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Transmissions: The Disconnect Between Trans People and Their Representations

When I was younger, I didn't understand why I used to so heavily relate to a song by Simple Plan called "Astronaut." Although the lyrics were as simple as the band's name, they touched me in a way eleven-year-old me wasn't expecting:

I know that there are millions

I can't be the only one

So disconnected

It's so different in my head

Can anybody tell me why

I'm lonely like a satellite?

As a young girl in Brazil, I felt so disconnected from the world. It felt like the life I was living was not my own, as if I were on the outside looking in, but at the time I had no idea why. It took me a few years to actually realize why, even though my feet were grounded, I often felt like I was drifting through space. It happened when I stumbled across the word "transgender" while browsing the web. I hadn't seen or heard of any trans people until then, and the little I could piece together was always said in either hushed or mocking tones. I remember spending an hour or so just looking through threads of people sharing their stories in awestruck confusion,

feeling as if it were forbidden knowledge. But when I thought of myself living as a boy, it just made so much more sense. However, this new realization hadn't come without fear. There were just so many stories of teens getting kicked out of their homes, news of trans people beat and shot in the streets. I was terrified. Of coming out, of the possibility of living as a guy and still feeling empty. So I kept it within me for as long as I could. I kept living life as if nothing had happened, pretending that hearing my deadname didn't make my skin crawl and that the body I saw in the mirror didn't feel alien. Until I couldn't. I came out to my parents after a year or so of hating the life I was living and my inability to change it, and to my school a year later. It was rough at first, there were many arguments and discussions, jerks who just wanted to antagonize me in whatever way they could, but my friends and family supported me all the way through. It's been almost four years now. Looking back now, I can see how lucky I was! Many people don't realize their transness until much later on, and there's always the risk of not having a supportive family or friend circle. However, I still wonder: would I have accepted this part of myself earlier if I had learnt about trans people through books, TV shows, documentaries or movies? Would I have felt as fearful if I had seen how it is possible to be trans and happy?

Unfortunately, there is still a lack of good trans representation in media. Even after decades of transgender activism and fighting against trans discrimination, most people can count the number of trans characters they know on one hand: two at best. (Off the top of my head, I can name Koi Boi from *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*, Roxy Lalonde from *Homestuck* and Shep from *Steven Universe*, which are all kind of obscure if I'm being honest). To trans people, especially those who aren't yet comfortable in their identities, this can be deeply alienating. How many times in our lives has the content we've come into contact with helped us feel understood

or gain new perspectives, be it through books when we were kids, a movie we saw in the cinemas, or that one song that hit us hard? Trans people can hardly ever find media about them, and when they finally do, it's never *for* them. Well, at least this content should allow cisgender (non-transgender) people to learn about trans experiences, right? In 2015, only 16% of Americans reported knowing a transgender person. (qtd. in “Number of Americans Who Report Knowing a Transgender Person Doubles in Seven Years, According to New GLAAD Survey.”). One of the main ways which the remaining 84% might learn about trans identities is through media. This shouldn't be an issue. After all, content dealing with nuanced, sensitive issues is expected to be accurate... Right?

Sadly, statistics say otherwise. The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has been monitoring media and pushing for LGBT+ positive content for over 30 years. In “Victims or Villains: Examining Ten Years of Transgender Images on Television,” GLAAD catalogued 102 episodes and non-recurring storylines of scripted television that contained transgender characters, and found that 54% of those were categorized as containing negative representations at the time of their airing. An additional 35% were categorized as ranging from "problematic" to "good," while only 12% were considered accurate enough to earn a GLAAD Media Award nomination. Over half the media portraying trans characters in the past decade has been considered negative. Ok, that doesn't sound good in the slightest... But, somehow, it gets even worse. GLAAD highlighted many harmful trends found through the study:

- Transgender characters were cast in a "victim" role at least 40% of the time.

- Transgender characters were cast as killers or villains in at least 21% of the catalogued episodes and storylines.
- The most common profession transgender characters were depicted as having was that of sex workers, which a fifth of all characters were depicted as (20%).
- Anti-transgender slurs, language and dialogue was present in at least 61% of the catalogued episodes and storylines. (“Victims or Villains: Examining Ten Years of Transgender Images on Television.”)

Some shows in particular were said to go to extremes: from a transgender serial killer who murdered his own mother in *CSI*, to *Nip/Tuck*, which depicted a transgender sex worker being beaten, and dedicated an entire season to talk about a psychopathic trans woman depicted as a baby-stealing sexual predator who sleeps with her own son. It is hard to pinpoint the exact repercussions this may have generated, but one can only imagine how warped of a perception of trans people someone would have if they had only seen these kinds of negative representations all their life. I’m sure that if I had watched these episodes, I would’ve felt so much more conflicted about my identity. Considering how scarce portrayals of trans experiences in mainstream media are, it is critical to make the few that exist accurate. Both to trans people themselves and the cisgender folks who haven’t yet seen transgender individuals represented as what they are— people.

Even when cisgender artists mean well with their depictions of trans people, issues tend to arise. They often accept trans suffering as the only truth. Content in which trans characters are constantly bullied, beat up or harassed can depict the discrimination many trans people experience. But when that’s the only reality depicted, it can be extremely harmful to the trans

people who would like to, or better yet, *need* to hear how much better things can be. Jehan, a queer and nonbinary artist, has dealt with their fair share of harmful trans media:

A lot of times in media, in books, whatever trans people are shown as, their life is so hard. Every day is horrible. And everything they always have to think about, is their safety, which can be true for many trans people. It's just that narrative gets exhausting. We want to see ourselves, not just suffering, we want to see ourselves thrive. Because if there's constantly that idea that trans people are suffering all the time, trans people suffer just by being trans. It's gonna keep happening. Basically, you're speaking it into existence. But we need to be shown, especially [show] young trans people that they don't have to spend their entire lives feeling bad. (Rasmussen)

The lacking sensibility of mainstream media has led many trans people to seek alternative content, oftentimes created by and for queer people. A visual and musical artist, Ryn gravitates towards self published and DIY style content, reading webcomics and listening to self-published music. In their free time they like to animate, play music and video games. According to them, “mainstream media isn't concerned with trans people as people but more as an idea, whether to use as a joke or a novelty, or a way to get money. I don't see trans characters often in the mainstream and when I do it's often written with those intentions” (Ryn).

As a trans woman who came out in the 80's, Shawna Virago has seen the highs and lows of trans people in the media. “When I came out there was almost no trans content to speak of. There was no internet, or trans visibility in the media. There were a few autobiographies written at that point, but nothing else. As someone who is an artist, I did not see myself reflected almost anywhere...” (Virago). She is the Artistic Director of the San Francisco Transgender Film

Festival, which started in 1997 and is the world's longest running trans film festival. They invest in trans people's artistry, prioritizing works made by trans and gender non-conforming people and screening films that offer empowered and authentic trans concerns. "We've come a long way since then" (Virago).

While representation is still scarce and oftentimes lacking, it has been noticeably improving. According to GLAAD's 2019 'Where We Are on TV' report, last year there were 38 regular and recurring trans characters across broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms. This is the highest transgender representation has ever been.

Similar to an astronaut drifting through space without any landing site or mothership in sight, looking for understanding in a barren universe can feel isolating. It can lead trans people feeling alien on our own planets, not knowing whether the issue lies within ourselves or in humanity itself, for a large part of our lives not being able to find the words that describe our complications. To a lone astronaut who has felt like a lone outsider for most of their life, any message from a fellow human, any radio connection, telecommunication, any sign at all— can be life changing. It is time to reach out to trans people and let their voices be heard. It is time to let trans people know that things can be better. It is time to reach out to trans people and say "Hey, I see you. I may not know what exactly you've been through, or what you're currently dealing with, but... I see you. And I stand beside you."

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