Film Review: Breaking Barriers: A Critical Examination of Transgender Representation in Media through *Disclosure*

Jessica Rivera
Department of Sociology
California State University, Los Angeles

Directed by Sam Feder, *Disclosure* (2020) is a groundbreaking documentary on Netflix that provides a comprehensive sociological analysis of the symbolic annihilation of transgender individuals in film and television. Symbolic annihilation refers to the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of a particular group in media, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting the visibility of that group. Through a combination of historical context, critical analysis, and personal narratives, the film sheds light on the harmful and inaccurate representations of transgender people in mainstream media, as well as the broader societal implications of these portrayals.

One of the most striking aspects explored in *Disclosure* is the complete absence of transgender characters in film and television. Transgender individuals have long been erased from mainstream media, perpetuating their marginalization and reinforcing the notion that they are abnormal or non-existent. By showcasing the lack of representation and its impact on transgender individuals' self-image, mental health, and overall well-being, the documentary highlights the devastating consequences of this erasure.

Moreover, the film delves into the harmful and inaccurate portrayals of transgender characters when they are included in media narratives. Transgender individuals have often been reduced to caricatures, perpetuating harmful and unrealistic stereotypes and misconceptions. These portrayals do not only misrepresent the transgender community, but they also contribute to the stigmatization and discrimination they face in society. *Disclosure* meticulously analyzes specific examples of such portrayals, providing a detailed sociological analysis of their negative effects on both the transgender community and broader societal attitudes towards transgender individuals.

In addition to examining the content of media representations, *Disclosure* also explores the power dynamics

within the film and television industry that perpetuate the symbolic annihilation of transgender individuals. The documentary sheds light on the systemic barriers transgender individuals face in accessing meaningful roles both in front of and behind the camera. By exposing the inequities in media production and distribution systems, *Disclosure* calls for structural changes within the industry to foster more inclusive and accurate representation. It emphasizes the need for diverse voices and perspectives to be included in the creative process to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and biases.

Furthermore, *Disclosure* delves into the intersectionality of transgender representation, highlighting how gender identity intersects with race, class, and other social categories. The film recognizes that transgender individuals from marginalized communities face compounded forms of symbolic annihilation, as their identities are further erased or misrepresented due to intersecting systems of oppression. By exploring the intersectional experiences of transgender people, *Disclosure* provides a nuanced understanding of the broader societal dynamics that contribute to their symbolic annihilation in film and television.

While *Disclosure* offers a powerful sociological analysis of the symbolic annihilation of transgender individuals, it also has some shortcomings. One critique is that the documentary focuses primarily on the negative aspects of transgender representation without fully exploring the positive strides being made in recent years. While it is crucial to address the harmful portrayals and erasure of transgender individuals, it is equally important to highlight the progress being made towards more accurate and inclusive representation. By balancing the analysis with examples of positive representation and showcasing the efforts of filmmakers and activists who are working towards change, the documentary could provide a more comprehensive perspective.

Additionally, though *Disclosure* acknowledges the intersectionality of transgender representation, it could delve deeper into the experiences of transgender individuals from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The documentary primarily features the narratives of white transgender individuals, which limits the examination of how intersecting systems of oppression uniquely impact transgender

people of color and those from marginalized communities. By incorporating more diverse voices and experiences, *Disclosure* could provide a more comprehensive analysis of the complexities of transgender representation.

Despite these limitations, *Disclosure* remains a valuable and thought-provoking documentary contributing to the ongoing discussion about representation and inclusion in film and television. By providing a sociological lens through which to understand the symbolic annihilation of transgender individuals, the film challenges viewers to critically examine the media they consume and the broader societal dynamics at play. It serves as a call to action for the film and television industry to prioritize diverse and accurate representation and for society as a whole to recognize the importance of visibility and inclusion for transgender individuals.

In conclusion, *Disclosure* is a great documentary that offers a comprehensive sociological analysis of transgender individuals in film and television. Through its examination of historical context, critical analysis, and personal narratives, the film portrays inaccurate representations of transgender people in mainstream media and highlights the broader societal implications of these representations. While the documentary falls short in certain aspects, it remains an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about representation and inclusion. *Disclosure* challenges viewers to examine the media they consume critically and calls for structural changes within the film and television industry to foster more inclusive and accurate representation.

REFERENCES

Feder, Sam. 2020. *Disclosure*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.

Jessica Rivera (She/Her/Ella) is a first-generation graduate student at Cal State LA. Jessica will be graduating with her M.A. in Sociology in May 2024. Her research interests consist of deviant behaviors, gender and mental health. She is currently working on her portfolio project on the topic of social media specifically Instagram affecting college students' self-perception. She is grateful for the opportunity she has been given to explore, grow in her writing and learn from her CSF team. Jessica had the opportunity to be a part of the book/film review team. She is a proud member of the editorial board and hopes to continue her passion in writing.