

MamSir Productions Presents

AGAINST A TRANS NARRATIVE

**A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY
JULES ROSSKAM**

USA, 61 MINUTES, 2009

www.againstatransnarrative.com

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Synopsis

Log Line

Trans Filmmaker Jules Roskam's provocative and personal experimental documentary investigating dominant constructions of trans-masculine identity, gender, and the nature of community.

Synopsis

Trans Filmmaker Jules Roskam's **against a trans narrative** is a provocative and personal experimental documentary investigating dominant constructions of trans-masculine identity, gender, and the nature of community.

By sensitively framing the film through his own personal journey within the trans-masculine community, Roskam creates an electric and original investigation into gender politics and social self-identity.

Blending fiction, nonfiction, and experimental film genres, **against a trans narrative** employs a genre-busting combination of intimate diary footage, stylized dramatic scenes, spoken word performance, faux audition tapes, and roundtable interview footage to explore and initiate a dialogue between feminists, queers, and transfolk about the way we construct personal and historical narratives. Careful attention is paid to the ways generation, race, class, and culture impact our understandings of gender.

against a trans narrative asks a series of provocative questions:

What does it mean to be 'trans'?
Is there an idealized perception of trans-masculine identity?
What is the diversity of trans-masculine experience?
Is there an 'idealized' community narrative?

Certain to spark lively community dialogue, this powerfully emotional film appeals to anyone who has ever struggled to reconcile their identity with the communities they belong to.

Key Production Credits

Director, Producer, Writer, Editor:

Jules Roskam

Director of Photography:

Renato Velarde

Produced by:

Kyle Broom

Executive Producer:

Jules Roskam

Art Director:

Joey Difranco

Sound Designer

Madsen Minax

Starring:

Jules Roskam

Desi del Valle

Suzy Brack

Denise Uyehara

Jessica Halem

Tierza Scaccia

Willy Wilkinson

Tracy Baim

Vernita Grey

F i l m m a k e r S t a t e m e n t

My work as an artist interweaves the personal and political through narrative, documentary and experimental filmmaking and the collective use of painting, anthropology, architecture and film. The aim of my artistic approach is to cut through cultural, social and artistic hegemonies and to radically alter the viewers' expectations and experiences of film.

With **against a trans narrative**, the culmination of my experience in the filmmaking, trans communities and academia over the past six years, I wanted to create a dialog - between friends, cultures and generations - addressing issues of representation, identity-formation, and the various forces that act together to build (or dismantle) communities.

The goal of the film is not to present a cohesive image of trans-masculinity because such a task is impossible. The goal is to instigate conversations amongst feminists, queers, transfolks, and anyone else invested in radically shifting the ways in which we construct personal and historical narratives.

One important question I asked myself when making the film was, "How does one tell an empowered version of their own history?", especially when that history (in the case of trans folks) has so consistently been constructed by others. Trans people "learn" a history that the medical community has carved out for them in order to access surgery and/or hormones (if that's indeed what they want), and in that sense perhaps lose a part of their personal histories along the way. In this process, we adopt the "dominant trans narrative". My film questions this - hence the film's name, emphasis on the AGAINST.

I chose to include a diverse group of subjects, interviews, and performers to reflect what my community looks like. When I watch a film, I ask myself, "Who is not being represented"? The answer is often: older people in the community, people of color, poor and working class folks, and people who identify as queer. It was important for me that this somehow be rectified or answered in the film.

I hope that if we have more frank and open conversations about ourselves we can have a deeper understanding of one another, and focus on the important issues that face our various communities. Additionally, I hope that the more we understand ourselves the less vulnerable we will feel by the ways others articulate their own identities.

- Jules Rosskam

F i l m m a k e r B i o

Director Jules Rosskam

Jules Rosskam is an internationally acclaimed trans filmmaker, artist, educator and longtime activist who is dedicated to creating work that is by, for, and about trans/queer communities.

Born in Chicago and raised in Philadelphia, Rosskam received a BA in Painting and Writing from Bennington College in 2001. He then moved to New York City, and developed a successful editing and production career in New York City from 2002 – 2006, working with independent artists and media makers.

In 2005 Rosskam premiered his first feature film, *transparent*, which was released to critical acclaim and awards internationally and stateside. Frameline Distribution acquired the film in 2005, and it continues to be one of their most popular films – and one of their top-ten best selling titles in 2008. The film has screened in over 50 film festivals and had its broadcast premiere on PBS in June 2008.

While in New York, Rosskam joined the legendary non-profit media arts organization Dyke TV, which produces an award-winning cable access television show for the queer community with roots in the LGBT activism of the late 80's and early 90's. Rosskam rose through the ranks to Executive Producer, and became one of the key organizers of the show and organization.

In 2006, Rosskam moved to Chicago to obtain a graduate degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he had the pleasure of studying with great artists, including Gregg Bordowitz, Barbara DeGeneivive, Don't Rhine and Frédéric Moffet. He received his MFA in Film, Video and New Media in 2008.

In Summer 2007, Jules received an acclaimed Fellowship from The Ellen Stone Belic Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in the Arts and Media, to support the development of his second feature documentary, **against a trans narrative.**

Currently on the faculty at Indiana University/Purdue Fort Wayne, where he teaches in the Communications Department, Rosskam is also a fine

artist whose paintings, installations, and performances have shown in galleries and venues throughout the U.S. Additionally, he is a noted lecturer and speaker on trans/queer filmmaking, art and activism.

Roskam is the recipient of numerous fellowships, awards and grants, including: Crossroads Foundation; Frameline Completion Fund Grant; Astrea Lesbian Foundation for Justice Grant; Illinois Department of Cultural Affairs; Best New Film, Warsaw LGBT Film Festival -*transparent*; Top Documentaries on Gender, Curve Magazine -*transparent*; Top Filmmakers to Look Out For, Curve Magazine.

He is now in production on his third feature film, *Transfeminism*, a documentary that compiles interviews and archival footage of trans women working from both inside and outside feminist movements towards a safer and more just society for themselves and all women.

For more information, visit www.julesrosskam.com

R o u n d T a b l e :

A Discussion with Jules Roskam and Greg Bordowitz

*Greg Bordowitz, noted writer, academic, and AIDS-activist, recently sat down with Jules Roskam for a discussion about trans issues, cinema, and the notion of 'community' addressed in **against a trans narrative**:*

GREG: What are the most urgent questions for trans people in your work?

JULES: If we talk about trans identities and we're talking about activism and organizing, we're also talking about larger communities because that involves saying who is on the inside and who is on the outside. There are so many groups that self-identify, and I think there are many questions they have to deal with. I don't know that anyone has really answered them in a graceful way. For me, the question is how we can move forward and learn to not see other people's articulations of their identities as a personal assault or as threatening to our own identities. For instance, if I use a particular term to refer to myself, I may then meet someone who uses the same word but they use it completely differently; words like transman or FTM or trannyfag or trans-masculine or even queer for that matter. We don't have to attack others because their articulation and definition of those words are different.

What do gay identified men and lesbians share in common with the trans person?

That's a good question. I don't think there is necessarily an inherent or "natural" connection. I think on a very basic level we share a history of marginalization and maybe where it becomes more important is where we share an overlap in some of our issues. Namely that there are many trans people that are gay and lesbian identified, so that trans people are gay and lesbian also. So, in that sense they are part of lesbian and communities, where lesbians and gays want them to be there.

It occurs to me that in *against a trans narrative* a great deal of attention is paid to the importance of a broader queer community, and you've talked about the difficulties of establishing that and yet the roundtables that you organize – organize because there are several different configurations of roundtables, people sitting in tables asking question of each other – are testaments to the fact there is indeed some kind of community that exists. Can you talk about the ways in which you organized those roundtables and how your process reflects the organization of a queer community?

I was having a really big issue with these very traditional documentary studio interview with individuals I had initially done. I felt like people were saying what they thought I wanted them to say. I was thinking: what would be a feminist way of dealing with the issue and how do you break down the inherent power structure of a filmed interview? I decided to gather groups of people to create a collective dynamic. I also wanted to take myself out of the equation.

I asked all the people I did individual interviews with to invite five members of their 'community' to a dinner - without defining for them who their community was - to talk about the film's issues and look at footage and react and discuss. And so they became their own moderators - I didn't intervene unless there was some question or problem. In this sense I think those roundtables function as a microcosm of communities, allowed people to speak more honestly about what they thought about issues in the film, and brought people together in unusual ways.

I am wondering, however, if it's possible really to produce narratives that are both appropriate for transmen and transwomen – do you think so? Do you think this film speaks equally to and for trans women and men?

In a sense, the film doesn't speak for anyone other than me, because I made it. My hope is that many people are able to relate to it in some way, but I do think it's 100% about a trans-masculine experience. However, I think there are issues and questions that transmen and transwomen share. In this respect I hope that transwomen can feel that the film speaks to them in some way. But it is very specifically addressing a trans-masculine audience and attempting to represent some aspect of trans-masculine communities. I've already heard this question: why is this not about trans-women? Which is a valid question with a simple answer: which is just that it's not. This film can't be everything.

Where do you see this film working within and against the histories of documentary and experimental filmmaking?

I think just as much as I'm trying to destabilize this 'universal trans narrative', I'm also trying to destabilize traditional documentary film techniques by blending fiction and non-fiction forms and elements. I'm trying to shift the power dynamics that exist - between the documentary filmmaker and its subjects, and between the documentary film and the audience. I'm employing strategies that ask the audience to be critically engaged in the film and not passively accept what I'm telling them. I think that issue comes up a lot in against a trans narrative: is what we're

watching real and true and what does that mean if it's not true? I'm interested in the process of asking the audience to recognize and question the assumption that the filmic documentary form carries an essential 'truth'.

On a personal level, I identify as a feminist and I try to see how feminism and other theoretical frameworks translate into practice as a filmmaker. I also situate myself within the activist video community. Furthermore, I come out of an experimental documentary tradition, and want the film to be thought of in this sense. Marlon Riggs' "Tongues Untied" changed my life when I saw it, because it was the first experimental hybrid documentary that I'd ever seen.

I'm interested in the work of Derek Jarman, Yvonne Rainer and Sadie Benning, to name a few, and your work has influenced me a lot. I like performative works that are also about identity as well as larger issues. Obviously I'm very interested in queer filmmakers, but once I start listing filmmakers I feel like I could just go on and on...

Against a trans narrative is in many ways a provocative title, a good title, but possibly misleading; it is a generous film, in that it does reveal an enormous amount about the urgent questions that a trans person faces, and succeeds in its enormous ambition.

Select Filmography

Director/Producer
Jules Roskam

2009 against a trans narrative, Feature Experimental Documentary,
Chicago, Illinois

World Premiere, April, London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival

2006 F Scott Fitzgerald Slept Here, Narrative Short,
Brooklyn, New York

Explores the intimacy of friendships between men and the dynamics of unlikely match-ups. Paul and Gordon seem like opposites - Paul is a scruffy, white, girl-hungry, FTM poet exploring the limits of his new gender the way other people test drive cars. Gordon is an over-achieving black student who is balancing his identity as a gay man with his conservative professional aspirations. Both are struggling with the same question: How do I fit in?

2005 transparent, Feature Documentary,
Brooklyn New York

Documentary about 19 female-to-male transsexuals from 14 different states who have given birth and, in most instances, raised their biological children. The film details the remarkable stories of these transmen and their children's extraordinary experiences with gender, biology and their every day life as a family. Through these incredible stories, we get a rare glimpse of life on both sides of the 'vast' gender divide, where basic assumptions about human nature, social roles and the essence of gender do not apply.

2002-05 Dyke TV, Executive Producer
Brooklyn, New York

Non-profit media arts organization, producers of award-winning cable access television show for the queer community.

Key Participants and Cast

Desi del Valle is an award-winning actor and filmmaker with a background in distribution. AGAINST is Desi's third collaboration with Roskam.

Suzy Brack has toured and recorded with musical acts as diverse as the art-folk of Tautologic and the swing jazz of Yves Francois. Her most recent screen acting credits include Slave (2002) an independent feature film by writer/director Noel Olken.

Denise Uyehara is an award-winning performance artist, writer, and playwright whose work has been presented internationally. She is interested in what marks us in our migration across borders of identity.

Jessica Halem is a funny "on-your-face" queer feminist comic, nominated as "Best Female Comedian" at the 2008 Chicago Comedy Awards.

Tierza Scaccia is an actor and performer seamlessly moving between film, television, theater and improv. In 2005 and 2007 she won best actress with the independent film commission.

Willy Wilkinson is a third-gendered writer and public health consultant from Oakland, and the recipient of a 2004 National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association award for outstanding opinion/editorial. Since the early 1980s, ze has organized queer and transgender communities of color, and has chronicled API queer movements in various media sources.

Tracy Baim is a Chicago-based lesbian journalist, editor and publisher writes about the LGBT, GLBT, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities, media, politics and more.

Vernita Grey is the GLBT Liaison and Hate Crime Specialist at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and is involved in addressing problems faced by GLBT seniors. She serves on the Task Force on Aging, the GLBT advisory committee to the AARP.

Screening History

London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival

World Premiere

April, 2009

Additional Festival Screenings

To Be Announced

Technical Specs

Feature-Length Documentary

Color

Aspect Ratio: 16:9

Completion Date: 2009

Total running time: 61 minutes

Screening format: Beta SP, DVCam, MiniDV

Full Production Credits

Director, Producer, Writer, Editor:
Jules Roskam

Starring:

Jules Roskam
Teriza Scaccia
Joshua Bastian Cole
Red Vaughn Tremmel
Elizabeth Atwater
Joette Waters
Elizabeth Cline
Gabriel Ervin
Willy Wilkinson
Robin Daverso
Jacqueline Boyd
Loraine Edwards
Lori Harmon
Ruth Clark
Genevieve Erin O'Brien
Erin Obradovich
Aaron Henderson
Carrick Bell
Denise Uyehara
Latham Zearfoss
Aay Preston-Myint
Christopher Keener
Ethan White
Mel Racho
Rebecca Gordon
Tracy Baim
Jackie Anderson
Jorjet Harper
Evette Cardona
Vernita Grey
Desi del Valle
Casey Schwartz
Jessica Halem
Myrl Beam
Tamara Roberts
Kumasi Gwynne

Lynnell S. Long
Dominic Weaver
Suzy Brack

Executive Producer:
Jules Roskam

Assistant Director:
Daniel Lampkin

Producer:
Kyle Broom

Associate Producer:
Sam Feder

Director of Photography:
Renato Velarde

Assistant Camera:
Josh Guffey
Ondrea Dauser
Additional Camera:
Adrean Mangiardi
Huan-Chu Wang
Sam Feder
Reiko Yamamoto
Genevieve Erin O'Brien
Steffani Jemison
Ya-Ting Hsu
Gabriel Ervin
Anthea Bhém
Meredith Ziekle
Yoni Goldstein

Grip:
Ronald Barclay

Art Director: Joey Difranco

Set Builder:
Ron Barclay

Sound Mixer:

Angel Kastanis
Ron Janusz

Script Supervisor:
Rachel Deans

Make Up:
Sparkle Sapp
Liz Schroeder
Liz O'Leary

Wardrobe:
Ondrea Dauser
Raquel Rodriguez

Sound Design:
Madsen Minax

Production Assistant:
Tiffany Samson
Malic Amalya
Gabriel Ervin
Erin Obradovich

Sound Mix, Coloring and Mastering:
metroSpace Media

Willy Wilkinson's performances:
written and performed by the artist

Thanks to our food donors:
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Subway

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Chicago Women's Health Center