***Boy Meets Girl*** *(2014)*

**Film background:** *Boy Meets Girl* was released in 2014. It was written and directed by Eric Schaeffer, who is a cisgender man. Schaeffer was adamant that the role of Ricky go to a transgender woman, explaining to Filmmaker Magazine, "Being an independent filmmaker, I had the latitude to cast a trans woman and not have to satisfy a studio (which would have ponied up a ton of money) by casting a famous cisgender man or cisgender woman, which likely they would have required. I felt it socially important that a trans woman play the trans part." Schaeffer cast Michelle Hendley, who was in cosmetology school and had never acted before, but who had a YouTube channel in which she spoke openly about her identity, her interests, and her transition. The film was nominated for many LGBTQ film awards, including a GLAAD Media Award.

**Plot summary:** The film follows a 20-year old transgender woman, Ricky (Michelle Hendley), who lives in Kentucky and dreams of moving to New York to become a fashion designer. chats with her best friend, Robby (Michael Welch) and expresses her frustration with dating men. Then she meets Francesca, (Alexandra Turshen), a wealthy cisgender woman who is engaged to David (Michael Galante), a cisgender man who is a Marine serving in Afghanistan. At Robby's urging, Ricky comes out as trans to Francesca; Francesca is not knowledgable about trans identity, but she is supportive. The two become friends and eventually lovers, despite Francesca's engagement. When David returns home early from Afghanistan, he is enraged by Ricky and Francesca's relationship, and it is later revealed that some of his anger stems from a past sexual encounter with Ricky, which he has kept secret. After deciding that she doesn't love Francesca, and perhaps that dating Francesca would be risky considering Francesca's conservative family's overtures, Ricky has a fight with Robby, who says cruel things to her about her identity despite his lifelong support. Ricky's younger brother, Sam (Joseph Ricci) shows Robby a video he found on her computer from seven years prior, in which she explained that her mother left the family because she didn't accept Ricky's identity, and that has led Ricky to acts of self-harm. Robby finds Ricky, and finally expresses to her that he was jealous of Francesca and he has romantic feelings for Ricky. The two begin dating. While Ricky gets rejected from a New York fashion school, Francesca and Robby start a crowdfunding campaign to help Ricky move to New York. She and Robby set off to pursue their dreams in the city, and Ricky posts the video from her childhood, which ends with an uplifting message. The film ends with a montage of many different people watching her video in support of her.

**Content warning:** *Boy Meets Girl* contains brief nudity, references to self-harm, transphobic comments, and frank discussion of sexual acts.

**Notes:**

* I’ve provided 3 clips/trailers from films mentioned by Julia Serano in Chapter 2 of *Whipping Girl.* Because the reading for Day 2’s class is short, you may want to also assign students to watch these videos before class, as it may give students a sense of the archetypes that Serano addresses in her reading.
* This week we will be reading essays from Julia Serano’s book, *Whipping Girl.* It might be worth noting for students that while many of her ideas are still highly relevant, some of her language is not widely used. For example, [GLAAD](https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender) explains about the word transsexual: “An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. Still preferred by some people who have permanently changed - or seek to change - their bodies through medical interventions, including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries.” Unlike *transgender*, *transsexual*is **not**an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word *transgender*. It is best to ask which term a person prefers. If preferred, use as an adjective: transsexual woman or transsexual man.” Similarly, while Serano’s chapter is titled “cissexual privilege,” today, most people refer to “cisgender privilege.”
* It may be worth discussing with students that this film, while notable in its casting of a trans woman actress for the lead role, was written and directed by a cisgender man. That there have been interesting critiques and debates about its representation of trans women and narrative development. If you have time, you could have students’ read different perspectives from LGBTQ media outlets like [Them](https://www.them.us/story/boy-meets-girl) and [Autostraddle](https://www.autostraddle.com/boy-meets-girl-is-heartwarming-groundbreaking-has-cute-queer-kissing-280713/) to examine some of these questions.

**Materials for this week:**

* Day 1: Trans 101 Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3ZzpTxjgRw>
* Day 2: Video clips from *The Crying Game* and *Transamerica* (Watch before class) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0qVhhIfWr4>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Z-o1RVdnHE>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9jz3uz8cqc>
* Day 2: Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity.* Seal Press, 2007. (Excerpt provided: Ch 2: "Skirt Chasers: Why The Media Depicts the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels")
* Day 3: Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity.* Seal Press, 2007. (Excerpt provided: Ch. 8: "Dismantling Cissexual Privilege")

**Lesson 1 – “Trans 101” and Close Reading:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (8 min) Watch Trans 101 video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3ZzpTxjgRw>

* *Defines key terms and concepts, such as gender, transgender, non-binary, transitioning, distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation, etc.*

1. (3 min) Jot down notes.
2. What key ideas did this video cover?
3. What questions do you have about the terms or concepts raised in the video?
4. (5 min) Discuss the questions above.
5. (15 min) Student-led scene analysis (see notes in *But I’m A Cheerleader* lesson plan and materials for details on this).
6. (3 min) Start teacher-led scene analysis with screening clip. (Closing scene - 1:34:48-1:37:30)
7. (4 min) Discussion prep.
8. How does this closing scene conclude Ricky’s story? What mood and message does it establish, and how does Schaeffer create that mood and message?

* *Symbol: A close-up shot on the rear-view mirror shows Ricky pinning Francesca’s barrette to the mirror; this could be a symbol that indicates she is bringing part of Francesca with her on the journey ahead; perhaps because of Francesca’s role in helping her raise money to fulfill her dreams. In the shot, the focus shifts from Francesca’s barrette being clipped to the mirror to Ricky glancing at herself in the mirror, perhaps indicating the connection between the two characters.*
* *Setting: After asking if she is ready, and Ricky saying, “what do you think?” sarcastically, Robby floors the engine and the pair drive off into the horizon. While this film seems to be partly focused on the fact that LGBTQ people live in places beyond New York City, this story concludes with an unsentimental and unquestioned choice to leave for the city. However, the montage that follows lingers on the setting that Robby and Ricky are leaving behind: a windy road with lush green forests, farmland, a small church with a tall steeple, a main street in a small town. Like Ricky’s glance in the rearview mirror, this montage seems to linger on Ricky’s past and setting before setting off into the future.*
* *Editing: In the montage, the first half involves fairly long cuts that intersperse 12-year-old Ricky’s video with Robby and Ricky driving, as well as introducing the small groups of people watching her video. In the second half, the shots of Robby and Ricky disappear and we only see faster-paced cuts that switch between Ricky’s 12-year-old self and the current watchers of her video. The first half of the montage emphasizes the future she is setting out for, while the second half seems to emphasize the connection and empathy the viewers are having with seeing her childhood self open up about her challenges.*
* *Theme: Presumably, this video is being posted on her YouTube channels, and the watchers be among the people who have send her money to fund her trip to New York. This suggests that people around the world, of many different backgrounds, are seeing her story and connecting with it, and seeing her as more than the object she has been treated as (by Robby, Francesca, David, and her mother) over various points of her life. For once, it seems that people are listening to her experience, her pain and watching her overcome it.*

1. (17 min) Whole class discussion. If time permits, have students share their responses with a partner before moving into discussion.
2. How does this closing scene conclude Ricky’s story? What mood and message does it establish, and how does Schaeffer create that mood and message?
3. **Extension question:** Were you satisfied with the ending of *Boy Meets Girl*? Why or why not?

**Lesson 2: Examining *Boy Meets Girl* Alongside Julia Serano’s Essay, “Skirt Chasers”**

1. (6 min) Personal reflection. Choose one question to respond to.
   1. Did you enjoy watching *Boy Meets Girl?* Why or why not?
   2. Did you relate to any of the characters in the film? Why or why not?
   3. Consider other representations of trans people that you have seen in the media (not including the other clips you watched for homework). What was similar or different about the character of Ricky, compared to other media representations you’ve seen?
2. (8 min) Discuss.
3. (5 min) Watch today’s scene – opening scene (0:00-5:08)
4. (10 min) Discussion prep.
   1. Consider the reading you did by Julia Serano. What arguments did she make?

* *The media portrays all trans people as extremely feminine trans women, although this does not capture the range of trans identities (35).*
* *Serano argues that stereotypes about trans women abound in the media because of the threat trans people pose to the “logic” of the gender binary: “The existence of transsexuals…has the potential to challenge the conventional assumption that gender differences arise from our chromosomes and genital in a simple, straightforward manner. We can wreak havoc on such taken-for-granted concepts as woman and man, homosexual and heterosexual…Because we are a threat to the categories…the images and experiences of trans people are presented in the media in a way that reaffirms, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes” (36).*
* *“Deceptive” or “pathetic” archetypes: Serano argues that media depictions of trans women typically take two forms: the “deceptive transsexual” or the “pathetic transsexual” (36).* 
  + *Serano explains that “deceivers” are exemplified by Dil, in The Crying Game, whose penis is revealed during a love scene, and her partner responds by slapping her and vomiting. Deceivers may be alluring, but they are ultimately revealed to be threatening to heterosexual manhood. The critical moment in the narrative of a deceptive transsexual plotline tends to involve a physical “reveal,” and at this moment, “the deceiver’s appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes the real identity”(37).*
  + *The “pathetic transsexual” does not “pass” as the “deceptive transsexual” does, and is therefore not considered a threat, because her failure to pass “does not seemed designed to challenge audiences’ assumptions about maleness and femaleness” (39). Instead, this trope reaffirms the distinct binary of male v. female.*
  + *Serano explains that while these two tropes seem to be in opposition, they effectively serve the same purpose: “Ultimately, both ‘deceptive’ and ‘pathetic’ transsexual characters are designed to validate the popular assumption that trans women are truly men. ‘Pathetic transsexuals’ may want to be female, but their masculine appearances and mannerisms always give them away. And while the ‘deceiver’ is initially perceived to be a ‘real’ female, she is eventually revealed as a wolf in sheep’s clothing…and she is usually punished accordingly” (40-41).*
* *Media obsession with feminization process: Serano argues that the media obsessively captures trans women putting on feminine clothing and makeup, catching them “in the act” of this process in order to highlight their femininity as an “artificial mask” (41); she cites the film Transamerica as an example of this trend. She argues that in the film, the visual references to the protagonist’s feminization process “is clearly designed to establish that Bree’s female identity is artificial and imitative, and to reduce her transition to the mere pursuit of feminine finery” (42). Serano also argues that the media presents trans women’s motives as sexually motivated (44), which aligns to the media’s broader objectification and sexualization of women’s bodies and motives (44-45).* 
  1. Consider the video clips from *The Crying Game* and *Transamerica* you watched prior to class. How did those clips illustrate Serano’s claims?
* *In the first clip from The Crying Game, Dil is presented as a sexualized object of desire (despite the undercurrent of secrecy in the comment “Listen, there’s something I should tell you). Everyone in the bar, regardless of gender, has their eyes on her. In the second clip, Dil is presented as the “deceiver:” shot from below, the shot emphasizes her bare broad shoulders and square jaw. She berates Fergus for not knowing, and when she notices she is bleeding, says she “can take” his abuse, just not on the face. After Fergus vomits, he abandons her. This film highlights the shock of “the reveal,” and the audience (in the 1990s) was expected to identify with Fergus.*
* *The Transamerica trailer highlights all the aspects of “feminization” that Serano points out: the visible foundation on her face, putting on pantyhose and nail polish, stuffing her bra, etc. Everything she wears is pink. The trailer is incredibly packed with the details of feminization in order to ensure the audience understands that she is a trans woman. Her parents’ comments that “we love you—but we don’t respect you” seems to be played for laughs. While she is not quite the “pathetic transsexual” because she does not have visibly masculine features, the trailer highlights her relentless attempts at feminization and her vulnerability in not fully “passing.”*

* 1. Consider the scene we just watched from *Boy Meets Girl,* as well as other scenes in the film. Do you think *Boy Meets Girl* resists the stereotypes that Serano critiques, or does it play into these stereotypes? Explain your response with evidence from the film and from the text.

*In general:*

* *Answers may vary, and students may critique or praise aspects of the film’s representation of trans women in various moments in the film. For example, students may critique the moment at which Ricky steps out of the water, arguing that this moment objectifies Ricky, or students may see this scene as critiquing the cinematic “reveal,” since deception is not a theme in this story, it is a moment at which Ricky herself chooses to show her body to Robby instead of being exposed, and she is met with acceptance rather than rage.*

*First scene:*

* *In the first scene, one could argue that the film plays to the audience’s expectation of a “deceptive” storyline through the first title card that young Ricky shows: “I have a past. I have secrets.” However, this secret turns out to be the reason for Ricky’s mother’s disappearance, rather than Ricky’s identity.*
* *Editing: Beginning with this flashback also highlights that this is not a story of a recent transition or a feminization process, as Transamerica is, since 12-year old Ricky is portrayed as feminine.*
* *Costume: The first scene we see of adult Ricky resists the feminization trope that Transamerica exemplifies: Ricky wears a T-shirt and flannel shirt and makes sarcastic and cutting wisecracks at Robby and Francesca throughout the scene.*
* *Dialogue: Rather than appearing to be the hyperfeminine stereotype, the dialogue and acting enables Ricky to be presented an individual in this scene, who, like many young people, is concerned about her finances and romantic life, irritated at her friend’s dating behavior, and curious about her own sexuality.*

1. (25 min) Whole group discussion. If time permits, you may want to have students share their responses with a partner prior to discussion.
   1. Consider the reading you did by Julia Serano. What arguments did she make?
   2. Consider the video clips from *The Crying Game* and *Transamerica* you watched prior to class. How did those clips illustrate Serano’s claims?
   3. Consider the scene we just watched from *Boy Meets Girl,* as well as other scenes in the film. Do you think *Boy Meets Girl* resists the stereotypes that Serano critiques, or does it play into these stereotypes? Explain your response with evidence from the film and from the text.
   4. **Extension question:** What parts of Serano’s argument resonated with you? Have you seen examples of the media portrayals she describes?
   5. **Extension question:** What parts of Serano’s argument do you have questions about?

**Lesson 3: Examining *Boy Meets Girl* Alongside Julia Serano’s Essay, “Dismantling Cissexual Privilege”**

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast:
   1. Consider *Boy Meets Girl* alongside *But I’m A Cheerleader.* In what ways are these films similar or different? (You might want to consider their subject matter, visual style, tone, genre, etc.)
   2. Do you think *Boy Meets Girl* fits the definition of a romantic comedy, as we discussed last week? Why or why not?
2. (7 min) Watch today’s clips (Ricky comes out to Francesca, 11:30-14:07; “You’re not a real anything” scene, 1:10:00-1:13:05)
3. (15 min) Study groups – students meet in groups of 3-4 to discuss the questions.
   1. Identify the key components of Serano’s argument. Choose evidence to support your claims.

* *Cissexual privilege: Serano defines this as “the double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders” (162).*
* *Gendering: Serano examines the process of “gendering,” which she defines as “assigning genders to all people based on usually just a few visual and audio cues” (163). She emphasizes that we identify people’s “perceived” gender, rather than necessarily their self-identified gender, based on their secondary sex characteristics and gender expression. She explains that becuase cisgender people have no experience being on the receiveing end of “misgendering” or “being mistakenly assigned a gender that does not match one’s identified gender,” (164) cisgender people often “mistakenly believe that the process of gendering is a matter of pure observation, rather than the act of speculation that it is” (164).*
* *Cissexual assumption: Serano explains this as when a cisgender person makes the “common, albeit mistaken, assumption that the way they experience their physical and subconscious sexes…applies to everyone else in the world. In other words, the cissexual indiscriminately projects their cissexuality onto all other people” (165). Serano compares this form of discrimination to heteronormativity, because that also involves a group with privilege assuming that their experience is universal, rather than noting the ways that cis identity is privileged and trans identity is erased or marginalized.*
* *Cissexual gender entitlement: Serano argues that cis people not only “feel entitled to call themselves a woman or a man,” they also “consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men” (166).*
* *Conditional cissexual privilege: Serano explains that trans people who are “gendered” in alignment with their identity (or who “pass,” although she critiques that term), are sometimes granted “conditional cissexual privilege,” or treated as if they were cissexual. However ,it is conditional because “it can be taken away from me (and often is) as soon as I mention, or someone discovers, that I am transsexual” (169)*
* *Trans-facsimilation: Serano explains this as “viewing or portraying transsexual genders as facsimiles of cissexual genders” (170). This often involves describing trans identity as an affectation or impersonation, while describing cis identity as genuine, inherent, and unquestioningly “real.”*
* *Serano urges avoidance of terms like “genetic” or “biological,” given the false assumptions made by the use of those terms, i.e. “we are unable to readily see other people’s sex chromosomes” (173), and that these words are “merely stand-ins for the word that people really want to use: ‘natural’” (174). She points out that the “naturalization” of privileged identities through pseudoscience has a long history in racism, classism, etc.*
* *Third gendering: She argues that using terms like FTM and MTF “reflects a conscious or unconscious desire on the part of many cissexuals to distinguish transsexual women and men from their cissexual counterparts” (175). Serano points out that some people may self-identify as a third gender, but it is important to avoid identifying someone this way without their consent.*
* *Passing: Serano critiques the word “passing,” arguing that it “implies the trans person is getting away with something” and it is steeped in cis privilege since it is never applied to cisgender people (176). She argues that passing is used in racist and classist contexts too, and the word is used “to shift the blame away from the majority group’s prejudice and toward the minority person’s presumed motives and actions” (177). She argues that while the media seems to suggest that trans people are obsessed with passing, “it has been my experience that most cissexuals are absolutely obsessed about whether transsexuals ‘pass’ or not” (178), and that cis people use a trans person’s ability to pass or not as “an excuse to deny that person the common decency of having their self-identified gender acknowledged or respected” (179). Futhermore, Serano critiques compliments that cis people give to trans people about their ability to “pass,” since these comments “praise [her] for looking cissexual-like, once again insinuating that cissexuals are inherently better than transsexuals” (179).*
* *Trans-exclusion: Serano explains this as the exclusion of trans people from spaces, organizations or events designated for the trans person’s identified gender (such as sports teams, restrooms, etc.) or “other instances where the trans person’s identified gender is dismissed” (185). Serano points out that given how much investment our culture has in correctly gendering people, “it is difficult to view trans-exclusion—i.e. the deliberate misgendering of transsexuals—as anything other than an arrogant attempt to belittle and humiliate trans people” (185).*
* *Trans-objectification: Discourse around trans people tends to obsessively focus on transition or on physical embodiment. Serano explains that “focusing almost exclusively on our physical transformation keeps transsexuals forever anchored in our assigned sex, thus turning our identified sex into a goal that we are always approaching but never truly achieve” (186).*
* *Trans-mystification: In the media, trans experiences are often represented as “a hidden secret or plot twist,” which plays up the “artificiality” of trans experiences (187). Serano explains, “in real life, when I tell people that I am a transsexual, it is common for them to dawdle over me, repeating how they can’t believe that I used to be male, as if I had just impressed them with a magic trick” (187).* 
  1. Consider the clips we just watched, or other moments in *Boy Meets Girl.* How do these scenes illustrate Serano’s claims? How do the formal elements of the scene (cinematography, editing, sound, and mise en scéne) reinforce those claims?

*Ricky comes out to Francesca:*

* *Dialogue: Francesca’s response can be seen as an example of “trans-objectification” (186) or “trans-mystification” (187) – she immediately asks about Ricky’s genitals, something that she would likely never do if she was speaking to a cis person. The scene seems to be critiquing Francesca’s interrogation, rather than normalizing it: when she asks “do you like it?”, Ricky pauses, unclear about the question and Francesca looks embarrassed. Both Ricky and Francesca use the language of “biological” and “genetic” that Serano critiques (173) – one could argue that this detail is a harmful representation, or that it is simply one person’s experience and self-description. Ricky resists the “hidden secret” narrative of “trans-mystification” (and the “deceptive transsexual” stereotype that accompanies it), explaining that she tells everyone she is friends with or romantically involved in. “I am completely comfortable with who I am,” she tells Francesca.*
* *Setting: The setting gives this scene a casual feel – both characters appear to be fairly relaxed, despite the interrogation that Francesca gives Ricky. This setting is also a significant one, as it is a space of transformation for Ricky and Robby’s relationship later in the film. Additionally, this is one of several locations in the film that reminds viewers of the rural landscape surrounding these characters, which shapes their perspectives on gender and sexuality.*
* *Cinematography: This scene is shot with both characters at eye-level, in a mix of two-shots and shot-reverse shots that are typical of dialogue scenes. The scene primarily features medium shots, in order to highlight the characters’ reactions to each others’ comments while also giving the viewer a sense of the setting.*
* *Costume/cinematography: The fact that both characters are wearing swimsuits could be seen as an illustration of the film’s resistance to objectify or sexualize trans bodies: there are no close-ups of particular body parts as we saw in the Transamerica trailer, despite the potential for intrusive and objectifying framing. Instead, this scene draws some attention to Ricky’s identity as a fashion designer who can make her own fashionable swimsuits. Despite the dialogue’s unnerving focus on genitals, the cinematography resists Francesca’s objectification.*

*“You’re not a real anything” scene:*

* *Cinematography: Unlike the scene by the water, this scene features a slightly unsteady camera that pans unsteadily between Ricky and Robby, emphasizing the Ricky’s anguish and Robby’s unpredictable and cruel comments. All the shots are close-ups, to highlight the emotional nature of this scene. Ricky’s face goes in and out of focus following the moment after Robby says “you’re not a real—” and she asks him to finish his sentence, highlighting her disorientation in that moment.*
* *Hair/Makeup: Ricky is shown with slightly out-of-place hair and mascara that increasingly runs down her face over the course of this scene. She is crying at the start of the scene because of her rejection from the school she applied to, and her makeup runs increasingly as Robby’s comments become increasingly cruel. While some students might argue that this falls into the “feminization” trope that Transamerica exemplifies, others might argue that this is simply a way to emphasize the emotional significance of this moment and the pain that Ricky feels.*
* *Lighting: Ricky’s room is lit with lamps and light strings. At the start of this scene, the purple, blue and green fabrics around the room are emphasized in the background and the contrast on the lighting is not particularly strong, but at the moment Ricky says, “You’re not a real—”, the lighting suddenly shifts and the light is brought up on these elements, bathing the room in a harsh, bright light and de-emphasizing the decorations and fabrics in the background. This shift highlights Ricky’s internal experience of this moment as a disorienting break in their relationship.*
* *This moment is an example of “trans-exclusion” (185) because Robby deliberately misgenders Ricky and denies her humanity in an effort to belittle and humiliate her. This scene also painfully highlights Robby’s cissexual gender entitlement, since he appears to “consider [himself] to be the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men” (166). Robby’s cis privilege is painfully obvious in his commentary; when Ricky tells him that she is isolated and alone because of transphobia, he argues that this is an example of her making everything “all about [her]” and berates her for not remembering that he “has been on [her] side without condition since [they] were six years old.” While he seems to be citing proof of his allyship, his comments highlight his ignorance about his cisgender privilege.*
* *Students may also bring up that Robby’s emotional abuse throughout this scene makes the ending of the film (including their nearly immediate reunion, sexual intimacy and happy resolution) either unrealistic or normalizing of this kind of transphobic behavior.* 
  1. What parts of Serano’s argument resonated with you? Have you seen examples of cisgender privilege?

*Answers may vary.*

* 1. What parts of Serano’s argument do you have questions about?

*Answers may vary.*

1. (25 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. Identify the key components of Serano’s argument. Choose evidence to support your claims.
   2. Consider the clips we just watched, or other moments in *Boy Meets Girl.* How do these scenes illustrate Serano’s claims? How do the formal elements of the scene (cinematography, editing, sound, and mise en scéne) reinforce those claims?
   3. What parts of Serano’s argument resonated with you? Have you seen examples of cisgender privilege?
   4. What parts of Serano’s argument do you have questions about?