The Danish Girl: Symmetry as a Representation of Society

Daniel Bustillo
Instituto Franklin–UAH

The 1920s were famous for being the time of the opening of mind in the United States and also in some parts of Europe. Before and during the First World War, the Victorian mentality predominating in Europe was marked by narrow-minded approaches to changes in social customs, such as declared homosexuality, bisexuality or transsexuality. However, after the Great War, some big cities such as London or Paris adopted a more progressive stand, while other countries remained stuck in a conservative mentality. Among them, Denmark stood out as generally intolerant to social transformation.

This illiberal society is portrayed in the American-British movie The Danish Girl, in which the topic of transsexuality has been explored. Based on actual events, The Danish Girl (Tom Hooper, 2015) deals with the life of Einar Wegener (Eddie Redmayne), a Danish man married to his wife Gerda Wegener (Alicia Vikander) who, by accident, discovers that he feels more comfortable with the female gender. The case of Einar Wegener, who will be later named as Lili Elbe, has been represented on the big screen as the first transgender woman to undergo a sex reaffirmation surgery in history. Moreover, it has been brought forth as an example for all the transgender people that feel oppressed daily by their own community.

In order to indirectly portray the conservative society and context of the time, the director of the film, Tom Hooper, decided to exploit the device of symmetry. If attention is given to the different landscapes and scenes, one would be able to see that similarity is presented all along the movie. My point is that this symmetry is used in order to represent the narrow-minded society of the time as, while symmetry predominates during the Wegeners stay in Denmark, it almost disappears when in Paris, finding themselves in a more progressive and diverse society.
**THE DANISH GIRL**

Set in 1926, *The Danish Girl* deals with the lives of Einar and Gerda Wegener, a married couple living in Copenhagen, Denmark. Both artists, Einar gains success by painting landscapes while his wife tries to follow the same path by painting portraits. Everything changes when, for one of her portraits, Gerda asks Einar to serve as a female model. Dressed as a woman, Einar starts to feel interested in cross-dressing, something that both he and Gerda take as something funny on first instance. However, Einar’s interest in being as much as possible like a woman continues to increase, and over time he prefers being Lili Elbe, the female version of himself.

While at first Gerda takes this situation with amusement, she will later realize that the issue might be more serious than she first thought. Fearful of losing her husband, Gerda tries to “cure” Einar’s passion for being a female. However, seeing that there is no way back, she decides to support her husband in his personal change. Meanwhile, the portraits of Lili Elbe begin to gain audience, allowing Gerda’s art to be exhibit in Paris. While in the French capital, a more open-minded society than the Danish one, Gerda and Einar—Lili—plan to look for help in order to see what Einar can do in order to fulfill his desire of becoming physically a woman.

Eventually, the Wegeners find a doctor who offers Einar to undergo surgical operation in order to change his sex from male to female. While fearful at first, Einar finally accepts the offer, which, nonetheless, will cost him his life due to the little medical knowledge regarding transsexuality at that time.

**THE USE OF SYMMETRY IN CINEMA**

Symmetry can be defined as the technique used for the purpose of creating a sense of unity through the repetition of one or more elements. Although symmetry seems quite simple and easy to display, it is actually a very complex technique that can bear a strong influence on the narrative of the movie. In film studies, there are three different kinds of symmetry which can be identified.

![Figure 1](image-url)
The second type of symmetry (fig. 2) is “rotational symmetry”. In this kind of symmetry, what we have is a central point, from which similar, equidistant objects emerge from equal distance. This technique is used in order to create a visual centrifugal force around a center. The following photo by The Big Lebowski is a good example of rotational symmetry (Thonsgaard 2003).

The third—and most frequently employed in cinema—kind of symmetry is the “axial” one. This type of symmetrical composition refers to the popular definition of symmetry as the equalness of two sides separated by an axis. In other words, it creates the effect of object mirroring each other with respect to a central line. This line can be marked or unmarked and it can be embodied by anything, from a person to an object (Thonsgaard 2003).

The following image from The Danish Girl (fig. 3) is a perfect example for this type of symmetry.
There may be different uses for symmetry in cinema, depending on the director and cinematographer's intents. For example, if the director of the film wants to give a character the main spotlight, he can set the character itself in the axis of the scene.

Symmetric composition can also be exploited to create a sense of community. It is recurred to apply proportion in situations where characters participate in some kind of shared environment, as it consists basically of several parts combined synergically. Also it can express peace, stability and eternity, and, therefore, death in some cases.

Symmetry is usually applied differently depending on the creativeness and purposes of the director of the film; moreover, there are certain uses of it that can be peculiar to a specific director.

For example, Stanley Kubrick proved to be obsessed with filmic devices strongly related with symmetry in his films. He is well-known for eliciting psychological effects on the viewer with the simple use of symmetric framing in rather static scenes where no relevant action is actually happening. This can be well seen, for example, in the scene of *The Shining* (1980) in which the young protagonist is riding his tricycle through the oppressive, uncanny corridors of the hotel (fig. 4).

The strategic use of symmetry is employed in *The Danish Girl* as a way of representing the conservative society of the time. Therefore, I will try to explain, in chronological order within the film’s storyline, how the symmetrical scenes appear and disappear in consonance with Einar Wegener’s evolving sentiments and emotions as he becomes Lili Elbe.

The film starts in the Copenhagen of 1926. At the beginning of the film nature is always reproduced as symmetrical, giving the viewer a sense of harmony and order. At this time Einar Wegener is still a man feeling conventionally masculine, and the representation of his manhood is embodied by a set of five trees set in a symmetrical order (0:01:23). The fact that the trees at the start of the story are the same that Einar is painting later on in the film gives an impression that—whenever they appear, either painted or in real life—he is behaving as he is expected to behave. At first, Einar only paints landscapes very similar to this scheme (0:02:00); suggesting that he is not
looking for something out of the bounds of order or harmony, but rather he seems to
be in a comfort state within the conservative society (fig. 5). Yet, as the film advances,
we are going to appreciate that Einar starts helping his wife with producing her
asymmetric art.
Regarding costume details, at the beginning Einar is wearing always formal clothes;
that is to say, his attire sums formality to the scenes, making them even more sym-
metrical and orderly. However, those people who are portrayed as more liberal, like
Gerda’s friend Oola Paulson (Amber Heard) are presented wearing more unequal
clothes, setting them aside from the conservative characters and extras (see fig. 6).

Moreover, when Einar turns into Lili, this formality embodied by the attire is going
to disappear and be substituted by more asymmetric, progressive ways of dressing.
It is worth noting that, while in Copenhagen, the architecture of the Danish capital is a faithful reflect of its conservative stance. Camera-shots on the buildings are almost always symmetrical both indoors and outdoors, giving the impression of authority and seriousness (fig. 7).

Everything changes in 00:13:00, when Einar poses as a female model for Gerda and suddenly realizes that he feels more feminine than a man is supposed to be. According to this change in the mentality of Einar, a clear change can be observed in the way he perceives order and equalness. Now, as he feels different from the surrounding society, he is also inclined to introduce asymetrical elements in his painting. However, even if Einar is experiencing a change, the Danish society is not, as can be appreciated during the ball in 00:27:50. In this sequence, everybody is wearing formal dresses, while the scenography remains symmetrical. It is also during this ball when a man attempts to flirt with Lili Elbe for the first time, whereas she wants to maintain the distance with him (00:30:13). Here again, symmetry predominates in order to represent Einar’s feelings towards this situation, as a barrier—metaphorical and physical—is placed just in the middle of the scene separating both characters (fig. 8).
Even if the viewer perceives that it is an uncomfortable situation for Lili, she ends up kissing him; as a consequence, she feels so embarrassed that she decides to get back to his previous life, to his manhood. This regress brings back the use of symmetry inside the Wegeners’ house and in Einar’s paintings. However, as time passes by, he begins painting asymmetrically again as a way to escape his conventional comfort zone. This rebellion against conservatism can be appreciated in 0:37:40 when he decides to break with formality and gets rid of his male clothes.

Everything will radically change later on in Paris, when Gerda is offered the opportunity of showing her art in the French capital. As said in the introduction, Paris in the 1920s was a more open, culturally stimulating society than the rest of Europe, and therefore the way it is represented in the movie implies a stark change from Denmark. For a start, even the Parisian scenery, contrary to the Danish one, offers us an asymmetrical landscape (fig. 9).
The urban character of the French capital allows for even more radical asymmetries, in which each side opposes to the other, as well as strong slanted lines. For example, in one of the following image we have a strong lighting contrast between the two sides of the street represented, having the sun on one side and darkness on the other (fig. 10).

This lack of formality and balance in Paris may be used to show the openness of the French culture. Yet, a different device is employed by the director to characterize the narrative development: while in Paris, the number of mirror and window reflections notably increase. That is to say, as there is no symmetry within the landscape or the architecture, the characters themselves seem to be looking for that symmetry. This may be due to the fact that the closeness of the Danish society follows them wherever they are; or maybe because they are now immersed in different society and they feel alienated by it at first, as it can be felt in Einar’s words when he’s preoccupied with his work being “a little introspective for French taste”. In the following images (fig. 11) we can appreciate how the reflections work.
While in Paris, Gerda talks with a friend about her husband’s issues with gender identity. These scenes show a new kind of symmetry, as it is forced symmetry contrary to the natural symmetry of Denmark. It seems that, while the Parisian society offers the Wegeners no insecurity—due to the lack of oppressive landscape symmetry and to the progressive nature of French society—the couple still struggles to see Einar’s struggle as natural.

After the period spent in Paris, Einar decides to go to a women’s hospital in Germany to find some rest. When he arrives to the place symmetry is pervasive again, as Einar conceives the hospital just as repressive as the society at first (fig. 12). Yet, as Einar begins to feel more confident and somehow accepted in that environment, this symmetry will be progressively disappearing.
At the end of the film, when Einar eventually undergoes the surgical operation for
gender reassignment and manages to become Lili even physically, symmetry disap-
ppears, and this denotes the end of the pressure from the oppressive society towards
Einar. However, the film ends with Lili dying because of a failure in the operation.

All in all, The Danish Girl shows that, at least in Denmark, anything out of the
“norm”, and thus perceived as unconventional, was judged and even repressed. The
use of symmetry gets this essence, as it gives a degree of formality, equilibrium, au-
thority and seriousness to the images depicting this country. This is directly opposed
to the image of Paris, characterized by an asymmetry that, despite accepting the We-
geners, does not achieve to make them feel truly comfortable.

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