

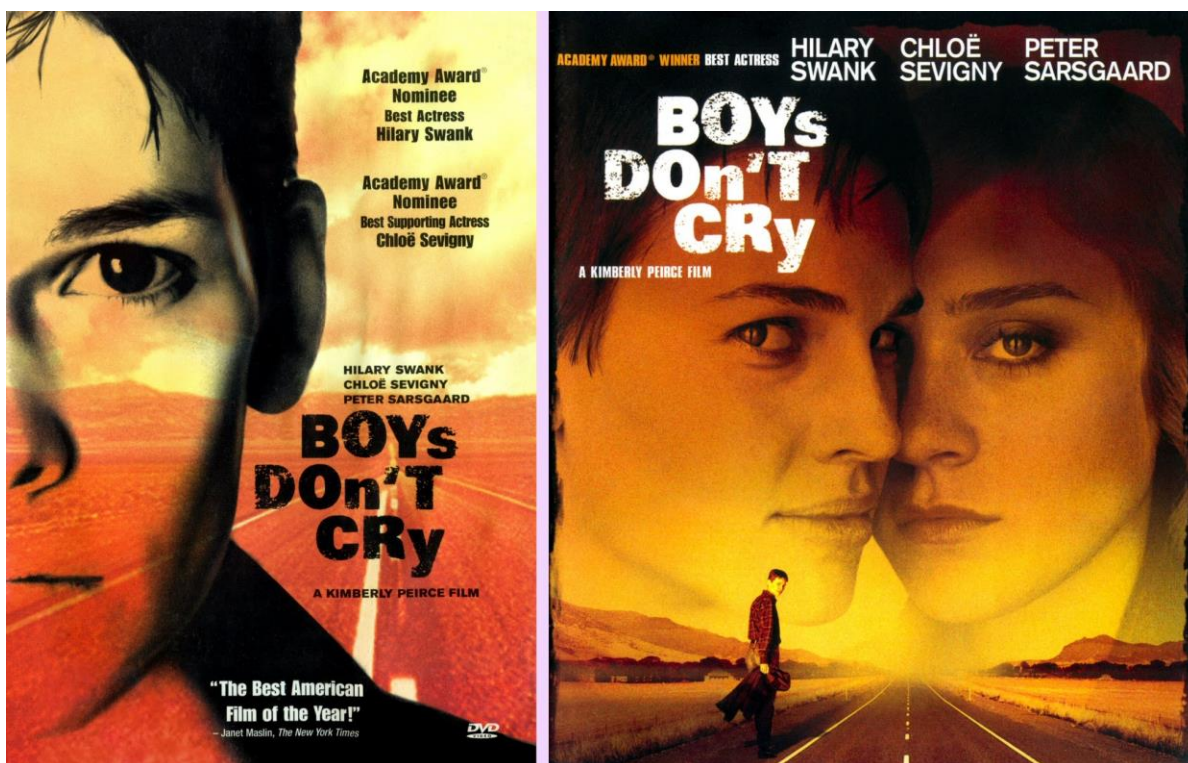
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Boys Don't Cry

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by Alexandra Barron



BOYS DON'T CRY. DIRECTED BY KIMBERLEY PEIRCE. 114 MINUTES. FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES, 1999.

Boys Don't Cry. Directed by Kimberley Peirce. 114 minutes. Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Over the past three years I've taught Kimberley Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) to my undergraduate literature and composition classes at the University of Texas at Austin. The film is a fictional recreation of the life and death of Brandon Teena, a young transgendered man living in Nebraska who was brutally murdered when he was discovered to be biologically female. There is a political efficacy in films which position viewers to identify with queer characters, something *Boys Don't Cry* does very well.

My students had a range of reactions to the film. Their comments included: "Brandon was sick; that is a disease; we learned about it in psychology" and "Poor, uneducated people in those rural places are so messed up." On the other hand, one student wrote in a free write: "Boys Don't Cry positioned me in terms of Brandon. Everything we see is from Brandon's point of view. At first this made me uncomfortable because I have never seen a movie from the point of view of a sexually ambiguous character before. It took a little adjusting to at the beginning, but throughout the movie I found myself hoping things would work out for Brandon."

Others wrote that they identified with Brandon, they liked Brandon, and they felt his pain. They described his struggle as "universal"; he wanted to find himself and to be with the girl he loved. Interestingly, the female students also wrote about wanting to protect and care for him. This identification provides a way into a story some wouldn't normally want to enter. It also makes for a great discussion on how we construct masculinity culturally and what makes Brandon so appealing -- his James Dean bad-boy quality and sensitive masculinity, his desire to please, his all-American white-boy looks, etc. (See Craig Wilse's review in *Make 2* [Spring 2000]: 17-20 on the film's treatment of race, including its erasure of Phillip Devine, an African-American man murdered with the real Brandon Teena.)

Another exercise that I found useful in class discussions asked students to think about what the "truth" of gender is in the film. To facilitate this, we drew up a list on the board of all the different ways in which Brandon was perceived. He is referred to as a boy, a girl, a "dyke," a lesbian, a "faggot," a hermaphrodite, someone with a sexual identity crisis, and "it." Then we tried to get at what definition of Brandon's gender the film was privileging, and from there we moved on to discussing if there is a "truth" of gender. It was a very spirited discussion because people ranged from diehard women's studies students who believe gender is a performance and cited Judith Butler in class to students who

argued that biology is destiny and anyone who has female genitalia is a woman. At least this discussion made everybody realize that the truth of gender is contested, and that other definitions besides their own exist -- though some people, obviously, do not need their eyes opened to transgendered identity or the hate directed at those who don't conform to gender norms.



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