
Gender Performativity in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto*

Rizka Wigati

Lastiko Endi Rahmantyo

English Department, Universitas Airlangga

Abstract

Patrick Braden, also called as 'Kitten' in the film *Breakfast in Pluto*, was a male-to-female transgender who lived in small town of Tyrellin, Ireland. He longed for his biological mother and to serve his purpose, in 1970s, he moved to London to search her love. During serving his purpose, he was establishing himself to perform his opposite gender. Judith Butler's gender performativity was the theory applied in order to explore how Patrick performed his gender. Qualitative method was conducted by selecting the scenes from their narrative and non-narrative aspects. The finding from the analysis on storyline, costumes, make-up, performance, and color was that he kept repeating imitating the appearance of a woman by wearing woman's clothes and applying nail polish. Furthermore, the imitation was followed by another feminine skill such as sewing. The repetition done by Patrick showed that he performed the opposite gender performance.

Keywords: gender performativity, repetition, imitation

Introduction

Binary opposition is commonly seen in society nowadays. One of the examples of binary opposition is the separation of gender, in which sometimes is constructed through traditional gender roles. Somehow, this norm has been set as the core in every part of the society. The construction of traditional gender roles has affected the understanding of being feminine and masculine. Therefore, feminists distinguish between the word sex, which refers to biological constitution as female or male, and the word gender, which refers to cultural programming as feminine or masculine (Tyson 86). This view of gender is an example of what has called as social constructionism. Through social construction of gender in society, people believe that human was born into two categories, boys/men and girls/women.

One of the major pivotal roles in shaping the gender is parental guidance. Parents become part of the gender shaping processes as they start dressing their children with colors that identify their gender. For them, colors are used as a distinctive symbol between boys and girls, and these behaviors lead to stereotypes (Flores 2012). Parents' duties include assisting children in negotiating physical, psychological, and developmental processes so they can adapt socially to the cultural mandates of gender expectations (Istarlev 269). It suggests that they want their children to live under the heteronormative norms. If you were born as female, you will be dressed as one and on the other way around. Most of people rarely consider boys/men and girls/women who begin the process of shifting their gender appearance from one to another.

Transgender people are those whose appearance, behaviors, or personal characteristics differ from stereotypes about how men and women are supposed to be (National Gay Lesbian Task Force 2000 as cited SpectrUM, Whitten University Center). The group includes cross-dressers, transsexuals, and intersex. Most of transgender are often suffer from internal confusion and prejudice or violence from society, such as from the family, neighbors and workplaces. Related to their sexuality, transgender are interested with person who have the same sex. It is contradictory with heteronormative norms. Heteronormativity is in favor of opposite-sex relationship as a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationship. Its aim is to describe and explain about the ideal gender role based on heterosexuals about their nature of sexes (Broadbent 1).

The issue of transgender has become a concern in every part of the world, including Ireland, as the setting for *Breakfast on Pluto*. To mark the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO), the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency publish the results of the largest survey on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the European Union (EU). Approximately 93,000 LGBT people were surveyed across the 27 EU countries and Croatia, including 1,625 LGBT people from Ireland. The survey findings showed that Irish LGBT people still face considerable levels of discrimination and harassment, and that many LGBT people cannot be themselves in their daily lives. Across the EU, many LGBT people hide their identity and live in isolation and even fear (Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) journal 2013).

The portrayal of transgender and such have been made into film, such as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Ma vie en rose "My Life in Pink"* (1997), *Beautiful Boxer* (2004). However, the writer chooses *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) by Neil Jordan to be the object of the study. This film won six awards. In 2005, it won Ljubljana International Film Festival as audience Award by Neil Jordan and National Board of Review, USA as its excellence in filmmaking. In 2007, Cillian Murphy, as the Patrick "Kitten" Braden, won Best Actor in a Lead Role in a Feature Film in Irish Film and Television Awards, Neil Jordan as Best Director, Film Glynn as Best Hair & Make-Up, Lorraine by Lynn Johnson, Best Script for Film by Neil Jordan and Pat McCabe (IMDB).

Breakfast on Pluto is a film that portrays the issue of gender performativity. It is considered as queer film that has comedy-drama genre. This film was directed by Neil Jordan and based on Patrick McCabe's novel. This film focuses on Irish culture, society, the changing toward gender, and sexuality. This film describes the story of transgender named Patrick 'Kitten' Braden who performs his opposite gender. This study aims to examine how gender performativity is portrayed. The main story is about Patrick, who was abandoned by his mother on the doorstep of the local house when he was a baby. Then, Patrick was raised by his foster mother since his father did not accept him as his biological son. In his teenage life, Patrick prefers to wear girl clothes and apply lipstick that angers his foster family. Therefore, he struggled to search for his biological mother in London.

The writer chooses *Breakfast on Pluto* film as the object of the study because the issues, transgender, which still be the minority group and somehow also difficult to be unresolved. Furthermore, transgender are being judged by the society by their performance, so it is very important for the writer to reveal their gender performativity. Those are the reasons why the issues of transgender and gender performativity become very important to the writer.

In analyzing *Breakfast on Pluto*, the writer uses the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler. According to Butler, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts (179). In this sense, the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. By using gender performativity theory, the writer also tries to analyze Patrick's gender performativity, a character in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto*.

Theory and Method

In analyzing *Breakfast on Pluto* film, the writer used queer theory to analyze gender performativity in Patrick's character. The word queer is an inclusive term that offers a collective identity to all non-straight individuals. Queer theorists examine how traditional definitions of gender identity (masculine vs. feminine) and sexuality (heterosexual vs. homosexual) break down, overlap misrepresent, or do not adequately explain the dynamic range of human sexuality in a text (Tyson 336). Gender performativity theory by Judith Butler is a part of queer studies. The idea of performativity is introduced in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999) when Butler states that "gender proves to be performative-that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (33). In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.

In this qualitative study, the primary data were taken from the scenes and scenario of *Breakfast on Pluto*, focusing on Neil "Kitten" Braden. As her secondary source, the writer took academic articles and books that related to the issue. The writer applied narrative aspects to deal with plot and intrinsic factors

of the film. While non-narrative aspects were taken from cinematographic compositions, such as: camera (shots, angles, the movement of the camera), scene (lighting, colors, frame), editing, sound, and acting. The non-narrative part includes the analysis on costumes, color, make up, and performances.

Finding and Discussion

The Representation of Patrick's Gender

Patrick was born in Tyrellin, Ireland, a place where the society respects heterosexual rather than homosexual. Therefore, the idea of heteronormativity is well developed in that place. This film starts on the scene where transgender woman named Patrick "Kitten" Braden, pushes a baby in a stroller and the construction workers mock him because of his feminine appearance. It happens in the fictional Irish town of Tyrellin, near the border of Northern Ireland in the late 1940's. When he was a baby, her mother abandoned him on the doorstep of local house where Patrick's father lived. Patrick's father is a Priest; he did not accept him because he was ashamed by his past. He impregnates his own housekeeper, Eily Bergin. Patrick then lived with his foster mother. A young Patrick prefers to have an appearance like a girl. He applied a lipstick, wears his step sister's dress and shoes which angers his foster family.

Patrick: Just the job, cutex coral pink.

Patrick's foster mother: My good shoes! My good shoes, you little brat!

Patrick's step sister: Do it harder, Mammy. Teach him not to wear my dress again.

Patrick's foster mother: He'll make a disgrace of us? Well, you'll not!

Patrick: Do you really have to?

Patrick's foster mother: I'll march you up and down the street and disgrace you in front of the whole town.

Patrick: Promise?

Patrick's step sister: Hit him with it, Ma! Give him the brush again!

Patrick's foster mother: Say, "I am not a girl."

Patrick: I'm not a girl

Patrick's foster mother: "I am a boy. I 'm not a girl"

Patrick: I'm a boy, not a girl.

Patrick's step sister: Say it right. Make him say it right, Ma!

Patrick's mother: My heart broke from the cursed day I ever took you in.

(00:04:11)

The conversation above implies the depiction of heteronormativity in this film. Patrick tries to wear his step sister's shoes and dress. He also applies a lipstick for the first time. He tries to hide when he applies a lipstick because his foster mother and step sister will be angry. When his foster mother knows about what he does, she hits him hard and puts him on the bathtub while rubbing up his back with a brush. She lectures him that a boy should not wear a dress or girl shoes. Patrick's mother assumes that the way Patrick dresses like a girl is a shameful action and the whole town will mock him. His foster mother also teaches him to say "I'm a boy, I'm not a girl." It indicates that Patrick and his foster family live in heteronormative society. It shows that young Patrick has been given knowledge about gender in heteronormative society and also the consequences.



Figure 1: Patrick applies a Lipstick

Figure 1, this scene uses extreme close-up shot to show Patrick when he does the repetition by applying lipstick. Patrick applies a lipstick for the first time like women does. Make up is the aspect of *mise-en-scene* that is related to the costume. According to Bordwell and Thompson, make up is important for the actors to boost the appearance of actors in the screen. Make up becomes important in creating character traits or motivating in the screen (122). Make up's role in this film is to complete the performance of Patrick. As young children, Patrick does not use any additional cosmetic, such as eyeliner, eye shadows, mascara, or blush on but he keep uses lipstick with soft brown color because lipstick is the easiest make-up to imitate for young children. Patrick uses brown color for the lipstick; it indicates comfort and passion when he applies lipstick on his lips. Therefore, Lipstick means the symbol of femininity and the early transition of girl become a woman.

The gender performance done by Patrick proves that femininity is very fluid, whether man or woman can be feminine despite their sex This is what Butler suggests as gender parody. "Gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (175). It means that since there is no original gender, then someone had to imitate performed gender by the myth or something that imitated repeatedly on the performed gender. This scene shows that even Patrick believes to the original of his gender, but the gender that Patrick performs is also an imitation, a repetition of what cultures teach to be.

According to Sara R. Phillip, a transgender woman in Country Wicklow, Ireland. In 60's and 70's, society was heavily influenced by the Catholic Church and most of the schools were run by religious organizations and most of families were deeply rooted in that community (Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) journal 2013). Moreover, transgender in the 70's in Ireland was just not acceptable because they were different. At that time, being a transgender was still considered as taboo because society was influenced by religious organizations. However, by the late 1970's, Irish society changed by the founding of the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform in the 1970's to fight for the decriminalization of male homosexuality. Its founding members include Senator Norris and former Presidents of Ireland Mary McAleese and Mary Robinson. Mary Robinson was the 8th President of Ireland from 1997 to 2011. She was the second female president after Mary Robinson. She also held liberal views regarding homosexuality and women priest in Ireland. In recent years, many LGBT people in Ireland are still not able to be fully open about their LGBT identity. Based on survey results done by Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) journal 2013, 62% the majority of LGBT in Ireland were not fully open on being LGBT to their families.

Patrick's Act of Cross-dressing



Figure 2: When Patrick becomes adult, he applies mascara

There are many historical accounts of people who, though physically female, have lives 'disguised' as men or vice-versa. They do so by successfully 'citing' the attributes of the other gender. Judith Butler writes in her book *Gender Trouble*, "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (173). "Feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female" (23). In this film, the understanding of gender performativity is clearly depicted. It is seen in Patrick's clothes when he was playing in the yard, he prefers to have a role as a girl and to wear girl clothes. In the age of 30, he still uses women clothes and nail

polish to show his feminine sides. Even though physically Patrick is male, somehow as a transgender, he shows his gender as feminine by wearing women clothes or dress, using nail polish, and even his gesture shows the smoothness manner. Patrick has some close friends; they are Charlie, Irwin, and Lawrence. Lawrence's father tells Patrick that his biological mother looks like a blonde American movie star Mitzi Gaynor.

Figure 2, the left scene uses close-up shot to show Mitzi Gaynor's figure. Lawrence's father is the one who tells that Patrick biological mother like a blonde American actress, singer, and dancer Mitzi Gaynor. In the middle 1960's, she starts to concentrate on live performances and becomes a major attraction in the Las Vegas nightclub circuit. She regularly appears on a number of television variety programs in the 1970's, includes the eponymous annual musical special Mitzi. In *Breakfast on Pluto* film, she also appears in television variety program. Actually, Patrick's performance influences by Mitzi Gaynor because she looks like her mother. A young Patrick does not know his mother figure. He just knows when Lawrence's father tells him that his mother looks like Mitzi Gaynor. The right scene uses extreme close-up shot to show the portrayal of Patrick when he uses mascara. Before he uses mascara, he looks on the television and there is Mitzi Gaynor figure appears on musical television program. When he becomes adult, he still uses woman make-up and clothes. The dominant color in those scenes is yellow; it suggests stimulation (Gianneti 25). It represents Patrick desire to change his gender to be feminine rather than masculine. Patrick's gesture shows the enjoyment and comfort when he apply mascara on his eyelashes like women usually does. Therefore, mascara means the symbol of maturity of woman.

Based on gender Performativity that was done by Patrick, it suggests a gender parody by Judith Butler. She states, "The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (174). It means that the idea of cross-dressing shows that Patrick imitates the opposite gender. Gender performativity that Patrick performs is also an imitation by cultural practices of woman appearance in general.

The Repetition of Patrick's gender performativity

The repetition appears when he wears and sews woman's clothes. Patrick decides to join the needlework class although his teacher and headmaster consider that as inappropriate activity. Furthermore, he refuses the decision from them and talks with them as seen in this dialogue.

Teacher: So, you see, Patrick, we're on your side. We're here to help you. I don't think you understand that.
 Patrick: Well, no, you're wrong, Father. I do.
 Teacher: So, if you can think of anything that would help us to help you, well...
 Patrick: Well...there is one thing, Father. Instead of PE...I could take Home Economics and Needlework class.
 Teacher: And you think that would help you...knuckle down and apply yourself? What's that Patrick?
 Patrick: Oh, and you can call me Kitten, Father.
 Teacher: Kitten?
 Patrick: Yes, Patrick Kitten Braden, after Saint Kitten.
 Teacher: Well, now, there was no Saint Kitten, Patrick.
 Patrick: Oh no, but there was a Saint Cettin, Father...and someone have been known to call him...or was it a her...Kitten.
 (00:16:52-00:17:53)

Needlework class is attended by most of woman in school as the extracurricular. However, Patrick negotiates his preference in needlework class because he is more attracted to sewing rather than PE (Physical Education). It suggests that Patrick's habit represents pleasure when he does feminine job. He continues sewing when he was with his boyfriend in the van while they do conversations. Patrick's repetition is also depicted in non-narrative aspects.



Figure 3: Patrick is sewing with Mrs. Coyle



Figure 4: Patrick is sewing while talking with Billy in the van

Figure 3, this scene uses close-up shot that focuses on Patrick's hands. The way Patrick sews is shows his effeminate. Patrick also talks about his stepsister's appearance "Oh, she really needs a bit of glamour in her life, Mrs. Coyle" (00:18:13). Figure 4 portrays medium shot to show Patrick's repetition. He sews while talking to Billy in the van. Patrick prefers to join needlework class to show his domesticity as woman. Those scenes show Patrick's happiness, his preference to do feminine job rather than men's job. By his repetition in clothing and act of sewing, his friends and other people confirms that Patrick is a woman. It is proven when he goes to a club; he meets a British soldier who then dances with him. The soldier does not know that biologically, Patrick is a male. While they are dancing, the IRA (Irish Republican Army) bombs the club. When the police discover that Patrick biologically is male, then he is arrested because he was suspected as terrorist. Therefore, the repetition and acceptance from the society for him are reassuring the Butler's idea of *stylized repetition of acts* (179). The effect of gender, which was given by Patrick, produces through the stylization of the body and must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion of gender performativity in Patrick's life happens in most of his life. It is seen in the way Patrick imitates the appearance of a woman by repeating wearing women's clothes and applying women's nail polish. Furthermore, his imitation in woman appearances is followed by his performance, which considered as feminine skills, such as sewing. It shows that the pattern of gender performativity by Butler works perfectly in his life, starting from repetition and ends with revelation of someone's gender performance. Associated with Patrick's gender performance, the non-narrative aspects play a big role in the story. Most of the non-narrative aspects, from colors, camera movements, and costumes support Patrick's effeminate performance. Finally, the most important factor is the condition of Ireland at that time after The Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform movement was founded. After that, public acceptance of LGBT becomes more tolerable than before.

Works Cited

- Ballew, John R. *Gay Men and Masculinity*. Bodymindsoul.org. Web. June 6, 2014.
<<http://bodymindsoul.org/articles/gay-sexuality/gay-men-and-masculinity/>>
- Breakfast on Pluto (2005) Awards. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0411195/awards>>
- Broadbent, Rebecca. *Heteronormativity*. Academia.edu search research. Web. February 25, 2014.
<<http://www.academia.edu/1690687/Heteronormativity>>
- Bordwell, David & Kristin Thompson. *Film art: an introduction*. 8th Edition, McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc, New York. 2008. PDF
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print

- Creswell, J.W. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007. PDF
- Flores, Laura. *What is Social Construction?*. University of California Santa Cruz.edu Oakes Collage. High Street: Santa Cruz. Web. February 25, 2014.
<<http://oakes.ucsc.edu/academics/Core%20Course/oakes-core-awards-2012/laura-flores.html>>
- Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN). *Major New EU Study shows daily life for many Irish LGBT People can be very difficult*. Exchange Street Upper: Dublin. GLEN Journal, 2013. PDF
- Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies*. 9th Edition. New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, n.d.
- Incredibleart.org. *Color symbolism and culture*, viewed 1 May 2014,
<<http://www.incredibleart.org/lessons/middle/color2.htm>>
- Istarlev, Arlene. *How Queer: The Development of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in LGBTQ-Headed Families*. Family Process, Vol. 49, No. 3. FPI, Inc. 2010. PDF
- Jordan, Neil. *Breakfast on Pluto*. Sony Pictures Classics Pathe. 2005. Film.
- Kawin, Bruce F. *Film Language and Elements of Style*. PDF
- Landi, Marcia. *Jordan, Neil (1950) Director, Writer, Producer*. BFI screenonline.
<<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/481951/>>
- Murphy, Julie. *Experiences of Discrimination among the Irish Transgendered Community*. Department of Social Science. DBS School of Arts. April, 2012. PDF
- Pathe Pictures and Sony Pictures Classics present. *Breakfast on Pluto A Neil Jordan film*. PDF
- Phillips, Sara R. *Act Now Transgender Rights for Ireland*. Web. May 23, 2014.
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sara-r-phillips/ireland-transgender-rights_b_3412713.html>
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical theory today*. 2nd Edition, New York: Routledge, 2006.
- University of Miami. *Transgender FAQ*. SpectrUM. Whitten University Center, Stanford Drive: Coral Gables.
<<http://www6.miami.edu/spectrum/transgenderfaqs.htm>>
- Woodhouse, A. *Fantastic Women: sex, gender, and transvertism*, MacMillan: Hampshire, 1989. Print