

In Conversation: Chase Joynt and Kristen Schilt

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Filmmakers Chase Joynt and Kristen Schilt talk about their film, "Framing Agnes"



A cast of trans actors turn a talk show inside out to confront the legacy of a young trans woman in *Framing Agnes*. (Courtesy Fourth Act Film)

In honor of Trans Week of Visibility and Action, Bright Lights Cinema Series will be showing "Framing Agnes" this Thursday, March 30. I had the pleasure of interviewing filmmakers Chase Joynt and Kristen Schilt about their documentary ahead of this week's screening.

Originally released as a short film, "Framing Agnes" utilizes the format of a talk show to revive the stories of some of the real people who sought treatment with Dr. Harold Garfinkel at the UCLA Gender Clinic in the 1950s. The film uses transcripts from those interviews with Dr. Harold Garfinkel as source material for the movie. An arresting blend of documentary and recreation, "Framing Agnes" utilizes prominent contemporary transgender actors—including Zackary Drucker, Jen Richards, and Angelica Ross—to reexamine this archived past. While critical of both historical and current-day media fascination with trans people, "Framing Agnes" is a compassionate, clear-eyed, and meticulously-researched portrait of complex humanity.

Casarico: What drew each of you to this project?

Schilt: Chase and I have had a collaborative relationship for the last decade, made possible by our more than twenty years of friendship that started for us as students at UCLA. We were fortunate to be able to find ways to work and teach together at the University of Chicago, which allowed us to ask questions about how each of our disciplines – documentary film for Chase and sociology for me – participate in the definition and shaping of representations of the lives of minoritarian communities. We each were working in trans studies from different perspectives, yet the ways in which Harold Garfinkel's writings about Agnes had been taken up over the years inside and outside of academia became a shared case for us to explore and examine together. What drew us to making a film was to find a way to really blow open the vault, so to speak, and bring this slice of mid-century trans history to a broader audience. At the same time, we wanted to use film as a medium to trouble and complicate questions of identity and representation.

Casarico: This film is stacked with some of the finest trans actors currently working, and all of them give such nuanced consideration to the real people they're portraying, and their level of research and empathy adds this incredible dimension to the work. What was the process like for casting "Framing Agnes?" And how much did your actors suggest in giving these subjects life?

Joynt: We are lucky to live and work in proximity to so many trans luminaries, many of whom have been making work about trans life for decades. In the context of this project, it felt particularly important to ask those who were already addressing the politics of representation in their own work, and who were already negotiating their image related to their career or personal history. While not all of these connections are made explicit in the film, the foundational approach is anchored by a commitment to move collaboratively, which meant that each actor/collaborator was an active participant in shaping the trajectories of their appearance and performance on screen, in both verité and recreations.

C: Both of you are academics in the field of gender and sexuality: Chase, you teach Gender Studies and Visual Culture at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, and Kristen, you're the director of the gender and sexuality department at the University of Chicago. How does your role of researcher intersect with that of artist? Do you ever find the two conflicting?

S: We get asked this question a lot! I always say that Chase is the artist of the collaboration. [Laughs.] As a person trained in the social sciences, working in film and making experimental art was very new to me. In my field, researchers typically work alone and write academic books and articles that have a pretty small audience. So for me, I really embraced the opportunity to push outside of this model and see what might be possible.

J: One of my favorite things Kristen says to break the ice in a Q&A is that prior to our collaboration, she didn't understand metaphor! While that is not really true, it is a very charming way to think out loud together about how we are, in fact, incapable of doing some of this work alone. That incapacity is not a deficiency, but rather, an endorsement for why we must move together toward complex, community—specific questions that demand poly-vocal investments and multi-disciplinary techniques.


C: This film dissects the notion of "representation" in media, specifically how the stories of transgender lives are shared with us as viewers. Yet it also resists the idea that every individual must be documented, and acknowledges that many transgender pioneers would have been happy to live quiet, untold lives. As documentarians, how do you navigate your role in this kind of cinematic voyeurism? When does it feel like you're overstepping?

J: You have identified a central concern, and, dare I say, obsession in the film! It is a confounding and politically charged paradox, and we understand the film as one of many attempts to reckon with the power of authorship and the legacy of documentary as a genre.

C: Finally, in using the real transcripts of the transgender patients for Garfinkel's UCLA study, but casting contemporary transgender actors to portray these subjects, you've effectively metatextually blurred the line between documentary and performance. To what extent do you think that gender is itself a kind of performance? And how do you envision the future of transgender representation in cinema, especially in light of the recent wave of anti-trans legislation sweeping the US right now?

S: I would say that a big motivation for us was to use the film to push back on the idea that circulated in the media in the mid 2010s that trans people had "made it" in terms of cultural acceptance in the U.S. The assumption was that because we now saw some trans representation in the media, we would see legal and social acceptance follow. And clearly, that was blatantly false. As Jules Gill-Peterson articulates in "Framing Agnes," there is a clear connection between the gender clinics of the 1950s and 1960s and the intense backlash against trans people and gender affirming care we see today. This is not to disparage the important work trans people do every day for greater justice and access to care, but rather to acknowledge that this kind of progressive change is not distributed equitably across the country, or across racial and ethnic groups and economic locations. Our goal is to show how the stronghold of these regulatory institutions helps to bolster and support anti-trans attitudes and legislation both then and now.

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About Sophie Casarico:
Sophie Casarico is a fiction writer from St. Augustine, Florida. She is currently in her second year in the MFA Creative Writing program at Emerson College, and is an aspiring novelist and screenwriter. Her favorite filmmakers are Wes Anderson, Alfred Hitchcock, and Anna Biller.

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