

A Discussion with Jules Rosskam and Greg Bordowitz

*Greg Bordowitz, noted writer, academic, and AIDS-activist, recently sat down with Jules Rosskam for a discussion about trans issues, cinema, and the notion of 'community' addressed in **against a trans narrative**:*

GREG: What are the most urgent questions for trans people in your work?

JULES: If we talk about trans identities and we're talking about activism and organizing, we're also talking about larger communities because that involves saying who is on the inside and who is on the outside. There are so many identity-based communities, and I think there are many questions they have to deal with. I don't know that anyone has really dealt with them in a graceful way. For me, the question is how we can move forward and learn to not see other people's articulations of their identities as a personal assault or as threatening to our own identities. For instance, if I use a particular term to refer to myself, I may then meet someone who uses the same word but they use it completely differently; words like transman or FTM or trannyfag or trans-masculine or even queer for that matter. We don't have to attack others because their articulation and definition of those words are different than our own.

What do gay identified men and lesbians share in common with the trans person?

That's a good question. I don't think there is necessarily an inherent connection. I think on a very basic level we share a history of marginalization and maybe where it becomes more important is where we share an overlap in some of our issues. Namely that there are many trans people that are gay and lesbian identified, so that trans people are gay and lesbian also.

It occurs to me that in *against a trans narrative* a great deal of attention is paid to the importance of a broader queer community, and you've talked about the difficulties of establishing that and yet the roundtables that you organize – organize because there are several different configurations of roundtables, people sitting in tables asking question of each other – are testaments to the fact there is indeed some kind of community that exists. Can you talk about the ways in which you organized those roundtables and how your process reflects the organization of a queer community?

I was having a really big issue with these very traditional studio interviews I had done. I felt like people were saying what they thought I wanted them to say. I was thinking: how do you break down the inherent power structure of a filmed interview? So I decided to gather groups of people to create a collective dynamic. I also wanted to take myself out of the equation.

I asked all the people I did those initial interviews with to invite five members of their 'community' to a dinner - without defining for them who their community was - to talk about the film's issues and look at footage and react and discuss. And so they became their own moderators - I didn't intervene unless there was some question or problem. In this sense I think those roundtables function as a microcosm of communities, and allowed people to speak more honestly about what they thought about issues in the film, and brought people together in unusual ways.

I am wondering, however, if it's possible really to produce narratives that are both appropriate for transmen and transwomen – do you think so? Do you think this film speaks equally to and for trans women and men?

In a sense, the film doesn't speak for anyone other than me, because I made it. My hope is that many people are able to relate to it in some way, but I do think it's 100% about a trans-masculine experience. However, I think there are issues and questions that transmen and transwomen share. In this respect I hope that transwomen can feel that the film speaks to them in some way. But it is very specifically addressing a trans-masculine audience and attempting to represent some aspect of trans-masculine communities. I've already heard this question: why is this not about trans-women? Which is a valid question with a simple answer: which is just that it's not. This film can't be everything.

Where do you see this film working within and against the histories of documentary and experimental filmmaking?

I think just as much as I'm trying to destabilize this 'universal trans narrative', I'm also trying to destabilize traditional documentary film techniques by blending fiction and non-fiction forms and strategies. I'm trying to shift the power dynamics that exist - between the documentary filmmaker and its subjects, and between the documentary film and the audience. I'm employing strategies that ask the audience to be critically engaged in the film and not passively accept what I'm telling them. I think that issue comes up a lot in *against a trans narrative*: is what we're watching real and true and what does it mean if it's not true? I'm interested in the process of asking the audience to recognize and question the assumption that the documentary form carries an essential 'truth'.

On a personal level, I identify as a feminist and I try to see how feminism and other theoretical frameworks translate into practice as a filmmaker. I also situate myself within the activist video community. Furthermore, I come out of an experimental documentary tradition and want the film to be thought of in this sense. Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* changed my life when I saw it, because it was the first experimental documentary that I'd ever seen.

I'm interested in the work of Derek Jarman, Yvonne Rainer and Sadie Benning, to name a few, and your work has influenced me a lot. I like performative works that are about identity as well as larger issues. Obviously I'm very interested in queer filmmakers, but once I start listing filmmakers I feel like I could just go on and on...

Against a trans narrative is in many ways a provocative title, a good title, but possibly misleading; it is a generous film, in that it does reveal an enormous amount about the urgent questions that a trans person faces, and succeeds in its enormous ambition.