

*The Danish Girl*

Dr Catherine Butler, Cardiff University.

Watching a film with a transgender subject is always a slightly nerve-wracking experience for me, as for many trans people. Trans identities in cinema, on television and in fiction have frequently been fetishized, made alien, held up as objects of disgust or ridicule. Even when a more sympathetic approach is attempted, trans people are often made the objects of the curious and puzzled “cisgendered gaze”, their anomalous nature setting their stories on a seemingly inevitable tragic trajectory (much as was the case for gay people some forty years ago), and their existence serving primarily as a way to teach cisgender protagonists useful lessons about tolerance and themselves.

*The Danish Girl* avoids the worst of these traps. No one is shown vomiting at the discovery that Lillie Elbe is trans (a staple of trans stories from *The Crying Game* on); on the contrary, this is very much a film in the sympathetic tradition, and both its director and its male star have been vocal in their support of trans people. Nevertheless, it sports its fair share of bingo-card clichés. We see the familiar lingering shots of Lili applying make-up, fondling fabrics, or taking lessons in convincing female body language, all of which tend to suggest the superficial and artificial nature of trans identities in contrast to the “natural” performances of cisgender women. We have the inevitable penis shot (unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal...) and numerous scenes based around Lili’s attempt to fool others into thinking that she is Einar’s female cousin, a framing of trans people as deceptive that has fed a good deal of real-life violence over the years. And, of course, there is the tragic death – which, sad as it is, conveniently clears the stage for the resumption of heteronormative service.

Conversely, aspects of the historical Lili’s life that fit the familiar trans narrative less comfortably – such as the strong possibility that she was intersex – are omitted. So, for that matter, is her wife Gerda’s bisexuality; while the occasion of Lili’s death (in reality caused by complications after an attempt to transplant a uterus) is here recast as a failed vaginoplasty – thus iconically fixing on the impossibility of her becoming (in the film Lili’s words) “a real woman”.

Ultimately, Lili herself remains something of a cipher. The tropes that cluster around her are a distracting camouflage that frustrate any attempt to understand her as an individual, or indeed as a person beyond the fact of her trans-ness. Rather, viewer sympathy is channelled through the far more legible figure of her wife Gerda, who has to cope with the fact of her husband’s distress and, eventually, transition to a female identity. Lili is Gerda’s artistic muse and model, as well as the catalyst for her personal growth – but like many muse figures before her she is effectively mute.

This film was, I think, made with unimpeachable intentions all round – but it ends up stumbling into too-familiar narratives for ignorance of any alternative. The fact that the writer, director and stars are all cisgender, and that the film is based on a novel by a cisgender novelist, is not incidental to the kind of film that they have made. And while it is easy to find justifications for this casting (Eddie

Redmayne is indisputably both a skilful and a bankable actor) it does almost inevitably limit what can be produced.