

# AGAINST NIHILISM: REPRESENTATIONS OF TRANS\*NESS IN DUTCH MEDIA



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## Abstract

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After the national controversy regarding gender inclusivity in the Netherlands in 2017, there seem to have emerged a whole new group of individuals that actively reject the gender binary, opting instead for other modes of gender identification. This is in no way a new phenomenon since there have been individuals claiming to stand in between or outside of the binary and actively seeking medical treatment since the beginnings of gender transitions in the 1960s. There has, however, been a shift in discourse apparent in Dutch media inspired by the LGBT movement. This shift has changed trans\*ness to a diagnosis to an active mode of self-identification, allowing trans\* individuals the complete control over their own gender identity.

This thesis will utilise the concepts of **traps**, **doors** and **trapdoors** (Gossett et al. xiii) as a framework for the analysis that will aim to trace the shift from a medical discourse of trans\*ness to a one that deems being trans\* a social identity. The starting points are two media texts; namely, Mounir Samuel's coming out interview on *Jinek* in 2015 and the documentary *Genderbende*, which follows five individuals that all challenge the Western gender binary. The two media texts additionally prove the way certain media genres and conventions shape a narrative, allowing a certain narrative to thrive over others. Another focus is the way in which inhabiting labels, in this case, gender identities, can be restrictive, negotiated but also possibly liberating, if we let go of clear cut definition and instead focus on a sense of community through a common struggle. Inhabiting new, broad and freeing labels such as Halberstam's trans\* help to imagine new possibilities of a trans\* future that does not focus on dividing people into ever smaller growing niche identities, but instead on uniting them. In current times, we cannot allow ourselves to fall into utopian yet unproductive modes of nihilism.

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## Introduction

Over the last couple of years, various discussions on gender have arisen in the Netherlands. From the updated article 28 regarding gender reassignment in 2014 to the discussions around gender-neutral language used by municipalities and other public organisations (NOS.nl 28-07-2017; NOS.nl 03-08-2017), the concept of being more accommodating to trans\* people in public spheres sparked national debate. This phenomenon is anything but new: trans individuals have been making their way into the Dutch media landscape since the 1970s<sup>1</sup>.

In the 1990s, some individuals identifying as somewhere in between or outside of the two binary genders started to unite under the term *transgenderist* (De Jong 15). Several publications dealt with this topic, such as *Het Continuüm*, a “paper for anyone moving outside of the gender binary” as well as the work *Man of vrouw, min meer* by Tim de Jong. During this period, academic papers were published on the topic as well, such as Cees Doorn’s dissertation titled *Towards a gender identity theory of transsexualism* and Karin Spaink’s *M/V: doorhalen wat niet van toepassing is*, that both argue that the gender binary is an oversimplification of reality that is untenable (De Jong 15-16).

With the public debate on gender inclusive language and spaces in 2017, this group of people that do not feel at home in the Western gender binary gained traction again, though this time under new names, such as non-binary or genderqueer (NOS.nl 28-07-2017). These individuals are still often met with incomprehension and scepticism since they actively question a binary that is fundamental to the current Dutch society. Where the trans\* body can be seen as a ground of endless possibilities, it is at the same time a threat to the Western binary that is presented as something normalised or even natural. Meanwhile, gender nihilism argues that trans\* modes of gender identification are not a way to fight the existing gender binary, but are instead a form of compliance with the very binary they are rejecting.

In a Foucauldian sense, naming oneself seems to inevitably lead to a process of normalisation and eventual punishment. However, there are other ways of relating to or identifying with a label or gender identity that does not have to lead to normalisation in the case of terms that do not require a set definition. Concepts like Halberstam’s trans\* can make sure people feel a sense of community without the fear of being punished for stepping out of line. Not the external experts, like medical professionals or the DSM, but trans\* individuals themselves become the experts over their own experiences as they can take

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<sup>1</sup> See Alex Bakker, *Transgender in Nederland: Een Buitengewone Geschiedenis*

control over their gender identity. Departing from these notions on gender I will analyse the way trans\* individuals manage to carve out their own spaces in Dutch media in order to answer the following research question: *How has the representation of trans\* people in Dutch media changed in the past five years and what are its potentialities?*

The main focus will be on the new developments in the last five years. These changes will be placed in a historical framework, as well as form the foundation of imagining trans\* futures. The research question is divided into three sub-questions. The first aspect is concerned with the shift in the discourse on trans\* identities from a medical condition to a social identity. The theoretical framework will be dealing with the question of *how labels of gender identification function as a tool of restriction, negotiation and possible liberation*. The second sub-question is rooted in television studies and how the form can influence the content of a media text. The analysis chapters will investigate *how different genres (specifically documentary and talk show television) allow for different kinds of representation*. Lastly, I will take the concept of trans\*ness beyond the past and the present and will elaborate on *how the control of trans\* individuals over their own gender identity and self-identification with broader terms helps imagine new possibilities for a trans\* future*.

I will be analysing two media texts, namely the 2015 coming out interview with Mounir Samuel on Dutch late night talk show *Jinek*, and the in 2017 released documentary *Genderbende*. The aim of these analyses is not only to show a contemporary representation of a trans\* individual in Dutch media but also to lay out the different **traps**, **doors** and **trapdoors** the protagonists navigate throughout the media texts.

## **On Trans\***

In this thesis, I will be looking at the media texts to an explicitly trans\* lens. The term trans\* was coined by Jack Halberstam in an attempt to convey the multiplicity of different trans\* experiences (Halberstam 9). Trans\* steps away from the false dichotomy between cis- and transgender. It is open to complexity and interpretation and allows trans\* individuals to be “the authors of their own categorizations” (4). I will elaborate more on this concept in the next chapter.

## **On the Glossary**

Despite my plead for labels and modes of identification that are more inclusive and, most importantly less normative and restrictive, I have decided to add a glossary with commonly

used terms at the end of this thesis. This is because these terms are still very commonly used in Dutch media and Dutch society as a whole, although their definitions are not always as clear. The analysed media texts are no exception. The definitions are intentionally kept to the point, not including the many discussions surrounding most of these terms in both academia and activism. It might seem contradictory to both rely on such a non-descriptive concept of trans\*ness while at the same time offering seemingly clear cut definitions of terms that each come with their own histories and debates. The reason to not include these debates is not in an effort to silence or delegitimise them, but because the aim of the glossary is solely to make sure everyone reading this thesis is familiar with these terms on a fundamental level. A more detailed justification on the glossary and its creation can be found on page 35.

## **Overview**

The next chapter will introduce the theoretical framework, which gives an overview of concepts concerning trans\* and gender studies and argues how labels can both be oppressive, negotiated and possibly liberating. The theoretical framework will be concluded with a methodological segment concerning media representation and discourse analysis. The following two chapters are analyses of both media texts. These chapters will argue how conventions shape the contents of a media text, and how in the case of trans\* lived experiences, space for expression is needed. They will also argue for the importance of allowing the trans\* individuals to be the experts over their own experiences. In the final chapter, the two analyses will be compared, and will be used as a stepping stone for imagining possible trans\* futures.

## 1. Why Naming? The Limits and Possibilities of Inhabiting Labels

The only way we can know the world around us is through language and more specifically, through the act of naming. According to Stuart Hall, we understand the world through so-called *systems of representation*. One of these systems is a shared conceptual map “that must be translated into a common language”. Language translates concepts and ideas into words, sounds or visual cues. Only with this common language, we can gain knowledge about the world in a way that we know will be highly similar to others (Hall 3-4). It is also this common language that allows us to share ideas that, according to Hall, make up a culture. We speak of systems of representations and not just representations because they are just that, “different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them” (3). So for something to be known, it has to have a name that can be classified, to fit into one box or another.

Gender is an example of this principle. According to Statistics Netherlands in 2018, the country’s population of 17,181,084 was neatly divided into 8,527,041 men and 8,654,043 women, making up 49.63 and 50.37 per cent of the total population (CBS). Every single human in the registry seems to seamlessly fit into the categories of male and female, the sex registered at birth. There are, however, laws in place that ensure that the sex of a newborn does not need to be registered for the first three months of their life if the sex characteristics are ambiguous. When after these three months, the sex of the infant is still ambiguous, this registry becomes permanent<sup>2</sup> and can only be changed through BW1 article 24, subsection 1, allowing the registered sex of an individual to be changed when an obvious mistake of administrative nature has been made<sup>3</sup>. However, according to a WODC report published in 2014, there were 67 individuals in the Netherlands registered with an unknown gender marker. Of these 67 people, only one was born in the Netherlands.

Additionally, a court ruling in 2018 made it possible for Leonne Zeegers to change the gender marker in their passport to an X, turning the total amount of Dutch-born citizens registered with an unknown gender marker to at least 2. Though this may seem like a futile amount statistically<sup>4</sup>, it can spark a change in the way we deal with gender in a legal sense and cultural sense. It changes the very concept of gender in Dutch culture, since, like Hall argued, “social and linguistic conventions change over time” and thus meaning is never truly fixed (Hall 9).

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<sup>2</sup> See BW1 article 19d, subsection 2

<sup>3</sup> Trans individuals in the Netherlands also have to argue with/on this law in order to change the gender marker on their birth certificate and all other documents of identification. (Van Den Brink & Tigchelaar 3; Bakker 94)

<sup>4</sup> They amount to exactly 0.0000116407 per cent of the Dutch population



In this thesis, gender will not be defined as narrow as a gender marker on a birth certificate, that is assigned at birth and can only be changed through a legal process. Gender can be seen as a power structure, normalising bodies into either masculine and feminine ones, but it can also be seen as a form of self-expression or a way of rejecting (or otherwise negotiating) these power dynamics.

This chapter will discuss, through academic concepts that are used throughout the rest of the thesis, how inhabiting gender identities (or other labels, for that matter) can be oppressive, negotiated and possibly liberating. To start out, I will lay out the poststructural framework of the normalising society as argued by Foucault, as well as Butler's concepts of gender. From that point onwards, I will introduce the concept of gender nihilism as coined by Alyson Escalante as well as its shortcomings. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the power dynamics of gender can be negotiated or even rejected on a personal level. Lastly, I shall turn to Jack Halberstam's concept of trans\* in order to make an argument for broader terms, that allows for more freedom and without immediate danger of normalisation and punishment.

### **The (Inevitable) Normalisation of Gender**

To establish a norm, that norm must be named and specified. Once there is a clear norm, individuals that deviate from that norm can (and will) be punished. The norm is not only applicable to the individual but is also used to discipline populations (Foucault 1997 253). Foucault defines norms in the normalising society in the following manner:

“The normalizing society is therefore not, under these conditions, a sort of generalized disciplinary society whose disciplinary institutions have swarmed and finally taken over everything—that, I think, is no more than a first and inadequate interpretation of a normalizing society. The normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation.” (Foucault 1997 253)

In terms of gender, this means that once a set of norms is established, those who deviate from that norm will be punished<sup>5</sup>. In the case of modern-day Western society, these norms take the form of for example a gender binary that divides the population in male and female

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<sup>5</sup> This argument is also used to critique opening up gender registration by adding a third option (X or unknown, since what is intelligible can be normalized and punished

gender roles that come with a strict set of behaviours, appearances and the like. Judith Butler defines this norm as “the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (Butler in Escalante 2015 3).

For Alyson Escalante, the author of *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto*, this is a reason to do away with gender altogether. The Anti-Manifesto is one of the foundational works of a reader titled "What is Gender Nihilism" that was published in 2015. The central premise of the reader is "ending gender oppression, not by the proliferation or liberation of gender(s), but by its catastrophic cancellation." The reader consists of both inspirations (e.g. Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" and Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto") and examples (like Paul Preciado's "Testo Junkie") that highlight different facets of what gender nihilism could be.

The Anti-Manifesto sees no other way to get rid of violence that is the result of gender than to get rid of gender altogether. The text's main foundations are firstly antihumanism, the belief that there is no essential human and that the subject is the product of discourses and power structures. The second foundation is gender abolition, which draws from the original abolitionist movement as well as current movements advocating for the abolition of the category of race and radical negativity. This last aspect urges the reader to get rid of all that is intelligible, and to do away with gender is in a way to get rid of the entire concept of identity and even society as a whole<sup>6</sup>.

Escalante argues that since deviance from the norm will always be punished, the more norms (in this specific case gender categories) are expanded, the more people will be punished for falling outside of this growing number of norms. "Infinite gender identities create infinite new spaces of deviation, which will be violently punished. Gender must punish deviance, thus gender must go" (Escalante 2015 315).

Gender is solely seen as an oppressive power structure that seeks only to punish anyone and everyone that deviates from the norm said power structure produces. This, however, takes away from the fact that individuals also experience their gender as an identity. No matter whether one thinks it is a set given at birth or something fluid, both ends

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<sup>6</sup> Escalante received harsh critiques on her initial Anti-Manifesto for allegedly having anti-black sentiments and for ignoring the materiality of gender, and an addendum was released soon after. In 2016, Escalante published a follow up essay titled "Beyond Negativity: What Comes After Gender Nihilism?" in which she defends the original thoughts behind gender nihilism, while also addressing the critique that became apparent in the previously mentioned addendum. Another main problem she addresses is how gender nihilism did not have a clear definition of gender. She then turns back to the materiality of gender by using Monique Wittig's theorisation of "the phenonema of gender as an issue of class and a class struggle." (2018 6) Citing Jules Joanne Gleeson, Escalante argues that "the struggle for the abolition of gender cannot be separated from the struggle for communism" (2018 8).

of the spectrum imply a sense of gender that is more than just a power structure that is being put upon us against our will.

The fact that people now generally seem to feel to have a greater sense of control over their gender has to do with a shift in discourse. Current modes of gender identification are often no longer rooted in medical discourse. The term transgender (and its predecessor transsexual) were coined and defined by medical professionals as a mental illness that needed treatment. This kind of diagnosis and treatment of trans\*gender individuals has been going on in the Netherlands since the 1950s (Bakker 271). Over the years, this medical care professionalised, cementing the medical discourse surrounding trans\*ness. Being trans\*gender was defined as a mental illness that was treated with a combination of therapy and medical procedures. There has, however, been a shift in the way people think about gender, deeming it more as an identity and less as a biological fact. This shift is a very recent one, especially in the Dutch context. Where in other parts of the world (like the US) the trans\* and gay liberation movement have always been interconnected, this was not exactly the case in the Netherlands (237). Here, the shift appeared early in the 21st century. In 2010 COC<sup>7</sup> became an advocate of the rights of not only gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals but also of trans\* people (238). Other developments, such as the updated law concerning trans\* individuals stating that medical procedures and sterilisation are no longer a requirement to change the gender marker on one's birth certificate<sup>8</sup> and the removal of gender incongruence as a mental disorder in the DSM, are also expressions of this identitarian discourse. Jack Halberstam describes this shift as: "the movement of transgender identification from pathology to preference, from a problematic fixation to a reasonable expression of self" (Halberstam 19).

This shift also entailed that people started coining terms that they believed better suited their specific gender identity, which has led to an almost infinite amount of gender identities. Halberstam discusses "the fifty-one ways to be a body offered us by Facebook" in a way of criticising this artificial production of labels that seems to be more focussed on dividing people into microscopic fractions, instead of uniting individuals that deal with roughly the same kinds of oppression on the axis of gender (9). Halberstam also warns that the identities we pick for ourselves are not necessarily less oppressive than the ones that are forced upon us, by stating that "vernacular forms of expression and definition are not necessarily less regulatory or less committed to norms than other modes of classification" (12).

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<sup>7</sup> COC Netherlands is an advocacy organisation for the rights of LGBT people that was founded in 1946

<sup>8</sup> See BW1 article 28

## **Cheating Restrictive Labels**

Despite the previously mentioned warnings, I am interested in the ways gender might be negotiated in a productive way. Escalante argues that the subversion of gender through non-binary, trans(\*) or queer identities is impossible, by stating that “to take on identity in a rejection of the gender binary is still to accept the binary as a point of reference. In the resistance to it, one only reconstructs the normative status of the binary. [...] Both [queer and trans identity politics] fall into the same trap of referencing the norm by trying to “do” gender differently” (Escalante 2015 313). I argue that there is no other way to reject the gender binary than to acknowledge it as the current social construct that holds power over almost every aspect of our lives. While there is no such thing as a fixed or final meaning of a certain concept and while meanings often change over time, we cannot, like Stuart Hall argues “get up one morning and suddenly decide to represent the concept of a ‘tree’ with the letters or the word VYXZ, and expect people to follow what we are saying” (Hall 9)<sup>9</sup>. For critiquing gender from a framework that is completely outside of social and linguistic constructs surrounding the concept is not a critique of gender at all.

Butler and Halberstam both discuss the inevitability of gendered embodiment. Because the concept of gender is so deeply rooted in all of us and entangled in all of our society, thinking of “a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, express nothing” is extremely difficult, if not impossible (Butler 1988 530). In a way, there is an overlap between Escalante's gender nihilism and the way people who identify themselves as agender define their gender since they strive for the same thing, for their appearance and mannerisms to not result in any association with gender: “The concept of being without a gender, however, is whimsical at best, since there are few ways to interact with other human beings without being identified with some sort of gendered embodiment. The concept of ‘agender’, then, names a wish to be outside of gender norms, rather than the real experience of being so”<sup>10</sup> (Halberstam 8-9).

Furthermore, Butler argues that the fact that “gender” is rooted in an oppressive regime of heterosexism does not mean that we should not make use of them. On the contrary, she argues, “precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained within such regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their

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<sup>9</sup> More on Stuart Hall and representation can be found in the methodology paragraph of this chapter

<sup>10</sup> Despite the possible theoretical objections to the term agender as a mode of gendered embodiment, this is not meant to deligitimise people who do choose to identify with this term. Like Aidan Rowe argues, “all genders are in some sense impossible” (Rowe 343, footnote 2)

originating aims. One does not stand at an instrumental distance from the terms by which one experiences violation” (Butler 83). This reification is, not without risks, though the results might be worthwhile: “Occupied by such terms and yet occupying them oneself risks a complicity, a repetition, a relapse into injury, but it is also the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chose (83).

So one can argue and criticize current modes of gendered identification, stating how new gender identities are only new shackles made to control us and are not productive when it comes to liberating us from gendered oppression. On the other hand, like Butler argues, terms that are used to oppress us can also be used as powerful (yet dangerous) tools of subversion. Even though the subversion of existing gender roles through, e.g. non-binary identities might not free us completely from gendered power structures, it might invoke a sense of personal freedom which in turn will also shape the ideas around gender within society. Though this might be nothing but a small act of protest, the solution Escalante proposes is as utopian as it is impossible.

This is why I am in favour of smaller changes on a more practical level to always exist alongside a need or desire for a complete revolution. Another reason I do believe in the power of subversion of gender is that it takes people’s lived experiences more seriously. Like the media texts analysed in the next two chapters will show, there are individuals out there who actively oppose gender norms and reclaim small bits of personal freedom through it.

### **Towards Trans\* Possibilities**

This brings me to the concept of trans\*ness. The term trans\* was coined by Jack Halberstam in order to loosen up the term trans(gender). It opens up the meaning of ‘trans’, while at the same time “putting pressure on all modes of gendered embodiment.” (Halberstam xiii, 3) It emphasises the idea that there is no such thing as a singular trans\* experience. The asterisk allows for this variance, and it is open to interpretation for anyone who pleases to adopt the label. It thus rejects the false binary between cis- and transgender. Since the term cisgender has a fairly straightforward definition with clear boundaries, there is danger in putting the term trans opposed to it, because it assumes a similar straightforwardness. Trans\*, on the other hand, is open about its complexity and multiplicity (4). The aim of the introduction of the term is to point to multiple possible uses and allows for more flexibility:

“The answer is not just to introduce new words (boi, cis-gendered, andro-fag) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism

here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly.” Seeing language in this way, as a shifting ecosystem within which words might fly, fall, or fail to convey their message, but also one within which words might hover over the multiplicity to which they point, relieves us of the mundane task of simply getting the name right” (Halberstam 9).

The focus on the term is thus much less on policing language or even capturing every distinct mode of embodiment into their own niche terminology. Trans\* is about thinking in “new and different ways about what it means to claim a body” (50).

The multiplicity of the term also makes it an extremely useful tool of analysis. The term is in no way trying to put yet another label on the media texts protagonists from the outside but is instead used as a catchall for all the different individuals whom all negotiate their gender in widely different, though all non-normative, ways. The term trans\* is preferred here because “it makes trans\* people the authors of their own categorisations” (4). A base requirement is that all these different gender identities and expressions all are part of a discourse deeming gender as a social identity instead of a medical condition.

This section has demonstrated how inhabiting labels can be seen as something restrictive, like in the Foucauldian sense as a tool for normalisation and punishment for individuals and regularisation of the masses. According to gender nihilists such as Alyson Escalante, this is a reason to not only want to do away with gender altogether but also to accuse everyone that does want to reject or critique the binary without wanting to step out of it completely compliant with its oppressive powers. However, as Judith Butler shows, the fact that these tools of gender are used to uphold oppressive and heterosexism regimes does not mean that we should not reify them. This is obviously not without any risks since there is a genuine chance of repeating the very patterns and power dynamics one is attempting to escape. I think that Halberstam's concept of trans\* can avoid this misstep. The term not only lets trans\* individuals regain control over their own modes of identification, but it also puts pressure on all modes of gendered identification and forces us to rethink the way language works within these spaces. These restrictive and normative labels not only punish from the outside but can also break up communities with language policing. The term trans\* is enough of an identifier in order to find a sense of community and solidarity, but is at the same time multifaceted enough to cater to the endless ways in which one can experience one's gender. The next two chapters will focus on all different kinds of trans\* embodiments and the way they are represented in Dutch media. But first, I shall elaborate on the methodology of this thesis.

## Methodology

In terms of methodology, I am turning to discourse analysis, which is a form of analysis commonly used in culture and television studies (Hermes & Reesink 81). Through discourse analysis, media scholars research the relations between people and the world, which power dynamics are at play and how meanings are created differently in different contexts, to showcase all the kind of ways of thinking about a particular subject (Matheson 1).

The term discourse was first termed by Michel Foucault, which he defined as the "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972 49). As Long and Wall put it: "discourses are the kinds of language we use to talk about something, and the assumptions that lie behind what we think, say and do" (Long & Wall 363). It thus encompasses everything that can be said about a certain topic, making the things that cannot be expressed through words or language literally 'meaningless' (Hermes & Reesink 83). Foucault's definition assumes that language and society are inextricably linked to one another (Matheson 3). Discourses become 'an abstraction [...] to make sense of how people gain power over each other by prejudging them in negative ways" (10). The aim is not to hunt for ideologies or unravel hidden messages that might not even be there, but instead to focus on "finding patterns, series, hierarchies in language that position people within certain roles and ways of thinking" (10).

I have opted for discourse analysis because, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the discourse regarding trans\* individuals has been shifting in the Netherlands from a medical discourse to a discourse viewing trans\*ness as a social identity (Halberstam 19). I will be analysing how these two different discourses manifest themselves in the context of a talk show interview and a documentary film. The concepts of **traps**, **doors** and **trapdoors** will be used as a framework for the analysis that will aim to trace the shift from a medical discourse of trans\*ness to a one that deems being trans\* a social identity.

The point of departure of this analysis is the anthology *Trap door: trans cultural production and the politics of visibility*. This work on the representation of trans people in contemporary culture argues that the increase of recognition of transgender individuals comes at a price. Trans people are offered **doors**, to recognition in mainstream media and other spaces of public life. These **doors** are almost always also **traps**, forcing the people in question to comply with dominant norms in order to be heard (Gossett et al. xxiii). It is important to note that although the two often come in pairs, *a door does not necessarily always set up for a trap*. Apart from these **traps** and **doors**, a third concept is introduced,

that of the **trapdoor**. **Trapdoors** are described as "clever contraptions that are not entrances or exits but secret passageways that take you someplace else, often someplace as yet unknown. [...] Here is the space we believe exists and a third term that acknowledges the others but refuses to be held to them" (Gossett et al. xxiii). This description is not clear cut and allows for the collaborators of the anthology to interpret the term in their own way. For this exact reason, I have also taken the freedom to do the same. I will again turn to Stuart Hall and define **trapdoors** as the gaps left between representations and their meanings. It is in the instances where different discourses collide; the moments where what is meant is left unsaid, but that what is said instead opens up the possibility for entirely new interpretations.

There are also limits to conducting discourse analysis. Because the main focus is the internal structure of a text and "the codes and conventions that establish specific meanings", there is a danger in not taking into account the (historical) context of the media texts (Hermes & Reesink 86). I have tried to decrease this risk to my best ability by adding historical context while introducing the specific media texts. I also consciously turn to the conventions of the media text's respectable genres since, in the domain of television, it might not be the medium, but more so the genre that is the message. These genre conventions will be thoroughly discussed in the respectable analysis chapters. However, it is also important to note here that the main focus of this thesis is the way trans\*ness is represented in Dutch media specifically, instead of in Dutch society as a whole.



## 2. “Just Call Me Mo”: Trap(doors) in Talk Show Television

On June 5th, 2015, Middle East expert Mounir Samuel was one of the guests of the popular Dutch late night talk show *Jinek* (KRO-NCRV 2013-). He was invited based on the blog post he had written in which he discussed his depression and the search for his identity. He stated that from now on, he would no longer ‘live as a woman’ and would also change his name from the Westernized Monique to Mounir, “the only name that makes his heart sing”. In the very first seconds of the broadcast, he was **trapped** in a narrative in which Mounir did not exist at all. Instead, there was only Monique, and ‘her wish to become a man’ and the tragedy that supposedly unfolds because of this fact.

Samuel is no stranger to Dutch media. During the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, the then 22-year-old Samuel gained recognition as a Middle East expert in the Netherlands. He worked as a fly-in correspondent for the predecessor of *Jinek*, *Pauw en Witteman* (2006-2014). For the general public, his most memorable appearance is that of him belly dancing on the studio table at *Pauw en Witteman* at the height of the Arab spring.

In this chapter, I will analyse the representation of trans\*ness through a discourse analysis of Mounir Samuel’s coming out interview on *Jinek*. First of all, I will give a brief overview of *Jinek*’s role in the Dutch television landscape. Secondly, I shall discuss the talk show conventions that play a vital role in the narrative the media text is portraying. Next, I will locate and analyse both the medical and identity based trans\* discourses through many **doors**, **traps** and **trapdoors** that are apparent in the talk show interview. Lastly, I will argue why **traps** thrive in such a restrictive television format, as well as hint at situations in which other outcomes are more likely.

### On *Jinek*

*Jinek*<sup>11</sup> (KRO-NCRV 2013-) is a daily late-night talk show produced by Pilot Studio and broadcast on the Dutch public broadcasting channel NPO1. *Jinek* is hosted by Dutch American journalist Eva Jinek. Jinek’s persona seems to be a significant influence on the actual contents of the show and *Jinek* as a media brand. This influence is most apparent through their social media channels. Apart from more traditional topics for Dutch late night talk shows such as politics, news events and sports, Jinek has profiled itself by emphasising topics such as feminism and identity. This emphasis gives the show a more progressive

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<sup>11</sup> References to the talk show titled *Jinek* will be in cursive, while references to the host Eva Jinek will be in a regular typecast.

character compared to the other show with which *Jinek* shared a timeslot, which is the show *Pauw* (BNNVARA 2014- ) hosted by Jeroen Pauw.

### **Talk Show Conventions**

Talk show interviews, and broadcast interviews in general, differ from regular conversations in the way that they are structured. One can even argue that interviews are too scripted to be even considered to be actual conversations. MacDonald argues that "even with the most accommodating presenter, the broadcast studio 'defines the terms of social interaction in its own domain by pre-allocating social roles and statuses'" (MacDonald in Matheson 120-121). During the interview, both parties have set roles, that allows for behaviour that would not be acceptable in daily life. The host of a talk show often "directs, cajoles, reinterprets what participants have said in order to heighten controversy, and provides a moralising touchstone for the opinions being articulated" (84).

Interviewers are supposed to be the neutral voice in an interview. Instead of expressing their own opinions, they are a representative of both the show (the channel, editors, but also the advertisers if applicable) and the audience (both the ones on screen and the ones watching at home). Interviewers are supposed to be seen as the voice of reason. In the analysed interview, *Jinek* can be seen interfering into the discussion as a referee in order to 'prove' her impartiality. This role of representative of the audience or 'the people' in general also enables the interviewer "to ask the most sensitive and intrusive questions and to defend themselves against interviewees' accusations of unfair or biased questioning" (Matheson 127).

Because of the studio setting, interviewers have the initial power during talk show interviews. They are the ones that can set the tone by having the power to introduce the guests and the topics discussed in a way that pushes a particular narrative (128). Interviewees, in turn, get most of their power from their social status as public figures. However, this is not the case for lay people, who do not have any national fame that grants them social status in the setting of a television broadcast. In a more conventional approach to television, the voices of "ordinary people" usually are not in favour of letting experts or others with a certain level of fame or status speak. This has changed with the democratisation of television<sup>12</sup>. However, this development does not mean full empowerment for those without fame, status or expertise on television, because they are usually seen as an object that is only allowed to have a set identity and not as a complex individual. As a

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<sup>12</sup> With reality television or debate programmes, lay people are now also a part of the television landscape, which is what is meant by the 'democratisation of television' (Matheson 131)

result, lay people are also often not seen as experts on their own experiences. Instead, there are often 'external' experts to contextualise the statements made by these ordinary people. These experts come in the form of, e.g. medical experts such as doctors and psychologists and others such as lawyers. Furthermore, so-called agony aunts can also be called upon as an expert, as a way of representing common sense wisdom (Matheson 131). To sum up, this is not as much about gaining actual expertise, but more about "the power – and responsibility – of broadcast talk hosts to allow different kinds of public identity to be expressed" (131).

This notion of expertise makes Samuel's appearance into a compelling case since he once was regarded as an expert himself, though under another name. Monique, the Middle Eastern expert, has status when talking about her expertise. Meanwhile, Mounir, even though he is talking about his own experiences with his gender identity, has not.

### **Analysis: Trapped in Conventional Narratives**

Despite being aware of the strict conventions that are part of a late night talk show, Samuel still decided to make use of the platform the talk show was offering him to tell his story. He consciously decided to have his second 'coming out'<sup>13</sup> on national television during *Jinek*. A logical explanation for the decision is the status of the show that is broadcast on national television. *Jinek* can thus be seen as a literal **door** through which Samuel gains visibility, recognition, and understanding.

It is important to note that this **door** did not open because of the increased media attention for trans\* individuals in Dutch media. In the Netherlands, this topic did not gain traction until 2017, when a nationwide debate sparked about gender inclusivity<sup>14</sup>. The reason Samuel is given a stage is because of his previous media appearances under the name Monique Samuel as a Middle East correspondent in talk shows similar to *Jinek*. The fact that he was asked to join the show based on his past fame does imply the show was possibly looking for a sensational story.

As mentioned above, visibility is risky and often comes with a price. Samuel quickly finds himself **trapped** in the power dynamics of the talk show. While his actual message of greater personal and societal freedom in regards to identity are ignored, he is instead pushed into the stereotypical and often sensationalised narrative of the transition from an unhappy woman to a binary trans man. This narrative is laid out in the very first seconds of the episode, in which that night's segments are introduced:

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel previously came out as queer, which is also mentioned during the interview at 10:39 - 10:55

<sup>14</sup> See the introductory chapter for more on this debate

0:08 [JINEK] Middle East expert Monique Samuel want to continue [her] life as a man. For the first time, we will hear *her* story.

*Transcript 1.1*

The narrative the talk show has decided on is a dramatic tale of a young, successful and intelligent woman in the media who 'decides to live as a man'. The interview will serve as a clean cut between Samuel's previous life, in which Monique was a successful expert on the Middle East known for her various television appearances, as well as a straight married woman (and later as a gay, divorced woman who nevertheless was a reputable expert in their field) to Mounir, 'her<sup>15</sup> new male identity'. Where Monique is praised for her role as an expert on talk shows during the Arab spring, Mounir is being reduced to his gender identity. Now that Mounir has decided to become himself, all his previous achievements seem to be lost entirely, since they are attributed to someone with a different name and appearance.

What is important to note is that he is **trapped** inside a narrative that pushes a medical discourse surrounding trans\*ness. This discourse can thrive in such a setting since this discourse is still very apparent in Dutch society, and Jinek's role as a host makes her speak on behalf of the general public. Moreover, the combination between a television genre that is upheld by strict conventions with a discourse that encourages a similar strictness of definitions seems to be a better match than a discourse in which there is a lot of space for grey areas.

In the narrative sketched in Jinek, the possibility of what Sandy Stone calls intertextuality is denied. By claiming Samuel used to be a woman but is now considered a man, the show insinuates that he is now passing. The act of passing, to "live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a "natural" member of that gender" also means the denial of mixture (Stone 12). In order to 'become a man', he is being forced to distance himself from the life he has led before because the two versions of him do not add up to a stable male gender identity. This dissonance is also the reason why Samuel has little to no authority during this interview since the reputation he has built on this talk show is entirely attributed to Monique. Intertextuality, in this sense, would be defined by embracing one's past, which has the consequence of having to 'read oneself aloud' (Stone 14). While Samuel does acknowledge his past, given the fact that he does not really have a choice because of

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<sup>15</sup> I am using female pronouns in this specific situation since that is the way he is introduced in the segment and is not in any way meant to misgender him

his previous media presence, he does, however, actively distance himself from the (media) persona of Monique:

13:31 [SAMUEL] "[...] I felt a disconnect in two ways: there was this disconnect between whom I think I am, how I see myself and my actual physical appearance. It is like looking in the mirror and literally not recognising yourself. So then there is the disconnect by the person you are inside and how you see yourself in, for example, the media and go 'Yeah, Monique Samuel is such an interesting woman but who is she?'. I could not identify with her at all, and the disconnect became increasingly stronger."

### *Transcript 1.2*

Samuel breaks out of the format Jinek is trying to maintain by continuing his own story, without giving the desirable answers. In a way, this fight over control of the conversation can be seen as a way of maintaining talk show conventions. However, since he is actively fighting the narrative that is put upon him, Jinek and Samuel are clearly not partaking in the same discussion. This is because they are both operating from different discourses. Where, as previously mentioned, Jinek leans towards a medical discourse, Samuel sees being trans\* as a social identity. This fundamental difference in understanding makes for an almost impossible conversation, though there are also moments where, through **trapdoors**, new spaces open up. The most notable example of this is a clash between *Jinek's* progressive values and the medical discourse that the narrative is trying to push. The dissonance between these two factors opens up a new space, in which the question can be reinterpreted through a trans\* lens.

- 10:57 [JINEK] That was one of the steps. So is this, well, the last step, would you say?
- 11:02 [SAMUEL] See, life is a journey. If this were to be my last step at age 25, I would be living a boring life from now on.
- 11:09 [JINEK] Sure, but for now, we're talking about the way you're feeling in regards to your sex, to put it that way.
- 11:13 [SAMUEL] Eh no, this is actually only just the start, because I've only now have permitted myself to allow room for whatever I am feeling inside. So eh, in two years from now I could be sitting here with a beard. It could also be that in two years-

### *Transcript 1.3*

This question is a very indirect way of Jinek informing Mounir about his medical transition and thus both the current and future status of his body. In the medical discourse, ideas around transition are usually incredibly strict. This discourse originates from the beginning of medical transitions in the 1960s and 1970s, where being diagnosed with gender dysphoria was necessary in order to be eligible for medical procedures. These procedures contained a set trajectory, which had the aim for an individual to literally end up as 'opposite gender'<sup>16</sup>.

Though these practices are in the past,<sup>17</sup> the idea mentioned above of a binary transition that consists of a set trajectory is still prevalent in Dutch society. The assumption that there might not be a next step after this revelation, so in other words that there will be no medical trajectory, opens up a space for Samuel in which he can openly dream of different futures. He does this by first admitting that this has been the first time he has actually allowed himself to be himself in terms of gender, and then goes on to imply that the possibilities are endless. In a year's time, he could have grown out his hair, or he could be seen sporting a beard. This almost utopian thought touches upon both Halberstam's concept of trans\* as well as Stone's definition of intertextuality and reading oneself aloud. This moment, however, is short-lived, or maybe not even being lived out to its full potential, since Samuel is cut off by Robert ten Brink<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Because of this strict trajectory, trans\* individuals that only wanted part of the procedures lied about their condition in order to get accepted into the trajectory. Once they have got to the part where they were satisfied, they stopped showing up at the gender clinic (Gooren in de Jong 134).

<sup>17</sup> The VUmc gender clinic now has a personal approach for its incoming patients, with tailor-made trajectories that may or may not include HTR or surgeries.

<sup>18</sup> Robert ten Brink is a Dutch television host, most famous for his show *All You Need Is Love*. His rise to national fame however started by hosting talent shows, one of which was the so-called *De*

11:13 [SAMUEL] [...] It could also be that in two years-  
11:24 [TEN BRINK] [interrupting Mounir Samuel] -No, you won't.  
11:25 [SAMUEL] - year -  
11:26 [TEN BRINK] - Don't do it. [silence, some soft laughter from the audience]  
11:27 [SAMUEL] What do you mean 'don't do it?'  
11:28 [TEN BRINK] Well that won't suit you, but- [some audience members start laughing harder than before]

#### *Transcript 1.4*

In this sequence, Ten Brink adopts the role of the agony aunt, by giving out unsolicited advice on Samuel's appearance. Judging from the reactions of the studio audience, he seems to be saying way others were thinking. It puts Samuel in a **trap**, though a distinctly different one than the one the narrative put him in. Whereas the narrative of the talk show seems to acknowledge Samuel's gender identity as that of a binary trans man, Ten Brink comments backfire this. By commenting on his appearance, reacting especially to the possibility of Samuel ending up with characteristics that are typically associated as masculine, it is made clear that Ten Brink does not actually see Samuel as anything other than a woman. Samuel also notes this tendency and decides to discuss what presenting in a way that was seen as feminine by many in Dutch media has felt like.

11:33 [SAMUEL] My biggest issue is that as a woman, especially as a woman in media, you are always made into an object, an aesthetically pleasing object that has to live up to all these expectations because that is seen as 'pretty' [air quotes]. So a woman has to be sexy, but not too sexy, or she's a slut. A woman has to be attractive, but not too attractive because that would make her shallow.

#### *Transcript 1.5*

Shortly after that, Jinek defends Ten Brink by telling Samuel he is free to do whatever he wants. Jinek senses that the topic discussed here, namely, objectification of women in

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*Travestie Show* (1995-1997) in which drag queens competed in lip-sync performances (which at the time was also a popular format for the not drag queen based *De Soundmix Show*)

media, is too far derived from the original narrative intended for this segment. She also tunes back to Samuel, telling him he 'should not feel offended by Ten Brinks words, because she (Jinek) of all people should know what it feels like when people have an opinion about your appearance. This statement definitively closes the **trapdoor** that allowed Samuel to speak about his gender identity without having to comply with the set narrative.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how talk show conventions combined with the still prevalent medical discourse regarding trans\*ness in Dutch society make for a representation that does not give Mounir Samuel the freedom to be himself. These artificial 'conversations' with set roles for both the interviewer and interviewee do not allow for the openness that is needed to accurately portray trans\* identities. The medical discourse can thrive in this context because of these strict conventions, along with the fact that the widespread sentiments considering a specific topic plays a huge role in the narrative Samuel is **trapped** in. Nevertheless, Samuel finds spaces in which he can get his message across. In the instances where the identitarian and medical discourse clash, **trapdoors** open themselves, allowing for new interpretations to questions asked. Unfortunately, these moments are short-lived.

It can be argued that Samuel's television appearance was slightly ahead of the curve since widespread debate around gender inclusivity did not spark in the Netherlands until two years after this interview was broadcast. The next chapter will discuss how the media representation has evolved between 2015 and 2017, emphasising on the documentary *Genderbende*.



### 3. *Genderbende*: (Trap)doors in Documentary Film

Mounir Samuel's coming out interview gets a follow up one year later. In 2016 he appeared on the interview show *24 uur met...* (VPRO 2008-2016), in which a guest spends 24 hours being interviewed in a television studio turned studio apartment. In this follow-up, his upbringing and the current relationship with his family are discussed. In 2017, Samuel participates in the docuseries *Geslacht!* (BNNVARA 2017). In this series, musician and television personality Rianne van Dorst investigates the concept of gender in Dutch society. Van Dorst gained national attention in 2015 with her participation in the celebrity survival program *Expeditie Robinson* (RTL5 2000-). She once again became the centre of attention by coming out as intersex during the first episode. Apart from the sensationalist reports on van Dorst's coming out, the series did open up a conversation on the limits and possibilities of gender in Dutch media. A week after the first episode of *Geslacht!* was aired, the KRO-NCRV show *Hij is een Zij* (2014-), a show that had previously only been focussed on the medical transition of trans people, debuted with Mik, the first openly agender person to ever appear on Dutch television. In many ways, current discussion on gender inclusivity reached a peak in 2017. Questions surrounding gender-inclusive language and gender-neutral restrooms sparked national controversy (NOS.nl 28-07-2017). These developments also meant that the focus was not just on binary trans\* individuals, but more so on individuals that identify as non-binary (NOS.nl 28-07-2017). In the same year, the documentary *Genderbende* also increased the visibility of trans\* individuals in Dutch media.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate the ways in which the documentary both opens **doors** and places **trap(doors)** and how these decisions shape the representation of trans\* individuals in the documentary. First, we will have a look at the way documentary conventions allow for a freedom in which the trans\* subject can be better represented than in the aforementioned talk show format. Next, we will have a look at the specific **doors**, **traps** and **trapdoors** placed throughout *Genderbende* and with what consequences for the representation. Then, we will see how all these things add up to a particular form of (self-)representation through examples regarding how the lack of experts means that the protagonists themselves are the experts over their own experiences. Lastly, I will argue how this specific mode of representation has more to offer than both gender nihilism and the binary discourse in regards to gender that is still hugely (over)represented in today's Western society<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> See chapter one for a more in depth definition of gender nihilism and the gender binary

## **On *Genderbende***

*Genderbende* (HALAL and BNNVARA, 2017) is a documentary by Sophie Dros about “five young people who feel neither male or female, but rather position themselves somewhere in between [the gender binary].” The documentary does a great job at showing the multiplicity of a lived trans\* experience<sup>20</sup> through the eyes of five protagonists. We meet them in both the most private and public spaces, from their living rooms and bedrooms to nail stylists and hairdressers. The film switches between talking heads of the protagonists, situations in their daily lives (mostly regarding their gender expression) as well as scenes that show us the way the protagonists relate to the gender binary imposed upon them by society. Dros has stated that she aimed to make a film about “the acceptance of yourself and others” (BNNVARA 24-05-2017) that would spark a conversation on the topic of identity.

## **Talk Show Television Versus Documentary Film**

Talk shows and documentary films are two very different media genres. In some aspects, they can almost be seen as polar opposites. The first one is clearly defined by strict rules and convention, while the latter is way more flexible and open to experimentation. The fact that the two are so different also leads to widely varying representations of trans\*ness or any other topic for that matter, is only logical. There are, however, also similarities between the two genres, especially in terms of representation. I will first reiterate the aforementioned talk show conventions as well as give a quick overview of conventions in documentary film and apply these to *Genderbende* specifically. Lastly, I will argue how both media texts can work in similar ways in terms of the role of the expert.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, talk show interviews are highly scripted interactions rather than actual conversations. Both the interviewer and interviewee are expected to follow set rules, greatly influencing the course of the interaction. Interviewers are seen as a neutral voice and a representative of both the show itself as well as the audience. They lay out the narrative for the interview, forcing the interviewee into a mould they can only fight themselves out of. The interviewees are present as the embodiment of a certain standpoint unless the subject is an ‘ordinary’ person without any previous fame or social status. In this case, they only serve as an example of lived experience that has to be contextualised by an external expert.

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<sup>20</sup> The documentary itself does not use the term trans\*, but hints at terms like ‘gender fluidity’ in order to capture the ‘inbetweenness’ or ‘outsideness’ the protagonists experience in regards to their gender. All the ways gender is portrayed all fit into Halberstam’s concept of trans\*, which is why I opted to use it throughout this chapter. Also see chapter 1

Documentaries are not limited to this same strict conventions and high stakes power dynamics. One could even argue that there are hardly any defining conventions to speak of. The lines between fiction and documentary film are extremely blurry (Eitzen 81). The term documentary was first coined by John Grierson in the 1920s and defined it as 'the creative treatment of actuality'<sup>21</sup> (Pramaggiore, Wallis 249). Some filmmakers, like those in the *cinéma vérité* movement, strive for an objective portrayal of reality. However, filmmakers affect the outcome of their documentary throughout the entire process: from picking a subject matter and angle from which to approach it to productional decisions and the editing process. Apart from conscious decisions, the presence of a filmmaker with a camera might also affect the subject's behaviour and thus the overall outcome of the film. The ideal of the documentary as an unmediated portrayal of reality is thus never actually realized (249). Since showing a universal objective world (if you even consider there to be one) is not an option, documentary filmmakers are left with the need to prove the truthfulness of the argument the film is making about the world. Dirk Eitzen argues that "all documentaries [...] revolve around questions of trust." What differs a fiction film from a documentary is that in the case of the latter one could ask "Might it be lying?" (Eitzen 1995 81).

Because the borders of the term documentary have become very unclear, stylistic choices do not define something as a documentary<sup>22</sup>. There are, however, conventions in terms of the strategies utilised in documentaries in order to prove it is making a sound argument and are not lying to the audience.

According to Pramaggiore and Wallis, here are four of these rhetorical strategies commonly used by documentary filmmakers in order to convey an argument<sup>23</sup>. The first strategy, the voice of authority, combines a voice-over with visual evidence to prove a certain argument. Here, one should always be wary that the voice-over derives their authority from their expertise about the subject or their convincing tone of voice. (Pramaggiore, Wallis 2005 251) *Genderbende* does not make use of a voice of authority. Instead, the authority is placed in the hands of the protagonists, which results in great multiplicity within the documentary without shying away from paradoxes.

Secondly, the talking heads documentary relies on "verbal testimonies from individuals affected or interested in the subject matter" (252). Often static medium wide to close up shots of the people in question are used to not only to legitimise a testimony but also to allow for identification with the individuals in question. *Genderbende* utilises this

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<sup>21</sup> There is a debate on the exact meaning of the term documentary, for more on this please see Eitzen's 'When is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception'

<sup>22</sup> This didn't use to be the case in the 1960s and 1970s, when there still were stylistic conventions in place (Nichols 53)

<sup>23</sup> This is one of the many ways of categorise strategies utilised in documentary film

strategy as a way to portray the verbal testimonies of the protagonists on their personal definition(s) of gender. These scenes are strung together in a way that can be complementary or contradicting, again emphasising the multiplicity the film is trying to convey.

Thirdly, there is the previously mentioned genre of direct cinema or *cinéma vérité* in which striving for the ideal mode of documentary filmmaking, showing an 'unmediated' version of the real world. The audience is pushed into a role of an observant through long takes and static shots, without there being a voice-over present to interpret the events happening on screen. In this case, the documentary makes use of more observational shots, which show the protagonists in their daily lives and capturing the interactions they have with others that also end up touching upon their gender identity. Most of these activities have to do with self-expression through visiting beauty salon but also through body modifications. The viewer is present during Dennis hair salon visit as well as at the moment where Lisa and Anne give each other tattoos with a tattoo gun in one of their bedrooms. These forms of self-expression of gender are in line with the discourse regarding trans\*ness as a self-chosen social identity.

Lastly, documentaries utilising self-reflexivity include the process of making the film as part of the subject matter in order to paint a more realistic picture of the film. These documentaries "challenge audiences to reconsider the relationship between documentary images and reality" (255). In other words, these documentaries ask the viewer to reevaluate what is real and what is scripted or artificial and what these terms mean in a mediated world. This is not a strategy used in the case of *Genderbende*.

Apart from the combination of talking heads and direct cinema, *Genderbende* also makes use of two kinds of highly stylised cutscenes<sup>24</sup>. The first kind features static shots of stereotypical feminine and masculine objects, such as bathroom stall **doors** accompanied by choral singing. According to Dros, this emphasises the perceived binary in society, because of the religious connotations with choirs and the fact that choirs are generally divided by binary gender (i-D 18-05-2017). The other cutscenes also highlight the gender binary imposed on the protagonists by society by forcing them to put themselves on a binary scale. This particular cutscene is also the most notable **trap(door)** and will be discussed below.

There are significant differences between the genres of talk show television and documentary. While talk show segments ask for highly conventionalised and scripted

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<sup>24</sup> A term borrowed from video games, describing "a short scene in a video game, which the player cannot control, and which usually develops the story." (Oxford Dictionary) In the context of this documentary however, cut cutscenes step outside of the narrative of the film, instead of the gameplay.

settings, where every rule bent or broken results in an unsatisfactory end result, documentaries are allowed almost the biggest kind of freedom imaginable within a genre. The only thing documentaries are committed to is to convey the truth, or at the very least, convince the audience that they are not lying. Interactions in talk shows seem more focussed on who wins and who loses a debate instead of building towards a greater understanding of a certain topic. There is, however, a great similarity in the way both talk shows and documentaries deal with representation. Just like in talk shows, documentaries are a commonplace for experts to make their appearance in order to contextualise or give depth to the topic in question.

### **Analysis: Opening Doors to Trans\* Futures**

Just like in the talk show interview discussed in the previous chapter, the **door** in *Genderbende* first and foremost grants visibility. On the one hand, it enables the five protagonists to be open about their experiences with gender. On the other hand, an audience that would not encounter these stories gets the chance to learn about the trans\* experience from first-hand testimonies.

The documentary goes a step further than solely making the trans\* protagonists visible. They become the expert over their own experiences. As mentioned previously, external experts are a commonly used tool in both talk show television and documentary film in order to contextualise statements made by 'ordinary' or lay people. The fact that the protagonists become experts over their own experiences mirrors the shift in the discourse surrounding trans\* identification from a medical discourse to one where trans\*ness becomes a social identity. The idea that being trans\* is a medical condition that needs to be diagnosed and 'cured' with both medical and psychological treatment is losing traction in favour of a narrative where gender becomes an identity similar to one's sexual orientation. Being trans\* is no longer a problem but rather something to be celebrated or at the very least accepted (Halberstam 19).

The **door** to expertise that opens up leads to two different pathways. Firstly, there is the protagonist as the expert discussing their gender identity and terminology within the framework of the documentary, educating the audience. Secondly, this same control is also seen that portray scenes in the daily lives of the protagonists. The protagonists shape both the narrative of the documentary, as well as the narrative of their gender in real life. Instead of laying out a narrative on trans\*ness from a place of authority and fitting the stories of the protagonists into said narrative, the documentary openly explores what it means to be trans\*

by comparing and contrasting the protagonists own experiences and perspectives. Towards the beginning of the film, the protagonists are asked how they define the term gender<sup>25</sup>:

- 9:50 [SELM] Gender... well gender is a very complex notion.
- 9:52 [ANNE] Sex! Right?
- [LISA] Well, gender, see, if you look at the concept itself-
- [ANNE] Sex!
- [LISA] -then it's just sex. So gender...
- [ANNE] Gender, what's the sex?
- 10:00 [DENNIS] There's definitely a difference between sex and gender, but they are closely related to one another.
- 10:05 [LASHAWN] The physical, you know, the biological aspect of it is now known to us. Man, woman and transgender. And this mental aspect, that's something new.
- 10:14 [SELM] The way a person is feeling, in terms of gender.
- 10:18 [ANNE] \*snaps fingers\* What was it about that interview again? That mentioned gender, it said 'genderfluid'. So I think it is-
- [ANNE+LISA] \*in unison\* Man and woman.
- [LISA] Man and woman.
- 10:24 [DENNIS] I know well, hm... I don't know whether I have a gender.

### *Transcript 2.1*

In this segment, the protagonists voice statements about the way they define gender both as a general concept and in relation to themselves. If one were to take the entire segment as one coherent definition, many contradictions immediately raise to the surface. Is gender the same as sex like Anne and Lisa proclaim, or are they two different concepts like Dennis and Lashawn argue? Also, is the category of gender limited to the binary of man and woman, or are there other options like the term genderfluid? Is it possible to not have a gender, like Dennis states? Is it a feeling, a 'mental aspect' of your identity or is it something physical? According to the protagonists combined, it is all these statements are true. The fact that this leads to obvious paradoxes is not necessarily problematic, especially when the aim is to disrupt a binary approach to gender. Aidan Rowe voices a similar point:

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that because of the multiplicity that the documentary enables, there are also more outdated ideas or concepts explained by the protagonists. These definitions can also be contradictory with the glossary

"The various forms of gender identity in the world are mutually incoherent, and in some cases, mutually cancelling. This should not be seen as a problem, rather we should seek to understand the ways that a variety of mutually incompatible forms of gender dissidence each open up their own spaces of freedom and effect their own disruptions of the gender regime. (...) but provisionally we can say that all genders are in some sense impossible" (Rowe 342 - 343, footnote 2).

Gender identities can be mutually incoherent since they not only state something about someone's preferred mode of identification but also about what gender is and what other genders can and cannot exist within this definition. In this sense, the concepts of, e.g. men and genderfluid as categories of gender cannot exist at the same time since the first category exists within a binary framework in which gender is static. The term genderfluid, on the other hand, presumes that gender has the possibility of fluctuation and thus cannot be something fixed. The fact that the existence of mutually exclusive genders can however also be interpreted as a disruptive force, opening up a **door** to endless modes of gendered embodiment.

The second **door** opens when the protagonists are seen in their daily lives, having conversations surrounding their gender identity where they are in full control. An example of this is the scene where Lashawn visits a nail salon. After the nail technician asks why they came to do their nails, Lashawn starts to explain the basics of gender theory as they understand it and how their identity as a genderqueer person fits into that. Halfway through their conversation, the nail technician is interrupted by an important phone call ("Suriname's calling and when they do, they won't hang up"). Instead of ending the conversation with Lashawn, she decides to involve her calling niece into the conversation by attempting to explain Lashawn's gender identity to her. The nail technician seems to be glad to be up to date in regards to new terms around identity and promises to tell everyone about the special person they have met (while jokingly asking Lashawn to do the same in order to promote her nail salon).



Still from *Genderbende*: Lashawn in a nail salon

The hairdresser in the scene with Dennis also seems pretty receptive to the conversation about gender. At first, she only seems to be interested in Dennis' gender expression from a professional standpoint, by giving out advice on how certain haircuts might make Dennis look either more feminine or masculine.



Still from *Genderbende*: Dennis at the hairdresser



10:42 [DENNIS] I wouldn't mind if it's... if it's a haircut that can be worn both masculine and feminine.  
[...]

11:05 [HAIRDRESSER] [...] you can indeed opt for a fringe, ehm, that does make it somewhat more feminine.

11:14 [DENNIS] Yeah, I wouldn't mind that.

11:15 [HAIRDRESSER] And anyway, the cut will be somewhat feminine. It will be layered, which is also more feminine.

11:19 [DENNIS] Yes, but that's of course already the case with long hair.

11:22 [HAIRDRESSER] True, but you don't mind.

11:23 [DENNIS] No, no, I do not mind at all. Quite the opposite, really.

### *Transcript 2.2*

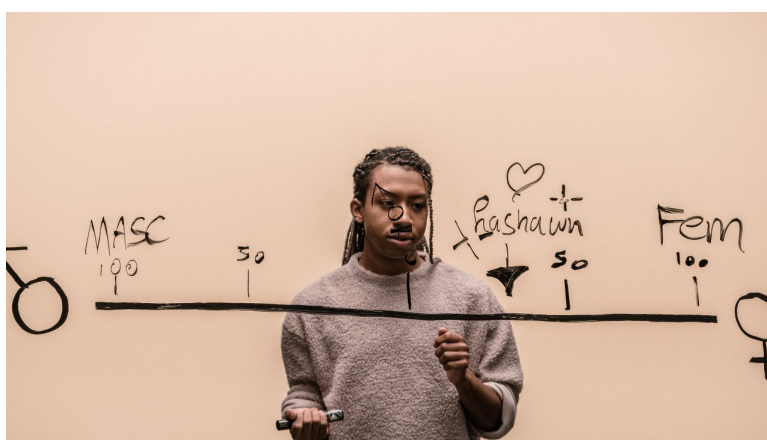
Then, the conversation shifts to the conversation of Dennis' childhood and his experiences with gender from an early age. Just like the nail technician in the scene with Lashawn, the hairdresser seems open to a conversation. These examples help imagine a space for conversation about different modes of gender identities with people who might not be knowledgeable about the subject. The fact that the trans\* protagonists are the ones introducing the people in question to these terms seems to give them a sense of control over the situation, giving them the space to fully shape their identity without restrictive diagnoses or characteristics put upon them by the medical world or academia.

Apart from these **doors**, that open up opportunities that are far greater than in the *Jinek* interview, there are also **trap(door)s** in place. The most clear example of this are the cutscenes where the protagonists are asked to place themselves on a scale from masculine to feminine. The protagonists are placed into a beige setting and dressed in similar coloured clothing resembling Kanye West's fashion brand Yeezy, that is known for androgynous layered clothing in muted neutral colours and their unisex fashion shows.



Left: promotional photo *Genderbende* (2017). Right: YEEZY SEASON 2 fashion show (2016)

The protagonists are filmed individually<sup>26</sup> standing behind a glass panel with a line between the symbols for mars and venus drawn on. They are handed a marker and are asked to place themselves somewhere on a scale between masculine (♂) and feminine (♀). This question can be seen as a **trap** that society sets up for anyone daring to question or reject the gender binary. The set up, however, allows for negotiation of the question, opening a **(trap)door** to a new space where questions about identification emerge.



Still from *Genderbende*: Lashawn reinterpreting and placing himself on the imposed scale from masculine to feminine

Each of the protagonists negotiate this question differently. Lashawn tries to make gender more quantifiable by adding more points of reference with percentages as a guideline when deciding where they should place themselves. Selm opt to draw a big cloud, hovering neatly over the centre of the line. Anne and Lisa are shown at the end of a discussion, at that point having added the trans symbol<sup>27</sup>, decide that no symbol is satisfactory and end up crossing them out.

These different examples show how the protagonists all have different ways of interpreting the question and coming to an answer that they find satisfying. This also includes straight up rejecting the question (and at the same time the gender binary), like Anne and Lisa end up deciding upon. In this reading, the question becomes much less about

<sup>26</sup> Anne and Lisa are portrayed together, which suggest the lack of agency the two individually supposedly have since they are twins. This critique is, however, outside of the scope of this research

<sup>27</sup> The trans symbol (♁) is a combination of the venus and mars symbol

the desire of the documentary for the protagonists to 'reveal their true selves' and more on the way trans\* individuals are living (and surviving) in a world that demands for everything to be contained within neat binaries.

## **Conclusion**

In short, the film takes a lot of the freedoms that come with making a documentary, which in this case results in a representation of trans\*ness that is different from other representations of trans\* (binary or not) individuals within Dutch media. There is no one to talk over or contextualise the statements by the protagonists. Instead, we see the 'conversation' of gender happening between the five through talking head shots, complemented by observational shots that show the protagonists having a great deal of control over the way they present themselves to others. While, unfortunately, still being very reliant on the gender binary, the film does show that even people without extensive knowledge on trans\*ness are still open and mostly, without judgement. This proves that labels are not just shackles, especially when the person identifying with a certain label is the one to explain the rules of the game to someone who is unfamiliar with it. It also shows the importance of having the freedom to both accept and reject labels, while also acknowledging there are still real systems of power in place that rely on a gender binary.

Though it is almost impossible to speak about these topics in terms of linear progress, there is definitely a lot of progress between the 2015 Mounir Samuel interview from the previous chapter and *Genderbende*, released only two years later. The film was among one of the first (also acknowledging the impact Ryanne van Dorst's *Geslacht!* (BNNVARA 2017) has had on the conversation on gender in the Netherlands) in the Dutch mediascape to not just define trans\*ness through a medicalised, binary discourse.

## Conclusion

So what are the reasons the two aforementioned media texts generated such widely different representations of trans\*ness? Progress is undoubtedly a factor in this. As frequently mentioned before, the debates surrounding gender in 2017 did shift the discourse a bit further away from medicalisation and towards identification, even if ever so slightly. The stories of trans\* individuals in Dutch media are still minimal, but there are at least a handful of examples to point to, which is a lot more than was the case in 2015 during the coming out of Mounir Samuel. However, time does not equate progress, so even though the increase in visibility has had positive effects, these things are also awfully easily forgotten. Like mentioned in the introduction, the mid-nineties has also known a sudden emergence of trans\* visibility that now seems to be completely wiped from our collective memory.

I also believe that intention plays a role in the outcome of both media texts. The segment on Jinek never seemed to have the aim to broadcast an in-depth interview, whereas *Genderbende* was far more committed to representing trans\*ness in a way that is understandable for a broad audience, without becoming superficial or sensational.

However, I think conventional differences between talk show television and documentary film can be ascribed to some of the most significant differences in representation. The main reason for this is that in both cases, the question of who can be in power is answered differently. In talk show television, the host has the first initiative and thus control over the narrative. If the power is not in the hands of the host, it is in those of experts, contextualising events and the statements of lay people if necessary. Ordinary people themselves are thus never the ones in control of their own narrative.

Documentary film, on the other hand, is granted a lot more freedom due to a lack of stylistic conventions. Though this freedom does not mean that every representation in documentary film is more progressive or free of normative assumptions than talk show segments, this freedom is required in order to showcase lived experiences that are not reinforcing normative discourses.

Allowing trans\* individuals to be in complete control over their gender identity in the way they express themselves, what how terminology is interpreted and how it applies to them allows them to disrupt the normative gender binary, but without having to dismiss the concept of gender as a potentially crucial aspect of one's identity. With the current rise of right-wing, conservative and gender critical discourses this might seem like a utopian concept, but the one on one interactions as showcased in *Genderbende* proves that people

are far more willing to learn about all different kinds of lived experiences in smaller settings, where trans\* individuals can be human first and a gendered embodiment second.

Where will this lead us in the future? Like mentioned in the last chapter, I do believe that there can be great potentiality in self-identification with broader terms. The discourse shift mentioned in this thesis proves that labels are not just put upon people against their will (though especially more restrictive and normative labels are the sites of violence), but that these labels can also be a way of navigating oneself in a world that is made up of language.

Inhabiting broader labels or umbrella terms allows for individuals to have a sense of community and solidarity while at the same time, not being restrictive through clear cut definitions and requirements. These terms allow for different kinds of interpretations, that might even be mutually exclusive or paradoxical yet highly personal. These paradoxes can function as a way to disrupt the gender binary and current normative discourses surrounding gender as a whole, and not just trans\*ness.

I want to highlight the importance of a sense of community specifically. Whether it is in online spheres on forums or through blogs or in real life through support groups or other forms of coming together in real life, relating to and supporting others should be of the highest priority. Real life examples of this can be found in the 2QT support group hosted in bookshop Savannah's Bay, as well as the Amsterdam TranScreen film festival.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The conducted research does not encompass all the facets of the trans\* experience or all accounts of the trans\* community as a whole. Apart from having narrowed down my research to focus on Dutch media in the mid-2010s representing trans\* individuals that do not comply with the gender binary, there are still aspects within these parameters that also need to be analysed and discussed within an academic context. It is important to note that the discourse analysis is conducted on the level of the media texts' narrative. There is still a lot unsaid about these discourses from within trans\* or queer/LGBTIAQ+ communities at large. The fact that the discourse treating being trans\* as a social identity is gaining more traction does not mean that there are no (binary) trans\* individuals that do identify more with a more medical discourse that emphasises on diagnosis rather than self-identification and focussed on treatment through medical procedures. However, since these communities are rather niche, this kind of research would not be the right fit for the kind of media analysis conducted. This kind of topics could, for example, be analysed by looking at online communities on websites with trans\* communities such as Tumblr.com.

## **Glossary**

This glossary was part of my research at IHLIA LGBT Heritage. The definitions are lifted from media guidelines by trans\* and other LGBTIAQ+ and feminist organizations.<sup>28</sup> Apart from more general definitions, I also added more academic concepts used in this thesis by the scholars that have coined them. Lastly, it is important to note that since both the relative short period trans(\*) subjects have been apparent in both mainstream media as well as academia and the ever changing character of language itself, definitions are always undergoing changes and the definitions sketched here might seem outdated in the years after publication. Dutch translations are added where applicable/needed.

### **Cisgender**

From the latin prefix 'cis-', meaning 'on the same side as', cisgender is the antonym of transgender. Refers to people whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned to them at birth. A synonym for non-transgender people.

### **Gender**

Traditionally refers to the social, cultural and psychological constructs of femininity and masculinity that make up the gender binary. One's gender (identity) can also come from the negotiation or rejection of these constructs.

### **Gender binary**

Points towards the gender binary as we know it in current Western society, in which humankind (as well as effectively all other forms of life on earth) are divided in male and female constructs. Natural deviations from this norm are artificially 'corrected' (see: intersex people who are subjected to operations and hormones from birth, the binary framing of transgender individuals, viewing people who lack primary or secondary sex characteristics associated with their assigned binary gender as 'broken'). The gender binary is at the very core of Western society, making it nearly impossible to think outside of it (non-binary/trans\*/genderqueer all depart from how they differ from binary genders)

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<sup>28</sup> Consulted organisations are: Transgender Netwerk Nederland (TNN), Transgender Europe (TGEU), The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Human Rights Campaign (HRC) en Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) and Atria Institute on gender equality and women's history.

**Gender expression (*Dutch: genderexpressie*)**

Refers to the external manifestations of one's gender through language, (a person's name and pronouns) appearance (clothing, haircut, body modifications, etc.) and/or other body characteristics (e.g. body hair, voice). All these manifestations are grouped into 'feminine' or 'masculine', though what is considered masculine or feminine can vary widely over time and by culture.

**Gender identity (*Dutch: genderidentiteit*)**

A person's inner sense of their gender, that can both be the same as or differ from their gender assigned at birth. Unlike gender expression, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

**Gender nihilism (*Dutch: gender nihilisme*)**

As defined by Alyson Escalante in *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto* as a concept influenced by Foucault and Butler aiming for the complete destruction of gender. Gender nihilism is rooted in antihumanism (the rejection of essentialism), gender abolition and radical negativity (the move away from any sort of knowable or intelligible future) (Escalante 308). The claim that gender is not rooted in a 'true self', but only as a power dynamic, which only aimed to normalize and punish.

**Genderfluid**

A person who does not identify with a fixed gender, but instead experiences their gender identity as something that can fluctuate or change over time (Oxford English Dictionary).

**Genderqueer**

A term used by people who do not identify as either a man or a woman, but rather something in between or outside the binary categories of gender. A vernacular term meant to use to self-identify, not related to psychological or medical discourse surrounding gender.

Can be a synonym for non-binary, though it can also be defined as a specific gender identity. One might choose to label themselves as genderqueer but not as non-binary (or the other way around).

### **Non-binary (*Dutch: non-binair*)**

A term used by people who do not identify as either a man or a woman, but rather something in between or outside the binary categories of gender. A vernacular term meant to use to self-identify, not related to psychological or medical discourse surrounding gender.

Can be a synonym for genderqueer, though it can also be defined as a specific gender identity. One might choose to label themselves as non-binary but not as genderqueer (or the other way around).

### **Sex (*Dutch: geslacht*)**

The division of humankind in male and female based on chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics. At birth though, this distinction is made purely based on the external anatomy of the newborn. Some trans individuals make use of the terms **amab** (assigned male at birth) and **afab** (assigned female at birth), though disclosing this extremely personal information should never be expected.

### **Trans(gender)**

An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity differs from the one assigned to them at birth. Non binary and genderqueer individuals are technically part of this definition, but in daily use the term mostly refers to **binary trans(gender) people**, e.g. women who were assigned male at birth and vice versa.

### **Trans\***

is a concept coined by Jack Halberstam, marking “a politics based on a general instability of identity and oriented toward social transformation, not political accommodation.” It “ signals the insufficiency of current classificatory systems”, without aiming for more (precise) terms to describe bodily identity “but rather to think in new and different ways about what it means to claim a body.” (Halberstam 2018 50)

### **Transgenderist**

An outdated Dutch term for what we now call non-binary or genderqueer that gained traction in the 1990s. A transgenderist is defined as a person who “feels like they stand in between the two [binary] sexes, like they are a man as well as a woman or like the categories of sex or gender are not applicable to them at all.” (de Jong 11)



**Transition (*Dutch: transitie*)**

The process by which trans individuals strive to more closely align to their gender identity through their gender expression, a social transition (changing one's name and/or pronouns) and/or a medical transition (like gender affirmative surgeries and/or hormone replacement treatment). The process of a transition is highly personalised and can vary from one person to another. There is no 'wrong' or 'right' way or order to transition.

**Transsexual (*Dutch: transseksueel*)**

An outdated term originated in the medical and psychological field, describing people who seek to change their bodies through medical interventions. The term is no longer widely used because of the attached stigma of transness as a mental illness, the focus on medical procedures and the possible confusion with sexual orientation. However, some people may self-identify as transsexual.

## Appendix

### Transcripts *Jinek*

#### *Transcript 1.1*

0:08 [JINEK] Middenoosten-deskundige Monique Samuel wil verder leven als man. Voor het eerst háár verhaal.

#### *Transcript 1.2*

13:31 [SAMUEL] “[...] Ik voelde twee kloven: de kloof van wie ik denk dat ik ben, hoe ik mezelf zie en hoe ik er dan in mijn uiterlijke vertoning uit zie. Dus je kijkt in de spiegel en je herkent jezelf letterlijk niet. En dan vervolgens de persoon wie je diep van binnen bent en wat je dan bijvoorbeeld in de media ziet en dat je denkt ‘Ja, super interessante vrouw die Monique Samuel, maar wie is zij in vredesnaam?’ Ik kon me zo niet met haar identificeren en die kloof werd steeds groter.”

#### *Transcript 1.3*

10:57 [JINEK] Dat was een van de stappen. Is dit dan, eh, de laatste stap, zou je zeggen?

11:02 [SAMUEL] Kijk, het leven is een reis. Als ik nu mijn laatste stap heb bereikt op mijn 25e dan heb ik een saai leven vanaf nu.

11:09 [JINEK] -Zeker, maar als het gaat om hoe je je voelt als het gaat om je geslacht, zal ik maar zeggen.

11:13 [SAMUEL] Eh nee, dat is eigenlijk nu pas het begin, want ik ben nu pas voor het eerst ruimte aan het geven aan wat ik diep van binnen voel. Dus ehm, het kan zijn dat ik hier over twee jaar met een baard zit. Het kan zijn dat ik over twee-

#### *Transcript 1.4*

- 11:13 [SAMUEL] [...] Het kan zijn dat ik over twee-
- 11:24 [TEN BRINK] [onderbreekt Mounir Samuel] -Nee hoor.
- 11:25 [SAMUEL] - jaar -
- 11:26 [TEN BRINK] - Niet doen. [stilte aan tafel, publiek lacht zachtjes]
- 11:27 [SAMUEL] Hoezo niet doen?
- 11:28 [TEN BRINK] Nou dat staat je niet, maar- [enkele mensen in het publiek lachen, harder nu]

#### *Transcript 1.5*

- 11:33 [SAMUEL] Mijn grootste probleem is dus dat als vrouw, en als vrouw in de media, je constant een object wordt gemaakt, een mooi object dat moet voldoen aan allerlei eisen want dat is 'mooi'. Dus een vrouw moet sexy zijn, maar niet te sexy, want dan is ze een slet. Een vrouw moet aantrekkelijk zijn, maar niet te aantrekkelijk want dan is ze oppervlakkig.

## Transcripts *Genderbende*

### *Transcript 2.1*

- 9:50 [SELM] Gender... ja gender is een heel complex begrip.
- 9:52 [ANNE] Geslacht! Toch?
- [LISA] Ja, gender, kijk, als je het kijkt naar het begrip van zichzelf-
- [ANNE] Geslacht!
- [LISA] -dan is het geslacht gewoon. Dus gender...
- [ANNE] Gender, wat is het geslacht?
- 10:00 [DENNIS] Er is sowieso een verschil tussen geslacht en gender, maar het heeft wel heel nauw met elkaar te maken.
- 10:05 [LASHAWN] Het fysieke, weet je, het biologische dat is nu bij ons bekend. Man, vrouw en transgender. En dat mentale, dat is dan weer iets nieuws.
- 10:14 [SELM] Hoe een mens zich gendergewijs voelt.
- 10:18 [ANNE] \*knipt in vingers\* Wat was nou dat interview? Daar stond gender bij, dat er stond 'genderfluid'. Dus ik denk dat het-
- [ANNE+LISA] \*in koor\* Man en vrouw.
- [LISA] Man en vrouw.
- 10:24 [DENNIS] Ik weet ja, hm... Ik weet niet of ik een gender heb.

### *Transcript 2.2*

- 10:42 [DENNIS] Ik vind het opzich niet erg als het een.. als het een kapsel is dat een beetje mannelijk en vrouwelijk kan.
- [...]
- 11:05 [HAIRDRESSER] [...] je kan inderdaad voor een pony gaan, ehm, blijft wel iets vrouwelijker.
- 11:14 [DENNIS] Ja, dat vind ik niet erg.
- 11:15 [HAIRDRESSER] Sowieso, je model is wat vrouwelijker. Straks in laagjes, is ook wat vrouwelijker.
- 11:19 [DENNIS] Ja, maar dat is met lang haar in principe ook al toch.
- 11:22 [HAIRDRESSER] Ja, maar dat vind je niet erg.
- 11:23 [DENNIS] Nee, nee, dat vind ik juist niet erg. Helemaal niet.

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