken the film's focus away from the hatred of queer people. Further discussion focused on whether we assumed that all queer people were white or that filmmakers had to make a choice between race and queerness.

The assignment culminated in an eight person parliamentary style debate on the topic "Boys Don't Cry is one more screening of history's white lies." Each debater wrote an essay detailing their research and their contribution to the group process. The other students could give brief speeches in support of one of the two teams. The class voted for the winning team and each student had to justify his/her vote in writing on the ballots; anonymity was optional. The ballots were given to the debaters to read and then to me; they were available at the next class for all students to read.

The debate format allowed the entire class to engage in a more structured form of discussion. The fact that the winner was decided by only two votes is significant. Clearly many did not endorse calling attention to the racial choices Brody identifies. However, the essays show that students were able to recognize the importance of thinking critically about representations of race and gender and, equally important, that they were willing to challenge as unacceptable the idea that oppressions have to be ranked into a hierarchy.

Charles I. Nero
Bates College

KILLING US SOFTLY III

By Jean Kilbourne. 34 minutes. California Newsreel.

> "I found it very difficult not to become angry by the information presented in this film! I had never realized how ads use our bodies to sell products and make us feel bad about who we are."

The speaker, one of the many Latinas in our team-taught English/Humanities course, organized around the theme of women's studies, has just seen Jean Kilbourne's documentary, *Killing Us Softly III*. She is one of the returning students at Northwest Vista College, a two-year school, serving mostly first-generation, Latino community college students in San Antonio, Texas. This student, whom we will call Yolanda, was registering her surprise and outrage over Kilbourne's remake of her 1979 documentary on the images of women promoted by the advertising industry.

While the 1979 version jolted women of that generation, it appeared against a backdrop of rising awareness of women's oppression. Today's film, by contrast, comes at a time when many of our students at least have not consciously considered their roles in society as women. We were surprised to find the enormous impact on our students' awareness produced by this film as well as by related class activities critiquing the advertising industry and mass media.

After showing the film, we assigned students to make group collages of ads from a variety of magazines and explain to the class why the images they chose were degrading to women. These collages exposed the use of women's body parts, women portrayed as little girls in passive poses, the exclusion of women of color in many of the magazines, and a strong, unreal emphasis on thinness.

Next we asked learners to watch a television show and critique its portrayal of gender issues. Some of the TV shows included *Everyone Loves Raymond*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Man Show*. Again, most of our students expressed surprise over the stereotypes that they had not noticed previously. A typical comment was, "I genuinely believe that the stereotypes are quite blatant and to a certain degree disturbing and women in the show are placed in subordinate roles."

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Because of the powerful impact on the students in our class, we recommend that more teachers show *Killing Us Softly III* to similarly awaken and empower their students, both male and female. As another of our students remarked to us, "I just love this class. It's changing me."

Sharon Shelton-Colangelo
and Mimi Duvall
Northwest Vista College

Is there a book, film, essay, poem, or story you've found particularly useful in the classroom and want to share with other* Radical Teacher *readers? We are especially interested in Teaching Notes on new materials not widely known, but we would also like to hear about newly rediscovered older works as well