Trans scripts

The representation of transgender people in the media in the Netherlands (1991-2016)

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, transgender people are increasingly becoming the focus of media attention, both in written media and on television. The question we raise in this article is whether the sudden popularity of trans people in the Dutch media can be seen as a moment of interruption and destabilising through which the contours of new paths of gender identification become imaginable, or whether, upon closer scrutiny, the media coverage of trans lives merely or mostly reinforces dominant, binary gender ideologies. We use the concept of 'transgender scripts' to explore the particularities of the representation of trans people in three national newspapers as well as two television programmes in the time frame 1991-2016. Trends in media reporting show that, in recent years, it has become more common to speak of transgender persons in affirmative ways. This affirmation, however, seems to come more easily when trans narratives confirm norms of gender, whiteness, youth, and national identity. We, therefore, argue for the inclusion of (sub-cultural) trans perspectives that show the variety in gender identity, including also non-binary identities, as well as cultural background and social and bodily experiences.

Keywords: transgender, Netherlands, scripts, media, representation

The year of the transgender

Over the past decade, the visibility of trans persons in the Netherlands has increased spectacularly (Figure 1). Both in written media and on television,

trans people have been the topic of media coverage to the extent that *de Volkskrant*, one of the largest national newspapers, declared the year 2015 to be 'The Year of the Transgender'. The increased visibility goes hand in hand with an increased degree of self-organisation of trans people and a growing government interference with and monitoring of the well-being of trans persons (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2012; 2017).
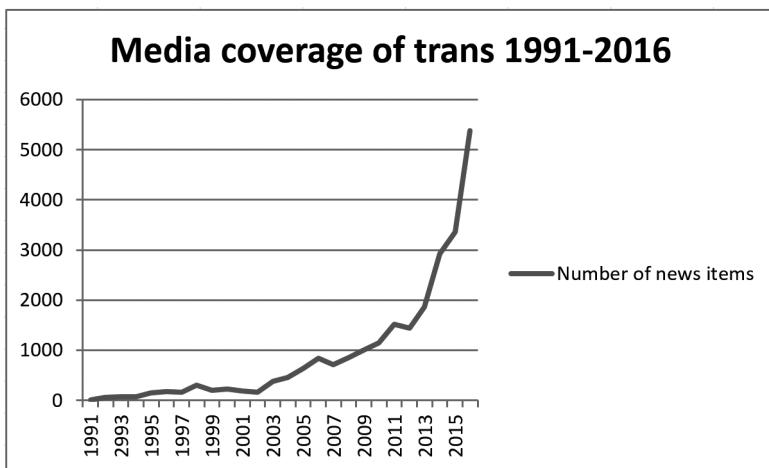

Figure 1   *Number of items on transgender in Dutch newspapers 1991-2016*
           Based on LexisNexis

In this article, we aim to investigate the particularities of this growing visibility of trans people in Dutch media, exploring the terminology and rhetoric techniques by which 'the transgender' has become a distinguishable public persona. We will do so by distinguishing several available 'transgender scripts' that characterise the representation of trans people in the Dutch mediascape. The question we raise in this article is whether the sudden popularity of trans people in the Dutch media can be seen as a moment of interruption and destabilising through which the contours of new scripts of gender identification become imaginable, or whether, upon closer scrutiny, the media coverage of trans lives merely or mostly reinforces dominant, binary gender ideologies. Such an exploration is of importance, first, because representations in the media form the building blocks of the Dutch collective imagination of 'the transgender'. Although the article 'the' in 'the transgender' seems to already close down the possibility of transgender diversity, we will come to argue that the current coverage of trans lives is simultaneously enabling and restricting a variety of trans subjectivities. Second, the representation of trans subjects depends

upon and will need to relate to the 'discursive opportunity structures' (Ferree, 2003) already present in a given society, in this case the gender identities that are currently possible and impossible in the Netherlands. The representation of trans people, then, has broader implications for the cultural limits and possibilities of gender variety in the Netherlands.

The representation of trans people in the Netherlands is relatively unexplored. Studies from the U.S., however, show how (social) media may have both emancipatory and oppressive effects on trans people. Social media in particular may function in empowering ways for trans youth. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015), for instance, found that social media use contributes considerably to the resilience of trans youth. In online spaces (though only when monitored and safe), young people can benefit from the examples set by others, become part of a trans community, and even make plans for public action. On the other hand, social media can also be a space where the anonymity of the participants enables (among others) transphobia and racism (Fink & Miller, 2014). Regarding traditional media, scholars have argued that the representation of trans people is often incomplete or misinformed. Trans youth and trans men are often underrepresented in TV shows (McInroy & Craig, 2015), as are trans people of colour (Keegan, 2013, p. 28). Keegan, moreover, notes that, while the present focus on gender transitions destabilises social expectations of gender as a given, this focus is problematic because it reduces being transgender to a matter of personal experience of the body. If only the body can be 'fixed', all problems are solved and no fundamental questions about gender that also involve cis persons need to be asked. The social, economic, and administrative exclusion of trans people remain undiscussed (Keegan, 2013, p. 28). Finally, in film, only a very limited number of roles and story lines are available to trans people. Joelly R. Ryan distinguishes the transgender 'monster' of horror films, the innocent transgender 'mammy', and the transgender 'deceivers' who pass only for their own profit (cited in Steinbock, 2017, p. 402). Maria Ramnehill, writing from a Swedish context, has added to this list that, in comedy, trans persons are often implicitly present in a joke (as 'the date you wish you never had'). And while for gay and lesbian characters counterexamples of affirmative roles can be given, trans persons are hardly ever present in comedy shows in affirmative ways (Ramnehill, 2016, pp. 31-33).

In this article, we aim to investigate the specifics of the depiction of trans people in the Netherlands, which is often portrayed (or portraying itself) as a front-runner of LGBT rights, even to the extent that its policies can be (and are) critiqued for their homonationalist and neo-colonial ten-

dencies (Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010; Dudink, 2011). LGBT-rights have thus become an 'export product' of national pride not unlike tulips and water management, with sexual citizenship an important marker of national identity. These collective investments in a carefully constructed self-imagery of tolerance and progression may lead to a more affirming and inclusive representation of trans perspectives. However, since the emancipation and social acceptance of sexual minorities often turns out to be a juridical reality rather than integrated in citizens' attitudes, and has often been dependent on minorities' willingness to merge into dominant heterosexual expectations and life choices (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011), the opposite might also be true.

In the following, we first introduce our conceptual approach of 'transgender scripts', then proceed with a description of our material and methods, followed by our analysis of the possibilities and limitations of transgender representation in mainstream media, and a conclusion.

Introducing the performance team: Scripting sexuality and gender

While previous studies have formulated certain characteristics of the representation of trans people, we have as of yet not encountered a conceptual-methodological approach that would enable us to explore more general trends across different media representations. In our study, we have, therefore, invested in developing such a conceptual framework. As a first step, we suggest, as sociologist and historian David Bos (2010) has proposed for the cultural imagination of gays and lesbians, that, in the Netherlands, 'the transgender' has become a public *persona*. Accordingly, we argue *transgender scripts* underlie the construction of 'the transgender' as a public figure: a collection of possible roles, story lines, plots, supporting acts, protagonists, and antagonists. The presentation of 'the transgender' to the wider public, in other words, can be viewed as a theatrical co-production that requires a 'performance team' (Goffman, 1959, pp. 82-28) consisting of, among others, trans people, their friends, and families, TV hosts, editors, journalists, celebrities, and medical and other experts.

Our suggestion to think of the representation of transgender people in terms of scripts derives, first, from Judith Butler's 1988 article 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. Making use of concepts from phenomenology and theatre studies, Butler argues that, while gender takes shape on the individual level, social

codes direct this process (1988, p. 526). Butler uses the concept of 'script' to elucidate this point: 'gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again' (1988, p. 526). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler furthers this argument with the use of the concept of performativity: it is the repetition of certain 'performed' acts that suggests one's gender identity.

The *sexual script theory* offered by William Simon and John H. Gagnon (1984), second, helps us to think in a more structured way about the various levels on which the construction of (trans)gender identity takes place. Simon and Gagnon are mostly interested in sexuality (in the sense of intercourse) as the product of meaning-making practices rather than a natural 'sex drive'. Though thus not directly addressing gender, their work is useful in its argument that the production of meaning takes place at three interacting levels: that of the *cultural scenario*, *interpersonal scripts*, and *intrapsychic scripts*. Cultural scenarios are abstract, collective scripts about the socially accepted behaviour and the accepted roles in relation to sexuality, which are expressed in the media and in social institutions such as the government, legislation, education, and religion (cited in Wiederman, 2015, pp. 7-8). Since these cultural scenarios indicate only by and large which behaviour is possible, desirable, or acceptable, individuals need to further negotiate their sexual roles and behaviours in their mutual relationships at the interpersonal level. At the intrapsychic level, finally, people will further interpret the available social scripts, but in doing so they are not simply directed by the scripts the media or the government dictate. To some extent, people can add personal meanings by taking into account their own preferences and interests, even those meanings that they find hard to put into words (Gagnon, 1990, p. 7). Since the focus of this article is on media representation, the analysis will mainly focus on the first level of cultural scenarios. We would like to emphasise, however, that cultural production does not operate in a vacuum, but in relation to people's mutual negotiations and personal preferences and choices.

Material and method

We have chosen to focus on a period of 25 years, that is, from 1991 until 2016. This time frame was chosen partly for pragmatic reasons: the online media archive that we use, LexisNexis, does not go back beyond 1991. The 1990s, however, also signal important events both in the emerging of trans-

gender studies (notably with Sandy Stone's 1991 'The Empire Strikes Back' manifesto) and in the 'becoming public' of trans lives through openly trans identified celebrities such as Dana International, who won the Eurovision Song Festival for Israel in 1998. We, therefore, feel that the time frame we chose overlaps with significant moments of the 'making public' of trans people.

Dana International
Source: Wikipedia, Flickr

For our analysis, we use two types of media. First, from traditional written media, we have selected three daily newspapers that, together, represent the variety of Dutch newspapers in terms of political preference and readership: *Telegraaf* (secular, politically right-wing, popular) *Trouw* (semi-Christian, politically left to centred, intellectual) and *de Volkskrant* (secular, politically left, intellectual). In the archives of these newspapers,[1] we have selected all articles that directly or indirectly deal with trans issues. (For a list of terms used to indicate 'trans related' in our project, please see Appendix). If the same article appeared in several newspapers, only one was included in the analysis. In total, 2341 articles were selected as relevant for our research. Of these, 34 per cent (683 articles) were directly related to trans people or trans issues. 64 per cent (1340 articles) were related only indirectly, mainly because, in the articles, the abbreviation LGBT (in Dutch: *LHBT*) was used and explained, while the focus of the article was on homosexuality. For each article, we indicated the type of media cover-

age (news, background information, announcement, review, opinion, life story, or other). We then allocated one or two thematic labels to each article, reflecting as adequately as possible the main focus of the article in relation to trans issues. The themes used are emancipation, discrimination, showbiz, science, criminality, public space, transition, and legislation. We furthermore indicated whether the article focused on a specific ethnic minority group, a particular celebrity, or a specific national context. Finally, we have made personal notes during the labelling process concerning anything that caught our attention, for instance on the use of pejorative terms and misgendering.

The second type of media used is TV programmes, and we have limited ourselves to two recent programmes. The first is a reality show titled *Hij Is Een Zij* (He Is A She; henceforth HIAS). First broadcast by KRO-NCRV in January 2014, HIAS focuses on the lives of trans youth who are transitioning, with particular attention being paid to physical transitioning, emotional hardship, and victory, and the supporting role of family, friends, schoolteachers, and medical staff. Until 2017, the show was presented by host Arie Boomsma, previously employed by the Evangelical Broadcasting (EO), and known for his earlier reality shows on gay and lesbian youth coming out to their families. We have watched the series as a whole to note tendencies and commonalities regarding the participants and the themes that were addressed. We then selected one episode (that of June 24, 2016) for a more in-depth analysis. The episode was selected because it reflected what we found to be the general concerns and set-up of the programme. Of this episode, we made a transcription of the dialogues and the voice-over (the voice of Boomsma), as well as notes on the camera position, the music played in the background, and the choices made for particular scenes. The second TV show on which we base our analysis is *Love Me Gender* (LMG), produced by the Evangelical Broadcasting. LMG brings together five trans youth who differ in terms of their attitude towards and/or phase in transitioning, in ethnic background, and in geographical location. Contrary to HIAS, LMG does not have a host who interviews the participants. For the most part, they discuss their lives among themselves and are supposed to (and actually do) give each other support when it comes to hardships related to identifying as trans. The show does make use of a voice-over that introduces new feeds and updates the audience on the inner struggles of the participants. We viewed and analysed all six episodes.

Our final step has been to distinguish, based on our labelling of the newspaper articles and the two TV programmes, patterns in recurring themes and modes of representation that we consider, as we will argue

below, to be the building blocks for transgender scripts. These scripts were then shared with a small focus group of both trans and cis identified persons to see whether and how the scripts matched individual experiences of trans representation.

Since our material is limited to three newspapers and two TV programmes, we would like to emphasise that our analysis is not intended to be representative of all media coverage of trans issues in the Netherlands. We do feel, however, that the patterns (scripts) we distinguish are indicative of the current state of the (quickly changing) representation of trans people in the Netherlands.

Transgender scripts in the Dutch media

Based on our material, we have distinguished six dominant transgender scripts, each with its particular plot (which life course becomes imaginable for a trans person?) and supporting roles (who are the significant others in this script?). These are the script of the 'successful trans', the 'pioneer', the 'pawn', the 'victim', the 'fringe figure', and the 'fraud'. We see these scripts as cultural scenarios that inform different ways of representing trans people, but which are seldom found as a neat and complete whole. Rather, the scripts leave traces and can be detected by analysing the presuppositions of, and applied terms and implicit messages in, both written and spoken texts. Basing ourselves on the material from newspaper articles, we will first discuss these six dominant scripts. We will then move on to a brief discussion of some alternative scripts that can be found mostly (but certainly not exclusively) in the TV programmes or that were suggested by the participants of the focus group.

The 'successful trans' script, which we found to be the most iconic of the six scripts, includes the life stories of a number of 'unknown', regular Dutch people, but also the lives of a number of trans celebrities such as Kelly van der Veer, a self-identified transsexual woman who appeared on *Big Brother*. This script is based on a narrative of progression, mainly that of a successful transition. 'Successful' here refers to the accomplishment of self-development, the pursuit of happiness, and an emphasis of finding your 'authentic' self. The script of the 'successful trans' contains elements of traditional conversion narratives: it emphasises the difference between an unhappy 'before' and a happy 'after' transitioning. As *de Volkskrant* narrates the life story of Michiel: 'Michiel is happy, very happy. Because of the sex change, everything in his life seems to fall into place' (Haveman & Theunissen,

2003, p. 36). 'Successful' also refers to the extent to which people succeed in abiding by societal norms of masculinity and femininity: the success of passing. The 'successful trans' script is highly dependent on a medical discourse and, therefore, centres on the body. Family, friends, neighbours, and classmates play important supporting roles as they are needed to confirm the trans person's gender identity by providing the appropriate reading of physical change.

The script of the 'pioneer' is based on the assumption that there is a necessary link between trans people and a progressive social and political agenda. This concerns, first, trans people themselves, who are seen as the vanguard of the disruption of dominant gender roles, often in critical opinion pieces. Second, the trans 'pioneer' appears in artistic productions. It seems that, in the world of theatre, dance, and music, the questioning of gender norms is more pronounced than it might be in other contexts. Trans is associated with the artistic avant-garde, as can be seen in a review of the show *Highlights*, performed by the Swedish Cullberg Ballet: 'The versatility, mastery and acting qualities of the performers are outstanding. The statement in itself – that masculine and feminine are fluid concepts, shaped by clichés and in the eye of the beholder – are full of complex implications' (Zes mannen dansen als vrouwen om de vroege moderne dans te laten herleven, 2015, p. 4). Third, in this script, the perspective on trans people extends to those around them. Surgeons who are specialised in sex reassignment surgery are often referred to as the 'pioneers' of medical innovation. Within this script, then, important supporting roles are played by those who set the conditions for the appearance of a gender-bending vanguard in which the possible social critique of trans people's mere existence is recognised and transformed into artistic, cultural, and medical innovation.

In the script of the 'pawn', often found in letters to the editor and opinion pieces, trans people are referred to rather instrumentally in order to construct certain social or political realities. This happens, for instance, when trans people and trans rights are included in homonationalist discourses that support the view that the Netherlands is more tolerant than perceived antagonists: Eastern European countries, Muslim countries, and Muslim and/or non-Western minorities in the Netherlands. An example can be found in *Telegraaf*, where the author of a letter to the editor complains about Moroccan youth:

> That the news opens with Moroccan bullies who force a transsexual woman to move out of her house: any well-integrated Moroccan ought to feel ashamed about that. Try it the other way around: would Dutch kids go off like that in Al-Hoceima? (Sarrekoppen, 2009, p. 33)

The script of the 'pawn' depends not only on the separating of Western (Dutch) and non-Western identities, but also suggests that attitudes towards transgender rights are demarcating dividing lines in the Dutch political landscape as such. Trans rights, or even the idea of putting those on the agenda, are then seen as a 'leftist hobby' that is being pursued at the expense of 'real issues' and, therefore, a sign of decadence. This means that the script of the 'pawn' depends on a paradoxical tension: on the one hand, abstract liberal tolerance towards gender variety is viewed as shared cultural heritage that needs to be cherished and protected, but, on the other hand, this tolerance is made suspect when it takes concrete forms in demands for the state funding of emancipatory policies or when it becomes 'too' present in the public debate.

The script of the 'victim' emphasises vulnerability of trans people, reporting on instances of exclusion, discrimination, bullying, vandalism, name-calling, physical violence, and murder. As a result, moments of trans agency are often glossed over. Within the script of the 'victim', it becomes clear that there are several factors that add to the risk of trans people being the victim of discrimination or violence: having a non-Dutch nationality, being a sex worker, and being a member of a religious community. However, secular white Dutch trans persons are by no means exempt from becoming the victim of transphobia. Important supporting roles are those of the perpetrator and the rescuer. Perpetrators are often framed as male, coming from the world of sex work (for instance, as a pimp), coming from an ethnic minority, or being a religious (often Christian/Roman Catholic) leader. Rescuers take to the street in protest or sign petitions, showing how the script of the 'victim' may merge into that of the 'pawn'.

In the 'fringe figure' script, trans people emerge as mysterious figures from the margins who are evoked to 'spice up' a narrative. These might be stories about the idiosyncrasies of corrupt politicians who 'even' invite trans sex workers and are then 'caught' with them. Or they might be travel stories in which a description of trans sex workers is used to add an exotic layer to the explorer's narration. The 'fringe figure' can also be a literary figure in novels, as can be seen in the work of John Irving. From the many reviews of his work we encountered, it becomes clear that Irving has an affinity for those who dwell in dark alleys and obscure bars – places where

Irving, apparently, also locates trans people. Finally, trans people can be found in descriptions, or rather, enumerations, of social margins (and 'misfits') as such. In a review of the book *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* by Andrew Solomon, we encounter such an enumeration:

> Ten years and three hundred interviews later he has expanded the club with kids who have Down syndrome, autistic kids, kids who are both physically and mentally disabled, schizophrenic youth, kids who were born in the wrong body and who want to change their sex, kids of rapists, young criminals and even prodigies. (Hovius, 2013, p. 5)

In this script, then, the description of trans people is closely related to the well-known figure of the 'freak'. Trans people are portrayed as people with valuable 'inside information' who may offer the viewer or reader a rare glimpse of the particularities of living on the outskirts of the normal.

In the script of the 'fraud', finally, trans people are seen as ultimately being what Talia Bettcher (2007) has described as gender 'deceivers'. Authors of texts who posit trans people as 'frauds' depart from the presupposition that the gender assigned by birth is the authentic, unalterable identity to which people will need to return. Trans people may, to some extent, be successful in covering up their 'real' gender identity, but the 'truth' about this identity will eventually be revealed. The word 'actually' is used often in the script of the 'fraud': people are 'actually' a man or a woman. Some authors seem hardly aware of the fact that they have assigned themselves the role of unmasking trans people: their assumptions show from their use of female pronouns for trans men or male pronouns for trans women, even in interviews or life stories that, at the same time, seem to intend to be sympathetic towards trans people. In other instances, the unmasking of trans people is the distinct goal of the article, for instance in coverages of sports events. An example is the report of a judo world championship:

> Karin Kienhuis from Groningen had never felt as powerless as in the arms of Ednanci Silva. 'I was slaughtered.' The Brazilian is a transsexual and has been active in the women's competition for several years now. She still walks like a man and throws like a dude. 'I was stuck, she just pulled me in any direction she pleased', said Kienhuis after she lost her match in the weight division up to 72 kilos. (Vissers, 1997, p. 37)

The script of the trans 'fraud' unsurprisingly often appears in articles on trans people who have been charged with a criminal offense. Chelsea Manning, working for the U.S. military and convicted for leaking information, is a case in point. For many journalists, her gender transition was an occasion to discredit her intentions in disclosing classified documents.

'She always has been my sister': Alternative scripts

Though most of the six scripts described above can also be traced in the TV programmes we analysed, in particular that of 'successful trans', we would like to take the programmes as an occasion to discuss a number of alternative scripts that, however subtle, appear in the face of more dominant scripts. Conversely, some of these alternative scripts can also be found in the newspaper articles. Television, however, seems to offer more fertile grounds for presenting a larger variation of trans perspectives, perhaps because the focus of the programmes we discuss is solely on trans lives, and trans people are given a more extensive opportunity to express themselves (even when considering the specific selection of participants and choices made by the directors). Through the medium of television, it becomes clear, moreover, that scripts are not merely cultural scenarios, but that they also require the negotiations and individual interpretations of people who may feel, think, and act different from what might be expected.

In the face of the emphasis that the most exemplary script 'successful trans' puts on a physical transition through medical procedure in order to *become* one's preferred self, the first alternative script that we distinguish is that of 'continuity'. In this script, trans people defy the assumption that their bodies are the sole markers of their gender identity. Rather, they experience their gender identity as ontological: it has always been there, and altering their bodies is or can be merely one of many steps along the way of achieving some form of harmony between the experienced and visible gendered self (and perhaps not even a necessary one). Significant others may back up this alternative script, as can be observed in the following excerpt from *He Is A She* (HIAS), where Zoë defies the assumption made by host Arie Boomsma that her trans sister Bo has, in some fundamental way, changed after her surgery:

> Arie Boomsma: So what was it like for you? For now she is really a sister, isn't she?

> Zoë: Well, she always has been my sister, but now there is really the confirmation, like: okay, now I am really a woman, but for me that has actually always been the case.
>
> Arie Boomsma: Yes? So now you… you don't see a difference?
>
> Zoë: No. [Laughs]. Well, it's not like, ehm, hey, could you pull down your pants so I can really see it?

While Boomsma's question conveys the expectations of the physical transition as a pivotal moment, Zoë shows how, in her experience, the gender identity of her sister has not changed in any fundamental way after the surgery.

Love Me Gender, more so than HIAS, contains the second alternative, 'non-binary' script, which also counters elements of the script of 'successful trans'. The most explicit advocate of this script is participant BeyonG, who refers to herself as 'a diversity' and who, while preferring female pronouns, refuses to identify as exclusively female or male. Through the story of BeyonG, viewers are made aware of the existence of non-binary gender identities, without such identities being portrayed as an 'in-between phase' for people who are transitioning.

When discussing the scripts with the (small) focus group, several other scripts were suggested that do not (yet) appear that much, but which participants would like to see emerging. The first would be that of 'post-transition' script. While many trans people's life stories as told in the media find their climax in transitioning, participants would like to see media pick up on what happens after a transition. Finally, participants suggested that there should be a 'whatever' script in which trans identity is of no importance. As they pointed out, when trans people are interviewed, this is mostly *because* they identify as trans, and this is the topic on which they are supposed to speak. What the participants found lacking was the consultation of trans people based on their expertise in other areas, rather than their experiences of identifying as trans. The extent to which this script may already be functioning is, of course, hard to pinpoint, for how to recognise a trans person? Many experts on television may already function within this script.

From spectacle to respectable

When looking at the past 25 years, shifts in the popularity of particular scripts can be noted. The current most dominant script of 'successful trans'

originates from the 1990s when celebrities such as Dana International challenged the then popular script of the 'victim'. While, in the 2000s, the scripts of the 'fringe figure' and the 'fraud' competed for popularity, since the 2010s, the 'successful trans' script has become the most popular and is now also available to 'regular' trans people. At the same time, the immensely increased attention for trans people also points at their incorporation in wider social and political debates on gender and migration (like the 'pioneer' and 'pawn'). Overall, then, a shift is noted from the representation of trans people as being in the margins of society, to a focus on trans people as the spectacles of showbiz and the mysteriously ambiguous characters in the arts, to, presently, a perspective on trans people as individuals who may lead a 'normal' life when they transition 'successfully' *and* whose existence is increasingly becoming of social and political significance. The choice of script is hardly a conscious one on the part of those who partake in the public representation of transgender people, but we can pinpoint two elements that play an important role in how transgender people are portrayed.

Assumptions about gender, first, enable the use of some scripts while excluding others. In the script of 'successful trans', for instance, gender is conceived predominantly as a binary category. Masculinity and femininity are located in the body and in how bodily expressions and behaviours are read and interpreted by (significant) others. The gendered meanings of these expressions as such are not questioned, which may be part of the reason why the 'successful trans' script gained popularity in the first place: hardly anywhere does this script challenge the gender binary. Switching is possible, but only between the two identities of male and female. In the script of the 'fraud', too, gender identity is understood from a binary perspective and is fixated on the body as the original and true source of gender. The 'fraud', however, functions as a 'mirror script' to that of 'successful trans' in that, in its politics, gender is a biological, natural and therefore inevitable given. From this perspective, a non-binary identity, but also transitioning, are impossible. To the contrary, in the scripts of the 'fringe figure' and the 'pioneer', it is precisely the fluidity of gender that is seen as the key aspect that gives transgender people significance in cultural or political discourses. In the scripts of the 'victim' and the 'pawn', the underlying gender assumptions are less clearly defined and simply seem to convey a general sense of the 'otherness' of trans embodiment and experience that leads to violence and exclusion ('victim') or demarcates societal relations ('pawn').

Second, while some trans people are welcomed into the dominant

script of 'successful trans', others are pushed into other, less affirming or even non-affirming scripts. Assumptions on gender but also on age, race, and national identity play an important role here. Binary or essentialist gender assumptions exclude people who identify as non-binary or gender-queer. The script also shows strong preference for young people, in particular on television. This may be the case because trans people are able to transition at a younger age than before, but also on screen, these trans youth evoke more awe among the audience by their passing as non-trans (as cisgender) than is often the case for those who transition at a later age. The notable underrepresentation of trans people of colour, moreover, underscores the whiteness of this successful 'passing for cisgender' script. With two non-white participants out of five participants in total, *Love Me Gender* is the exception that further underlines how this 'white rule' operates most everywhere else. If trans people of colour do appear in the media, this is often done via scripts that exoticise or problematise them. Trans people of colour appear in debates about trans refugees and asylum seekers, which often evoke the script of the 'fraud'. Their gender identity, it is claimed, is a 'trick' to obtain a residence permit. These arguments may be countered by those who argue that trans people, in some countries, risk being subjected to harassment, violence, and criminalisation and should therefore be welcomed into Dutch society. While this is true in many cases, this counter argument relies solely on the script of the 'victim'. Trans people of colour are then welcomed into Dutch society because they are pitiful, not because they are or could be 'successful'. That the 'mistrust' of the gender identity also concerns white trans people from Eastern and Central Europe shows how the 'acceptability' that is implied in the script of 'successful trans' is not only based on race, but also on national identity. The script of 'successful trans' is, as has hopefully become clear by now, problematic in many ways. Yet, since it is currently the most important entry point for the recognition of transgender people, it is worrisome, to say the least, that a 'successful' trans person who is elderly, of colour, or has a migration background (or a combination of these), who 'belongs' in Dutch society and who deserves support, is presently almost inconceivable in mainstream Dutch media.

Conclusion

The analysis of media coverage of trans lives in the Netherlands through the concept of transgender scripts has enabled us to take a closer look of

the persona of 'the transgender', whom *de Volkskrant* so boldly stated was to be celebrated as a figure of importance in 2015. While hoping that this approach may be fruitful to fellow scholars who want to disentangle the ways in which meaning is given to the presence of trans lives and perspectives in current society, we feel that our first steps towards such an understanding has already resulted in some important insights, the most important of which might be that, instead of 'the transgender', it would be more apt to state that there are a multiplicity of transgender personae figuring in the media in the Netherlands.

Considering the fact that, previously, trans people have predominantly been portrayed as most of all tragic and marginal figures, dominant trends in the current representation seem to be a leap forward. The script of 'successful trans', currently the most visible script on television and popular in interviews with trans people in the printed press, conveys the message that there can be liveable trans lives, in particular when significant others are supportive and when bystanders learn to read gender identity in the appropriate way. Other scripts can be viewed as trans supportive in less obvious ways. The script of the 'victim' potentially generates empathy for trans people whose lives have been made unliveable. The script of the 'pioneer' understands transgender transition from the broader perspective of the blurring boundaries between the body, technology, and aesthetics, a perspective in which a gender transition is only one of several possible changes the body undergoes. The script of the 'pawn' presumes the acceptance of gender variety as cultural heritage. Even the script of the 'fringe figure' at least opens up the possibility of unpassable bodies and uneasy gender identities.

In the meantime, the dominant scripts also show under what conditions Dutch society is willing to recognise and accept trans people. Visibility in the media seems to be secured more easily when narratives confirm the status quo of gender ideology, leaving the gender binary largely untouched. If the binary is questioned at all ('pioneer', 'fringe figure'), this almost immediately relegates trans people to either the refined sub-culture of the educated elites or to the social and economic margins of criminality, prostitution, and immigration. It is only a very recent development that non-binary trans people are 'allowed' their say on television or in the newspaper in an affirmative way: as self-conscious, possibly non-white people for whom a physical transition does not, or not necessarily, define their gender identity.

A tendency we located in the scripts we distinguish, and which needs further scrutiny, is the 'instrumentalisation' and politicisation of trans peo-

ple. The rule, we suggest, is that the less attention paid to trans people's actual daily life experiences, the more their presence is used for purposes that go beyond, or might in fact conflict with, their personal interests. Moreover, the less trans people are involved in telling their own stories, the more the narratives about them seem to be ´closed off´ in a one-sided plot that can only end in in a single conceivable way. What is needed, then, is a larger variety of flexible scripts that represent the diversity of trans people's cultural backgrounds, gender identities, and bodily and social experiences. These scripts need to recognise that trans lives, like all lives, have open endings.

This research was conducted at Atria, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History.

Note

1. In LexisNexis, Telegraaf is available from 1999 onward; Trouw from 1992; and de Volkskrant from 1994.

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Appendix: Search terms

Geboren als man
Geboren als vrouw
Genderkind
Genderkinderen
Genderneutraal
Genderneutrale
Genderbenden
Genderbender
Genderbenders
Genderbending
Genderdivers
Genderdiverse
Genderdiversiteit
Genderdysforie
Genderdysforisch
Genderdysforische
Genderambigu
Genderambigue
Genderambiguïteit
Geslachtsoperatie

Geslachtsoperaties
Geslachtsregistratie
Geslachtsregistraties
Geslachtsstoornis
Geslachtsstoornissen
Geslachtsverandering
Geslachtsveranderingen
Geslachtswijziging
Geslachtswijzigingen
Hij is een Zij
Transgender
Transgenderist
Transgenderisten
Transseksualiteit
Transseksueel
Transseksuele
Transseksuelen
Transvrouw
Transman
Verkeerde lichaam