

## Abstract

Films on trans children often portray transgenderism as a disorder with a tragic ending for the protagonists, hereby often ignoring the existing research on children being capable of expressing their own gender. In this article, we perform a close reading of the feature film *20,000 Species of Bees* from a queer and feminist perspective. We focus on the potential of the film as a tool for educational practice as part of queer pedagogies. This coming-of-age movie portrays a family where daughter and mother undergo an identity crisis, challenging the traditional (gender)norms in the Basque society in which they are embedded. We argue that, unlike some of the recent films featuring trans children, *20,000 Species of Bees* breaks with the conventional structures of mediated trans identities as problematic and opens a new perspective on the pedagogical use of the media, particularly cinema, as a space for imagining a 'future to become'.

**Keywords:** fiction film, queer pedagogies, childhood, mother, transgender, identity, *20,000 Species of Bees*, Basque Country

## Introduction

Cultural products such as music, literature, film and fiction, provide a site of discussion on certain topics among the public opinion. In the case of transgender youth, cultural products and social media have been crucial not only for awareness-raising about being trans but also for the connection among peers and the independent production of content (Tortajada et al., 2021). As Spanish trans activist Roberta Marrero says in *We Can Be Heroes: Una celebración de la cultura LGTBQ+ (A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Culture)*, as a teenager she had an urgent need for queer cultural references when she was struggling to find herself and her place in the world, and to fight against intolerance in society (Bermúdez de Castro, 2020). Indeed, finding imagery or references to non-normative role models in (niche) cultural products is not only important as a resource for the emotional survival of queer teenagers, but finding these in commercial cinema is crucial for awareness-raising among mainstream society (Fisher and Fisher, 2018).

LGBTIQ+ films that have found their way to the commercial circuit do not simply make visible the realities and experiences mostly unknown by cis and heteronormative people, but actively contribute to creating a more diverse society by giving voice, validation and cultural presence to minorities (Bermúdez de Castro, 2020). In these films it is not only important to show lived realities in particular contexts - which may include experiences of rejection, incomprehension or bigotry - but also to create images of what an open and inclusive society should look like, to show the way ahead.

As Íñigo Marzábal and Carmen Arocena remark in *Películas para la educación (Films for Education)*, 'cinema offers a great opportunity to create new imagery and thus new realities' (2016: 15).

Unfortunately, the way trans characters are (re)presented in fiction films has not always been helpful, as often these portrayals are either fetishistic or tragic (Engdahl, 2014). This is the case, for example, in the film *Crying Game* as pointed out by Jack Halberstam (2005). In mainstream cinema, it is common to see stories revolve around the very fact of being trans instead of having the trans characters play a part in the plot and presenting their gender identity just as another personality feature (Reitz, 2017). Mainstream films generally tend to portray trans characters in stereotypical ways (Thomas, 2020), often linked to stigmatized activities like prostitution or pornography (Mockarsi et al., 2019), resulting in the "trans/romance dilemma", a term coined by Tracy Abbott (2013) to explain the impossibility of romance or 'real love' for trans characters. The narrative of the 'wrong body' prevails, linked to a dramatic storyline of an unhappy person that usually ends in tragedy (death by murder or suicide). This negative representation is part of what Waal and Armstrong understand as 'trans necronarratives' (2020), that is, narratives emphasizing grief and mourning as central to the constitution of trans subjectivity and vitality. Nonetheless, in recent productions with trans characters we find a tendency towards more positive representation based on concepts of complexity, recognition, and comfort in films and TV shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (Taylor McClaren et al. 2021), *Euphoria* (Masanet et al., 2022), or *20,000 Species of Bees* (García-Catalán, 2024). These TV shows and movies open the door to a trans gaze, "a non-fetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body" (Halberstam, 2005: 92).

### **20,000 Species of Bees: Contesting a binary regime of representation**

The feature film *20,000 Species of Bees* (Urresola, 2023) is part of this new trend, and takes the opportunity to break with these (mostly negative) stereotypical representations by showing a reality of incomprehension and backlash in a small village, but also the empathy, tolerance and love towards a trans child. The realities of trans children in Spain and the story told in the film are intertwined, resulting in a respectful approach that has been praised not only by the trans community and their families but also by a mainstream audience. Among many other prizes, the film received three awards at the Berlinale (2023), the Forqué award for Cinema and Education in Values (2023) and three Goya Film Awards (2024): one for best new director, one for best original screenplay, and one for best supporting actress.

*20,000 Species of Bees* was released on 21 April 2023; it is a 128-minute film directed and scripted by Estíbaliz Urresola and produced by *Inicia Films* - an independent Spanish production company - and *Gariza Films*, an independent feminist production company. In an interview published in CTXT (Cuéllar Menezo, 2023), Urresola narrates that she was shocked by the news she read in the press on the suicide of teenager Ekai in 2018 (Azumendi, 2018), which led her to contact a local association of trans children's families, Naizen. In this organization she met with many trans children and their families, and after spending some time with them and conducting a series of interviews over a year and a half, she came to fully understand the heterogeneity and complexity of their experiences. From these relationships, established in Naizen, an

important change emerged that we have experienced in the last decade in Spain: the progressive acceptance of (the existence of) trans children, in contrast with the previous paradigm of rejection, punishment and attempts to modify children's conduct (Parra, 2021). For many of these families, their children's transition was "unavoidable" (Pepper, 2012), highlighting the persistence and insistence of their identities, the profound distress their children experienced, and suicidality at young ages (Pepper, 2012; Pyne 2014). In Spain, some profound changes in sexual and reproductive rights have taken place in the last two decades: abortion rights for 16 and 17-year-olds without parental consent, single women and lesbian women access to assisted reproduction technology rights, same-sex marriage, name and sex changes in documents for trans people, among others. These legal changes, along with historically low birth rates, have contributed to a shift towards parenting styles focusing more on children's needs rather than only on parents' needs, and listening to children's voices. These are some of the elements that made a change happen towards greater support for trans children in Spain, and families uniting and becoming a social movement in the mid-2010s (Platero et al., 2023).

With a new bill recently passed by the Spanish government, *Law 4/2023 for the full and effective equality of transgender people and for the guarantee of LGBTI rights*, adolescents of 16 and older can change their name and sex registration on their identity cards in the same conditions as adults. For the ages 14 to 15, adolescents need their legal representatives' assistance, and documents proving a degree of stability in the non-conformity with their sex/gender. For children between 12 and 14 a new judicial procedure is in place, where matureness and stability must be proven by the child. Children under 12 cannot access legal gender recognition with this law, although there are sentences that have granted these rights in particular cases (López Trujillo, 2023). Moreover, due to a ruling by the Constitutional Court in 2019, minors demonstrating 'adequate maturity and a stable transgender identity' are now afforded the opportunity to modify their name and sex on official documents, even at younger ages (López Trujillo, 2024; Tribunal Constitucional, 2019).

Going back to *20,000 Species of Bees*, director Urresola thus decides to write a script where fragments of different storylines are intertwined as in a journey, breaking with the biomedical narrative of transsexuality as a pathological pattern with a predefined path. Urresola realizes that transition should not be understood as an individual process of a trans child (Burrul, 2023), but rather as "the relationship with these sons and daughters, not so much the children's transition, but a change in how others look at or read these children's realities" (Cuéllar Menezo, 2023). It has often been pointed out that when a person makes a gender transition, it is not them alone but also their families and surroundings that make up the process of transitioning (Simpson, 2018; Dierckx and Platero, 2017). This means that in a trans person's family and nearest circle (friends, school, neighbourhood), a process of 'literacy' about gender and sexuality occurs, including the acquisition of new skills to face this new reality (Platero, 2014). At the same time, social norms that are usually taken for granted are now questioned, such as the gender binary or heteronormativity (Pyne, 2014). Psychology offers a concept to understand these relationships between parents and children: the "child-taught-parent" (Hill and Menville, 2009), assuming a mutual learning process where families accompany their children following the child's lead. This breaks the top-

down relationship of adults guiding their children along paths and experiences that they already know, towards a more horizontal relationship off the beaten tracks where parents and children discover a new reality together: being a trans person or breaking with binary gender patterns and heteronormativity.

Being aware of these parallel and intertwined relationships between parents and children, director Urresola traces “a parallel journey with two protagonists, the girl and the mother” (Cuéllar Menezo, 2023). She hereby uses the psycho-analytic notion of the mirror (Lacan, 1966), referring to the construction of one’s own knowledge based on the Other, in this case a daughter and a mother who look at each other. Urresola says: “I began to work on this idea of mirrors, where the more the girl becomes herself, the less the mother is herself” (Cuéllar Menezo, 2023). Even though she was advised to make a story about a single character, Urresola thus decides to construct two different stories, portraying a family where both daughter and mother undergo an important identity crisis: the child as a transgender girl who experiences an awakening process while lacking support; and the mother as an artist who gave up her artist career to take care of her three children and wants to get her life back as a sculptor. Both pose important challenges to gender and sexual norms in which the Basque society is rooted: the child has a father who denies her identity as a girl, and the mother’s deceased father was a famous artist who never believed in her career or talent. Under their fathers’ shadows, both mother and daughter struggle to find a way to pursue their path towards self-identification and finding their own identity.

*20,000 Species of Bees* is a relevant case study for many reasons, both from an academic point of view and a pedagogical point of view. The film is part of a series of productions that are contributing to trans visibility where identities are presented as authentic and truthful instead of being questioned (Abbott, 2022). In this film Urresola, as director and screenwriter, employs narrative strategies to protect queer audiences, including emotionally supportive portrayals of the queer character and her family (Soto-Sanfiel and Villegas-Simón, 2024). In this sense the film provides positive social knowledge and an alternative to the cisheteronormative view, breaking with Western cultures’ discomfort with trans or non-conforming identities (Miller, 2015). It allows us to address the different perspectives on trans childhood realities within a family and a social context, as a ‘mirror’ of the different tensions in Spanish society today. Also, the film creates a symbolic space for trans and non-binary children to make sense of and acknowledge their own gender experimentation and identity process, as well as initiate or reinforce ongoing interpersonal negotiations with their families (Kosenko et al., 2018).

## Methodology

In this article we analyze the feature film *20,000 Species of Bees* to illustrate its potential as a pedagogical tool. Our analytical framework is rooted in queer pedagogies (Britzman, 1998; val flores, 2020), providing a critical point of view going beyond the polarized discourse surrounding the rights of trans children —whether their childhood is constructed as typical or pathological, or whether it is appropriate to use such content in schools or high schools. Here, Marla Morris’s conceptualization of

queer theory proves relevant (1998). Morris articulates queer not so much as an identity, but rather as a subject position, a political stance, and an aesthetic sensibility. Queer theory, in essence, looks at individuals who are othered because of their gender and/or sexuality deviating from societal norms—a situation illustrated by the portrayal in *20,000 Species of Bees* of a trans child and her family in Spain. Furthermore, queer theory challenges the notion of the ‘normal,’ particularly in the context of this young child in Basque society. Queer politics not only position themselves outside cis-heteronorms but also resist the existence of these norms and the structures enforcing their boundaries (Morris, 1998). By revealing the norms constraining the film’s protagonists, we redirect the focus from the trans child and her family to the norms themselves, such as cis-heteronormativity, traditional roles, sexism, and adultism. Lastly, Morris also posits queer as an aesthetic stance, seeking and appreciating potentially subversive content in cultural productions. Hence, the act of watching, enjoying, and critically interpreting the film within a safe space becomes instrumental in ‘queering’ it, as well as queering the pedagogical applications of the movie (Shlasko, 2005 p.124).

The qualitative analytical categories *adult gaze, traditional culture and nature, body, faith and naming* were established through a reiterative process of deduction and induction. A theoretical assembly of queer and feminist paradigms, as coined by Denzin (2012), was accompanied by a common-sense selection of key themes in the film after cyclic close readings. At all stages of the analysis, triangulation between researchers was ensured (Denzin, 2009), in order to add depth to the results. This case study focuses on the pedagogical uses for transformation and social justice, as pointed out by Denzin: “The goal is to provoke change, to create texts that play across gender and race, utopian texts that involve readers and audiences in this passion, moving them to action” (2012, p.85).

This article will highlight the potential uses of *20,000 Species of Bees* for raising awareness and educating the audience by presenting a visual and textual analysis of selected scenes and dialogues. These can provide prompts that contribute to ‘queering’ debates and insights in formal and informal educational settings. The entire film, as well as many of its fragments, can be viewed adapting the debates and activities to different ages and contexts. This reflective exercise will yield the most when carried out with associations or interest groups, for example families of trans children. The film proposes an approach that moves away from the notions of suffering and tragedy, expanding the references of trans childhoods to more positive scenarios while showing the importance of emotional support. We have selected a number of relevant themes that appear throughout the film with the ultimate goal to help educators and other professionals to use the film when working with their students/participants.

## **Analysis of the main themes**

*20,000 Species of Bees* narrates the journey to the home village of 8-year-old transgender Aitor/Cocó/Lucía, her mom Ane, brother Eneko, grandmother Lita, and grand-aunt Lourdes. The film features many topics involving these main characters,

but in terms of relevance for pedagogical uses in formal or informal settings, we will only pick out a few, according to the analytical categories pointed out to above: the adult gaze, traditional culture and nature, the body, faith, and the act of naming.

## Adult gaze

Films about trans childhoods produced to date are mostly made by adults and for adults (Richardson & Smith, 2023), so we can classify them as adult centric. Adult figures occupy two opposed roles in these pictures: either they provide understanding and support, or they personify the incomprehension, fear and rejection towards children's transness. In *20,000 Species of Bees*, the adult world is presented as a division between these two poles, which allows for a pedagogical reflection on the different positions the adult figure represents and on the children's voices in their relationship with them. On one extreme we have the figure of Lourdes, Aitor/Cocó/Lucía's grand aunt. As a beekeeper and healer, she has a strong connection to nature, and her grand niece's gender manifestations do not lead her to feel awkwardness or rejection towards her. We then have Ane, the mother, who unconditionally defends and supports her 8-year-old daughter but finds it difficult to recognize and accept what is happening. The figure of the confused but loving mother figure allows us to understand the transition as a complex process involving the relationship of a mother with her children, and the social environment she interacts with in her childhood village (Simpson, 2018; Dierckx and Platero, 2017). As pointed out above, this is an intertwined story: on the one hand we have Ane, who seeks to resume her career as an artist, for which she never had any support from her own family. On the other hand, Ane's mother Lita, governed by tradition and by 'what people will say', considers that Ane should set limits to the gender exploration of Aitor/Cocó/Lucía who in her view causes confusion among the people of the village with her behaviour. Ane's husband - Lucía's father - is not present but from the distance blames the mother for what is happening, suggesting that she is spoiling the child too much, as to him this gender transition is just an annoying whim. Hence, the absent father, of all characters, represents the most explicit rejection towards the transition of Aitor/Cocó/Lucía as well as harshly demonstrates a lack of support for his partner Ane in her artistic process. This role of absence and rejection of the father is sadly common in the experiences of trans children (Bhattacharya et al., 2021; Johnson and Benson, 2014), although the figure of the father is also shown in more plural postures and reactions in some representations (Richardson & Smith, 2023).

In *20,000 Species of Bees* the father, along with the deceased grandfather, represents a patriarchal world that is dominant but absent/irrelevant, unable to provide support to the girls and women who are the protagonists of this film. The grandmother reveals that her late husband disliked Ane's artistic work, and in the next generation we see how the child's father avoids using her chosen name. Thus, the adult characters (the mother, grandmother, grand aunt and father) represent four positions that could be read both in contrast and in a continuum, as phases of critical maturity with regard to the transition. The process by which a family reflects and understands the needs of a trans child is non-linear and does not necessarily move in the direction acceptance (Parra and Missé, 2024). The different positions Lucía's family members represent help to understand two issues: first, the needs of each person in the family constellation are

different (for example, a father may feel that having a trans daughter means questioning his own masculinity, whereas a grandmother may support her granddaughter without feeling her own role being questioned). Second, while adults are discussing how to face the situation, the trans child needs an adult's company in this process, and this may be a person other than the parents (Platero, 2014), in this case the grandaunt. Hence, following the evolution of each character helps us highlighting these simultaneous but different processes occurring in a family with trans children.

Featuring adult characters in films about trans children is a common narrative strategy to contrast the innocent or naive nature of children's experiences (Richardson & Smith, 2023; Robinson 2013), who are often deemed to have a scarce repertoire of adult identities. However, in this film the adult characters - especially those of the mother Ane and the grand-aunt Lourdes-, are full of nuances, doubts and contradictions, suggesting that the adult does not always know the answer, but the 'innocent' child might. Moving out of the comfort zone of adultism, Urresola portrays Ane and Lourdes in an approach to the process of transness/transition with empathy and acceptance. In this case, Ane and her daughter fight against the socially imposed gender roles that limit their horizons respectively as a sculptor and as a child who wants to go through life as a girl. Both struggle and strive to find their own path, off the beaten track. The different positions presented in the film allow for identification and reflection on one's own position, while the parallelism with other situations where one is misunderstood broadens such empathetic view. Focusing on Ane's and Lucía's parallel processes of crisis and struggle allows us to identify, from a pedagogical point of view, how gender continues to be a naturalized norm almost impossible to avoid. It becomes clear that only a mother/daughter alliance can be effective in confronting transphobia and move forward. In fact, family support is a fundamental element in predicting present and future well-being of trans children (Parra and Missé, 2024; McConnell et al., 2016; Platero, 2014).

## **Traditional culture and nature**

*20,000 Species of Bees* does not eschew scenes portraying the cruelty of traditional small-town mentality, bigotry, and religious repression through the figure of the grandmother Lita, who does not validate the failure/dissidence represented by her daughter and granddaughter, but on the contrary wants to keep them 'in their place' through religious dogmas and assumptions of traditional (gender) roles. Lita firmly believes that these socially imposed roles are part of a higher order created by God. Here, nature is considered as subject to the divine will and a space to be dominated/manipulated by humans. On the other hand, the film also - and more convincingly - shows the strength of an ancient culture in the Basque Country and its strong link with nature, through Lourdes and her bees: the grand-aunt represents the figure of the 'wise witch' connected with nature, who does validate the girl in her gender dissidence. This theme subtly connects with the idea that a culture based on a strong link with nature can easily normalize gender variations and integrate them in an assumption of freedom and respect for all things living, unlike traditional thought linked to religion or other powerful institutions that consider these as 'unnatural' or 'against nature' (Sterling, 2000).

The tension between these two aspects of 'traditional culture' - a pagan and a religious tradition - is beautifully elaborated on through the child's journey in the village, transitioning from Aitor to Cocó to Lucía, both emotionally and physically. Thanks to - and despite - both poles of traditional culture she can somehow place the acceptance/non-acceptance of her imposed body. Two narratives are constantly intertwined and struggling for truth on the concept of the body in Lucía's transition into early adolescence. Her grandmother Lita tells her about Faith, God and the Saints, how 'God made us perfect' (not allowing for any questioning of the body!) and how we will be punished for dissident convictions - like Santa Lucía was. This is the moment when the child decides to adopt the Saint's name as her chosen name - Lucía - as we will see below. In contrast, Lucía's grand-aunt Lourdes takes her to the river in the woods, swimming naked with her, validating Lucía's body as the girls perceive it - even though her child body is not even defined yet. The film shows that transition also has a place in tradition, that it is not just a habit or prejudice, but a space that can be redefined. Hence, we see a trans child as just another instance of reality.

## Body

*20,000 Species of Bees* sustains the possibility of a trans child and portrays a very young protagonist with the capacity to define her own gender, thus distancing herself from some predominant discourses that question her mere existence (Castañeda, 2014; Missé 2018). In the film Aitor/Cocó/Lucía's body is presented as one of the central pillars of the story, but far away from the discourse of the 'wrong body' (Capuzza & Leland, 2017; Missé, 2018), in similar ways as other recent films such as *Orlando, my political biography* (2023) by Paul B. Preciado. The protagonist is portrayed as someone authentic and honest, in line with a relatively consolidated pattern of film representation (Richardson & Smith, 2023), but her confusion and conflicts regarding her body do not imply abjection or rejection, but rather possibility. We shouldn't forget that the bodily transition imagined by an adult audience does not always correspond with the reality of trans children's needs as to their social transition (which involves a change in their role, a new name, and only in some cases, access to hormonal puberty blockers). The film's references to the body allow us to understand Lucía's experiences more deeply, particularly regarding gender and transition.

Aitor/Cocó/Lucía's emotions are more related to anger and frustration than to shame, although in the pool scenes at the beginning of the film we do see how the protagonist hides her body. These images of concealment that we could read as a state of shame are later contrasted in a scene where Aitor/Cocó/Lucía and her friend Niko are standing on the riverbank exchanging swimsuits. Niko normalizes the act of swapping her swimsuit with Cocó's boxer shorts, stating that she doesn't like her girls' swimsuit anyway as 'it gets up her ass' and therefore prefers Cocó's boxer shorts. While they get dry in the sun Cocó tells her friend that her real name is Lucía and Niko replies that a boy in her class is in a similar situation, implying that there is no problem and that she understands this reality. In other terms, the pool scene makes us reflect on the violence exercised by adults who try to make children fit into stereotypes and concepts about gender and the body (girls' and boys' swimsuits). And at the same time, it allows us to approach representations in which the trans body is not understood from

vulnerability (Stryker, 2014), shame or discomfort, but rather in a process of acceptance, affirmation and gradual empowerment.

The river appears in the film as a space of liberation. In the scene where she swims with her grand-aunt, Aitor/Cocó/Lucía ends up feeling comfortable with the situation, partly undresses, and goes into the water. Her grand aunt tells her 'a girl's weenie should be clean', assuming that she is a girl, and that you can be a girl with a penis. The river seems to cleanse everything, the body, but also the worries and doubts, becoming a space of freedom and acceptance. The film is based on the concept of 'becoming', presenting the body in (trans)formation, as something that is not stable (Garner, 2014), questioning the hegemonic belief that bodies and identities are fixed, 'natural', ahistorical, and universal.

In another scene, we see Ane with her three children in the workshop where she is working on her art, and she suggests they all make a wax piece of an ideal body. Aitor/Cocó/Lucía makes her and, when asked, responds to her mom saying, 'I made myself, because I'm pretty'. The wax allows for the possibility of creating an idealized body for oneself, and at that moment Aitor/Cocó/Lucía is a little overwhelmed by the exercise, which generates empathy in the audience with the 8-year-old. It's important to mention that just before this scene, Aitor/Cocó/Lucía has told her mother that she wants to be called Lucía, which Ane is not prepared for at that moment. In any case, the child's trans body is not presented as wrong, a whim, or an ideology, but rather as a vital experience, something that is 'in process' and that requires action for which they need adult support (Richardson and Smith, 2023). The film presents the protagonist's discovery process in a respectful way, without gloating over the moments of suffering, and highlights the support she receives from her environment, without eschewing the contradictions experienced by her family members. The representation of the trans body is not morbid but feasible. This is in line with the most recent fiction productions on trans children, marking a difference with earlier imagery in television and film genres presenting the trans body as problematic (Abbott, 2022).

## Faith

In *20,000 Species of Bees*, faith is defined through the elderly characters, especially Lucía's grandmother Lita, as 'being convinced of something', like what a person feels on the inside. In a conversation with Lita, Aitor/Cocó/Lucía asks her 'Why am I like this?', to which the grandmother responds with determination: 'What do you mean "like this"? God has made us perfect, we are perfect'. In another scene the family attends a baptism celebration. The scene presents the event as a social space of oppression: although Lucía leaves the house wearing a dress - with the support of her mother and siblings-, she will change her outfit during the party so as not to make other members of the family feel uncomfortable, especially the father. Throughout the film, Ane shows her support to Lucía, telling her that she can be whatever she wants, defending her look (long hair, painted nails, androgynous outfits) and confronting the grandmother's comments about her (Ane) being the one that confuses Aitor/Cocó/Lucía and makes the 8-year-old think that she is 'special'. There are also several scenes where she comforts Aitor/Cocó/Lucía in hard and painful situations, and

although it is not always easy to communicate with Lucía, Ane is portrayed as a receptive, loving, and open-minded parent. Feelings are treated in complex ways in the film. The array of emotions Aitor/Cocó/Lucía goes through is broad and nuanced: she feels frustration, loneliness, and anger but no self-denial or shame. The 8-year-old does not appear as someone who believes there is something wrong with her, or feels rejection towards herself, but rather as a person who is not ready to be visible (Ahmed, 2015), or to face the lack of social support, even from her own father. Eventually, Lucía's insistence on behaving in a normative manner - by changing her outfit at the baptism - makes the prevailing social norms visible, revealing that queer identities and experiences outside cisnormativity will be set aside as unintelligible and abject; as a reality that seems impossible and out of place. As we see throughout the entire film, here the stable - and vulnerable - representation of the body is, again, transcended (Stryker, 2014; Garner, 2014). Although at some point Aitor/Cocó/Lucía expresses fear, for example when she wonders if 'something went wrong when she was in her mother's womb', this is a question that some trans children of her age ask in real life (Platero, 2014). This is the image not of a confused child, but of the pain caused by social pressure and the weight of social norms. Here we should wonder - following queer pedagogy - if the image of the confused trans child is not actually a projection of the adult who wants to believe childhood a space of confusion altogether, and thus a territory for adult domination. At the same time the question emerges of how some religious beliefs reinforce - or not - the gender binary.

## Naming

The film presents the child with different names as the story evolves - given name *Aitor*, transition name *Cocó*, and chosen name *Lucía* -, illustrating how an 8-year-old thoughtfully explores gender by means of naming. It also emphasizes how a name is not fixed, but rather something transitive and under construction (Halberstam, 2018). At the beginning of the film, the children are celebrating mid-summer night (San Juan). That night people make a wish, write it down and throw the piece of paper into the fire. Our little protagonist tells the other children her name is Cocó, that it is her wish to use that name, but some children answer that 'that is not a name'. Another girl says she likes Cocó as a name and hereby validates her gender, as Shaila García-Catalán (2024: 35) points out, "if she says she is a girl, she is, and that's it!"

As mentioned above, the choice for the name *Lucía* is not fortuitous and has to do with the child's identification with Saint Lucía, who fought for her convictions despite rejection of society. This experimentation with names is important for trans and non-binary children, but it is not exclusive to this period in life (Platero, 2014).

Regarding the act of naming itself, one of the most important moments in the film are the final scenes when Lucía runs away from the baptism and introduces herself to the bees with her new name. At this crucial moment in the story, Lucía appropriates the religious and pagan beliefs and symbolically stages her own baptism by hitting the beehives and speaking up: 'Bees, it's me, Lucía'. By stating her name before the bees her new identity emerges in a performative utterance (Butler, 1993) and is affirmed so that there is no turning back. As Butler writes, "Within speech act theory, a

performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (1993: 13). By naming Lucía, her identity as a girl is enacted.

This is a moment of great uncertainty in the film, as Lucía has run away from the celebration, her family has become aware of her disappearance, and they are searching for her - with no luck. For a few moments the audience may be overwhelmed by the possibility of another film with a tragic ending. While her family is desperately looking for her in the woods, shouting out her given name - ‘Aitor’-, we see how Lucía has escaped the family event to get to the bees and pronounce her name. Eneko, Lucía’s brother, is the first one to spontaneously shout out ‘Lucía’, followed by her mom Ane. A very powerful moment is when Ane realizes that by shouting ‘Lucía’ and hearing her name resounding in the woods, she is not only confirming her daughter’s reality, but also finding her own identity. It is the tipping point where she realizes she will find her daughter and a new chapter of their lives has started.

The film thus moves away from the narratives picturing an unhappy ending for trans children and youth (Abbott, 2022; Richardson and Smith, 2023) and offers us an open ending when we see Lucía some time later in the car, returning home with her family. In this journey back to the city - which may be the beginning or the continuity of something - two images are intertwined: a trans child whose identity is not questioned anymore (Abbott, 2022) and a narrative framework located in ‘becoming’, going into the unknown (Halberstam, 2018). In another scene, much earlier in the story, the intelligent and affectionate character of Lucía’s grand aunt reinforces a critical reflection about this ‘becoming’. Lourdes talks to the mother of the child and tells her: ‘Just sit down and talk to him [*referring to Aitor/Cocó/Lucía*]’, emphasizing the importance of communication in this transition. She also reminds Ane of the role that she will play in her child’s transition, suggesting her to deal as soon as possible with the fact that her son is actually a girl (‘You already know, so what are you afraid of?’), and knowing that Ane is facing a hostile context - the grandmother and the father have expressed their strong rejection. Furthermore, Lourdes strongly recommends Ane to make sure her children ‘do not live their lives with shame’, in clear reference to how to understand the transition of Aitor/Cocó/Lucía.

## Conclusions

The increasing visibility of transness in media and fiction films we are currently witnessing does not necessarily mean that all these representations promote more rights for trans people - let alone for trans children. In fact, some trans media representations contribute to reinforcing stereotypes such as ‘the wrong body’, a tragic ending or commercially exploited stories on trans people’s lives/bodies. *20,000 Species of Bees* is the kind of fiction film that helps to distinguish between transphobic representations and those that are truthful, diverse and do not question the existence of the very trans identities they portray (Abbott, 2022). A film in which two strong characters fight to affirm their identities as a woman and as a girl, in a subject position that challenges what is considered to be a ‘normal’ role for their gender or age. A film that tries to move away from presenting transness as a problem, tragedy, or disorder.

Returning to Morris's (1999) definition of queer theory, we find that the subject position is a place of 'queering' the film, wondering both about the media representation of trans children and mothers who pursue artistic careers. In addition, the film unveils the patriarchal norms that constrain our protagonists' choices, such as the gendered expectations of a female artist and mother or a young 'boy', but also the norms of adultism that do not trust, support, or believe children when they break cis-heteronormative norms. Both mother and daughter will try to make sense of their -parallel - transitions and learn from each other by breaking the adult/child hierarchy caused by a need to deal with a trans reality.

As for queer as aesthetic, our analysis of *20,000 Species of Bees* helps to evocate a queer and trans perspective in which to interpret and enjoy the diverse world we live in. Here, the politics of trans representation are not limited to the notion of authentic or good trans representations, but ideally "trans" our ways of looking at the world (Koch-Rein, Haschemi, Verlinden, 2020: 7). Indeed, *20,000 Species of Bees* allows for imagining a future-to-be, conceiving other possible futures, a good life despite the limitations (Halberstam, 2005).

Challenging the gender binary, as the movie and our analysis do, proves to be a good step forward in applying trans and queer methodology which can be taken into classrooms. This trans and queer methodology invites us to enjoy the film, to identify with characters that are uncomfortable with dominant social norms, deconstructing these as oppressive structures. In this regard, viewers can learn from Lucía and Ana what it means to have agency, thanks to their very vulnerability and their unwillingness to be mere passive subjects dominated by hegemonic gender norms and assumptions about sexuality (Butler et al., 2016).

*20,000 Species of Bees* can be used as a prompt to raise a number of questions rooted in queer pedagogies, such as: Which character(s) in the film do you identify with? How can we support children like Lucía? What challenges face mothers who are artists? Which kind of relationships are established between mothers and daughters when they experience a transition together? What does normal mean? In what mirrors - using Estíbaliz Urresola's metaphor - do we look at ourselves in mother-daughter relationships? What role can other people in the family play in supporting trans children? How can we use language to better support and represent trans and non-binary experiences? Do adults listen to children?

Future research should incorporate the voices of trans people and their families who have seen *20,000 Species of Bees*, as well as students and teachers who use it as a pedagogical tool.

Finally, this film invites us to understand the true value of diversity in society, expressed beautifully by Niko - Lucía's wise little friend-: 'There are many species of bees, and all of them are good'.

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