

# T U R N I N G P O I N T

WITH CAITLYN JENNER ON THE COVER OF VANITY FAIR AND THE BBC COMMISSIONING ITS FIRST SITCOM STARRING A TRANSGENDER ACTRESS, ARE WE SEEING A SOCIAL REVOLUTION, ASKS NICOLA GILL

**F**irst we had Orange Is the New Black giving a groundbreaking mainstream role to the trans actress Laverne Cox, then we had the androgynously beautiful model Andreja (formerly Andrej) Pejic, who modelled both men's and women's clothes with equally sinuous grace, with surprisingly few eyebrows being raised in Middle England.

In 2013, one of the world's richest men, the American billionaire investor and philanthropist James Pritzker, became Jennifer Pritzker, essentially said "So what?", and carried on making millions before breakfast every day, only now wearing a nice frock. And, of course, this month we have the queen of all transitions in the newly monikered Caitlyn Jenner, reigning the newsstand on the cover of Vanity Fair.

What happened? Long the poor relation in LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), until very recently being T was a bit like being Welsh, in that it was the only minority it was still somehow socially acceptable to mock. Before Jenner's keenly followed transition, many people still thought transgender and transvestite were pretty much the same thing (tell that to Grayson Perry) or that trans folk were just plain weird and too out there to be given any compassionate bandwidth. Now, suddenly, all that has changed.

"There's a huge groundswell of people coming out as trans," says Rebecca Root, the star of the BBC's new sitcom *Boy Meets Girl*, out later this year, centred around the tribulations of a single woman on the dating scene who just happens to be trans. It will be post-watershed, witty, close-to-the-bone fun, and Rebecca is aware that she will soon become the poster girl (all long-limbed, 6ft, miniskirted, knee-booted inch of her) for the UK trans community: she isn't fazed. "We are finally becoming less stigmatised and more visible than ever before. If *Boy Meets Girl* can open people's minds so they can simply see the T community as another shade within the glorious hues of the human condition, I'll be delighted — if that doesn't sound too ridiculously rainbow of me."

In a way, fashion sensed the change in atmosphere early. The designer Richard Nicoll launched a unisex line, *S/He*, for SS14, in partnership with the artist Linder Sterling, and JW Anderson regularly blurs the boundaries between genders with his clothing, saying that looking at clothes in those terms is "really stale". Fashionistas of both sexes have lately adopted gender-neutral pieces such as bomber jackets, sweatshirts and trainers as style staples, and last year Rad Hourani presented the first unisex collection during couture week.

Attitudes to gender and sexuality in 2015 are more fluid and open than ever before, at least in the Tinder generation. Straight boys wear nail varnish for nights out, hetero girls play around with butch looks, fierce piercings and DMs and both make the most of apps like 3nder to play fast and loose by adding a third person (or more) to their bedroom mix when the mood takes them, without the doubled-up gender half of the couple identifying as gay. No one minds any more if big boys sometimes cry and grown-up girls often want to wear the trousers; to the younger generation being transgender just seems like another shoulder-shrug thing.

In America, last year Bruce Weber's beautifully shot campaign for Barneys department store created waves for featuring the moving stories of 17 (unfeasibly stunning) transgender individuals.

"We're all conscious in the last couple of years of the strides that gays and lesbians are making in marriage equality, and it seemed that the 'T' in LGBT was getting a little bit left behind," says the CEO of Barneys, Mark Lee.

Amos Mac, a photographer and the founding editor of the uber-cool trans-male style magazine *Original Plumbing*, says the Weber film was a seminal moment: "More and more I've noticed fashion, film and TV doing a beautiful job of sharing trans experiences and putting a real effort toward authentic stories. Over here we also have the award-winning show *Transparent*, which not only shows a story line about a parent transitioning later in life, like Caitlyn Jenner, but has the largest number of trans cast and crew behind and in front of the camera. People across generations are drawn to Caitlyn Jenner's story, and I think that's partly why the media are sympathetic. A ton of younger people feel like they grew up with the Jenner-Kardashian clan, and older people knew her as an Olympian and American hero on Wheaties cereal boxes. They knew the person before the Diane Sawyer interview and they now know the person after the 'coming out' interview and can see she's the same person, just a human being who wants to be happy."

The performer Kate O'Donnell is another loud-and-proud trans woman making waves. Her sell-out show, *Big Girl's Blouse* (which has just won best LGBTQ show at the Brighton Fringe festival), recounts in furiously funny anecdotes (and with all abandonment of personal boundaries) her story of growing up in the Midlands in the 1970s as a gender-confused little boy and teenager.

O'Donnell is less into debating the politics of trans acceptance than talking about the funny, warm, human side of being transgender. When we talk she's more concerned with showing me a fantastic vintage hat she's just bought and wondering if it suits her than making any deep, political points. She's witty, wise and has a wonderfully glamorous dress sense. She signs off her last email to me saying: "Gender is always a fashion statement. RuPaul said, 'We are all born naked, and after that it's all drag!'" Funnily that email arrives just as the DVLA announces it is introducing the title "Mx" onto driving licences for those who do not wish to identify with any particular gender.

By the time Root hits our screens in *Boy Meets Girl* this autumn, the publicity for the new Eddie Redmayne film *The Danish Girl* will also be hotting up. Redmayne is starring as Lili Elbe, the artist and transgender-surgery pioneer who started life as Einar Mogens Wegener. Root has a small part as a nurse in the film, but she hopes that after years of slogging away hoping for a mainstream breakthrough, bigger and better roles will now beckon. Wandering around Selfridges with her recently, checking out its shiny new *Agender* capsule collection of gender-neutral clothing, she muses on how far trans people have come, and how far they still have to go. "When we are visible in all walks of life without anyone making a big thing of it, in the same way no one goes on about Graham Norton's sexuality or Naomi Campbell's ethnicity, I'll know we are there."

"Now", she says, holding up an edgily directional elongated waistcoat in powder grey from the unisex collection, "what do you think: yes or no?" ♦



## BEYOND BINARY HOW TO UNDERSTAND TRANS

**For those whose gender identity — what they feel on the inside — doesn't match the sex they present on the outside, defining themselves can be a minefield, and many choose not to. In the end, it's up to each individual what labels they use or don't.**

**Transvestite** Less about feeling as though you are in the wrong body, more a desire to delve into the dressing-up box of gender stereotypes.

**Transgender** Both, either, neither, other. An umbrella term for people who don't conform to the conventional idea of gender roles. Straight-up male or female doesn't have to be a focus or even an aim.

**Transsexual** An older term usually used for people who want to live as the opposite gender. Many embrace medical intervention, which can include hormone therapy and/or surgery. Transsexual isn't an umbrella term, and many transgender people don't identify as transsexual.

Harriet Nelham Clark

WHEN WE ARE  
VISIBLE IN ALL  
WALKS OF  
LIFE WITHOUT  
ANYONE MAKING  
A BIG THING OF  
IT, I'LL KNOW WE  
ARE THERE