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Drag:
Spectacle, Transformance, and
The Construction of Gender Utopia

A Thesis
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By
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Introduction

We live in a world of constant performance. Simultaneously being performer and audience, we navigate every day situated in the suspension of disbelief due to society's spectacle. We are continuously enacting, evaluating, providing feedback, and adjusting in order to perform just well enough to be accepted into mainstream society. Gender is often understood and constructed in rigid binaries where performing too much or too little can lead to exclusion from acceptance into society. However, there are some who purposefully perform in order to criticize the binaries and cultivate an area of limbo between masculine and feminine. I am referring to the ambivalent, anarchic, drag queen. Through the queer sensibilities of camp, irony, and glamour, these queens turn the "normal" and "natural" on its head by providing convincing and over the top performances of gender.

The work of drag is structured on the grounds of a society whose basic fabric is founded upon oppression. Oppression it is best understood as a concept that "designates the disadvantages and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power intends to keep them down, but because of the everyday practices of well-intentioned liberal society....Oppression is systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions," (Young, 1988, p. 271). The power of oppression is found in its evolution that allows for it to exist in the absence of overt discrimination, manifested in ordinary interactions, the media and cultural stereotypes, structural features of bureaucratic hierarchy and market mechanisms, and essentially the ongoing processes of everyday life (Young, 1988). Oppression outside of overt discrimination can be categorized into five areas: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These forms of oppression that groups are subjected to by the dominant group are

important as we understand our bodies to be constructed texts that function as sites of control. It is also important to note that some groups face multiple forms of oppression that compile on top of one another due to their intersecting identities. What is understood as “natural” and “normal” in the ongoing process of everyday life is reinforced by the repetitive behaviors the dominant group puts in place, however, these performances of what is “natural” are not the experience of life for all.

In light of these factors this research investigates how a society whose basic fabric is oppression, supports alternative systems where we can trace out the history and tactics that have made drag queens able to turn that fabric of oppression into a glamorous outfit through queer sensibilities of camp and transformance. By fleshing out key features and conventions of drag history that are still utilized in today’s club and ballroom drag scenes, and implementing Debord’s theory of modern society being predicated and saturated in spectacle, seeing queer politics at play in gay clubs and bars allows for a transformance in the appropriation of gender spectacle to liberate society from normative and restricting gender binaries. The meta-performance of gender performance dismantles its inherent normality allowing for the performer and audience to co-construct a gendered utopia in liminal and regulated society.

Drag

Drag has a long and vast history that differs when contextualizing it in different regions and cultures. The context in which I will be focusing my argument is within the drag scene of American clubs and ballrooms, however, it is important to provide a history of the theater that this form of drag has originated and evolved from. First, by looking at the introduction of drag as female impersonation in the church and its relocation into secular English theater in the 1600s, emphasizing conventions that still play a role today, we can trace out one timeline of its evolution and how it is understood in queer politics and liberation.

Drag queens have been defined in a multiplicity of understandings from female impersonators who perform publicly in front of an audience, to cross dressers in private, comedic dames, offenders of society, and also its biggest critics. When writing about drag queens I will modify Baker's (1994) idea of the, "secular drag queen," as the "exuberant exhibitionist anarchic figure who overturns the rulebook of polite society, mocks its manners and parodies its modest social strategies," (p. 106). I will be adding that the drag queen is an active performer who works as a critic to polite society, understanding "polite" as what is today to be understood as the normative, mainstream, complementary, and "natural." In this criticism of polite society, the drag queen is able to take hold of the invisible and seemingly intangible performances that we enact every day in order to assimilate to dominant gender ideals, and make them into the material hyper performance where she exposes the facade we deem as "normal".

History

Female impersonation has roots dating back to the gendering of clothing, which allowed

for cross-dressing to begin as a practice (Schacht, 2004). However, the history of drag that has most influenced current drag practices in the United States derives from mainstream theater in England, which has its roots in the church. There were no formal understandings of a permanent stage before the 16th century, and the church utilized plays to make biblical stories understandable to their illiterate audiences (Baker, 1994). Women had no part in the services or offices of the church, which allowed choirboys to introduce this performance of female impersonation when a woman's role was required (Baker, 1994). Once, divorced from the church, due to its influence on societal roles and values, all-male rules still applied to the stage, though biblical narratives that were largely narratives of power and politics were left and tragedies and comedies became the popular content of plays (Baker, 1994).

Modern day drag continues to resemble aspects of its beginnings, such as the political content of the plays and performances, due to the continued conventions drag has created. However, drag has evolved as gender expectations and rules of the theater have changed. The continued exclusion of women from theater is particularly important because it shows the influence and power that societal norms have over performance, shaping female impersonation to be practiced as an art that had the goals of taking the character seriously and creating a believable and passable performance (Baker, 1994). It also shows that even within these highly regulated and oppressive norms of marginalization, resistance has always been a political tool of empowerment in deconstructing the assumed nature of gender. The theater and stage, though a mainstream space, held the privilege of allowing non-normative performances of gender to occur that would be punished or policed elsewhere, which has been a continued political discourse of drag today (Baker, 1994). Even though men were working to portray more believable

performances of women on stage (Schacht, 2004), the 1600s set the groundwork that allowed for the anarchic drag queen to be born.

Religion reintroduces its involvement in drag later in the 1600s when the Puritans clamped down on public entertainment. In the decree of 1642, theater was banned in an attempt to purify public sectors of influence and actors and female impersonators were immediately out of work. This led them to find alternative spaces to perform or ditch acting for other jobs. Many actors became involved in the British Civil War, taking the side of the Royalist party in order to oppose the Puritans who had robbed them of their livelihood, aligning with King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria who had been active supporters of the theater (Baker, 1994).

It was during the rule of Charles II, known as The Restoration, in the mid to late 1600s that theater was reinstated and women were first allowed on stage, leading to a change in how female impersonation was understood and performed. Initially, women actresses did not have any training and were recruited for their looks rather than talent and most people assumed women actresses would be a passing fad of excess. This allowed some male actresses to continue performing as female impersonators because of their talent as female actresses, while their female counterparts essentially faked it until they made it (Baker, 1994). Once it became clear in the early 1700s that women actresses would not be a passing fad and were integrated into theater, the final years of grace ended before the female impersonators final eclipse (Baker, 1994). The female impersonators, thus, had to abandon acts of realistically emulating women and became the comic drag queen, adopting tactics of humor and criticism as a way to resist confining societal roles.

It is in this space of reinvention that some conventions of drag begin to formulate such as

the ultimate revelation of the female impersonator, the exposure of the genitals (Baker, 1994). This tactic in drag was implemented for its shock value and a way of disrupting the audience's suspension of disbelief. This exposure epitomizes the humorous, crude, and critical performances that drag becomes renowned for. It was also during the 18th century when the drag queen's celebration of fashion took prominence, as there was plenty of opportunity for this celebration to be found in satirizing the extreme fashion and over-the-top couture of the time (Baker, 1994).

Not only were certain conventions or normalities of drag beginning to evolve, but so were the roles and understanding of heterosexual relationships. Marriage was becoming more understood as a union of compassion where love and friendship were taking precedence over the ideas that women were silent property of their husbands and the legal receptacle of male lust (Baker, 1994). However liberating this new ideal of marriage may seem, and is in comparison to the previous system of marriage, it created new restricting expectations for women in the domestic sphere with the role as a "house wife" (Baker, 1994, p. 106). The anarchic drag queen, however, was a ready opposition who voiced rebellion in order to criticize and create unease with these confining roles. This evolution in the understanding of women's roles is a good example of how drag performances evolve and adapt as the conventions of what it means to be a woman are reconstructed and change.

In addition to its changing conventions on stage, drag begins to bleed into the public sphere. Men who desired to push back against the confines of traditional masculinity begin dressing in drag as a criticism of restricting gender roles, and the discovery of "Molly Houses" by mainstream society starts the formation and proverbial understanding of drag and homosexuality being linked (Senelick, 2000). As drag continued and the relationship between

drag and homosexuals was further understood, it was not the drag itself that identified men as homosexual but the actions and manner of the men performing drag in its embodiment of costume and scrutiny. Polite society was scandalized by men who blatantly flaunted conventions and mocked the very foundations of domestic society (Baker, 1994).

Baker (1994) states that with these critical performances, “The drag queens provoked social outrage - as much for their apparent contempt for the comforting rituals of heterosexual domestic life as for their homosexuality and transvestism,” (p. 107). Due to the outrage drag queens provoked because of their social commentary and perceived perversions as homosexuals, they were banished from the stage, yet continued constructing their own kingdom outside of the theater for themselves in a solemn and hilarious manner (Baker, 1994). However, this statement goes to show that it is not just the performer who scandalizes society, but the audience also understanding the critique, even if they disagree with the statement. Whether people were shocked or offended, they worked in the validation that there was a critique to be made about the domestic gender roles that restricted all members of society and audiences continue to be active participants in its construction today. In their offense taken or disregard of the critique, they also point out that the performance is in opposition to what is regarded to be the common script, and this the performance is pointed out in either case of acceptance or rejection of the appeal.

Drag continues to garner critical response to the enactment of these stereotypes of women, “Today’s critics of drag queens frequently charge them with satirizing, and therefore oppressing, women. At first glance this may seem to be the case, but what they are actually doing is criticizing those social structures - the rigid division of roles between the sexes and the heterosexist values that ensue - which make women and men behave as they do,” (Baker, 1994,

p. 107). When we further explicate how drag works to co-construct with the audience a transformative space by implementing the spectacle society performs we will see how in light of these criticisms there is still a strong subversive potential. This potential is able to reveal drag as working to deconstruct ideological powers and norms in order to liberate the performer and audience to a space where a closer gender performance is possible for all.

It is interesting to note that throughout the history of drag, women were the main comrade and supporters of the queens. Baker (1994) states, ““ Among the most enthusiastic of the applauders we observed a good many young ladies of fashion in the boxes: and indeed we do not know when we have seen so many delicate hands beating their snow-white gloves to pieces on behalf of a new favorite upon the boards.”” (p. 115) The beating of these snow white gloves to pieces is a great visual for how feminist criticisms of drag can be understood, reflecting the gender stereotype being enacted not to perpetuate, rather to deconstruct and allow for the paradigm of gender roles to be looked at from an outside perspective. It is not enough to just say that now women can wear pants and ties and men can wear heels and dresses, the criticism should not just reinforce our freedom to have more roles inside of the paradigm, but work to deconstruct the paradigm to allow individuals to construct a more accurate performance of how they wish to perform their identities. Steven Schacht (2004) speaks about taking his students to drag shows and comments that, ““ Women appreciate the experience more because they are much more aware of their own performance of drag,”” (p. 235). Though women may more identify with the performance because queens appropriate similar tactics, artifacts, and performances of women in their shows, because of their critical potential it is also liberating space for men who may identify with these queens, or may be possibly aroused by them and begin to question the

limitations masculinity puts upon them.

Due to the taboo that existed outside of dame, comedy queens, drag was rarely seen outside of the professional stage, however by the end of the nineteenth century it was popularized throughout the Western world. Music halls, variety theaters, circus performers, minstrel shows, and school theatrics all played a role in the popularization and implementation of drag as a performance. With its integration across multiple types of entertainment, a wider array of femininity as a performance were constructed allowing for a broader understanding of the category that was previously taboo (Senelick, 2000). It is in the mid-nineteenth century when the term “drag” was coined and popularized referring to the petticoats worn by men when playing female parts (Baker, 1994). This helped to further understand drag as its own category and once language is able to define activities that differentiate it, it begins to garner more formal conventions and methods. Drag is no longer just acting, but a specific type of acting (Baker, 1994). The word evolved from meaning to “put not he drag” as the slowing down of stagecoach into homosexual slang to refer to the train of a gown and wear female attire, sometimes to solicit men (Senelick, 2000).

It was also during the late nineteenth century that the word “homosexual” was coined and began becoming popularly utilized. Since this formation and understanding it has created a widely misunderstood category inspiring confusion and anxiety, which had to later be distinguished from transvestism (Baker, 1994). With the definitive language that allowed for these associations, we also see a stronger participation with drag and queer politics due to the illicit regulations surrounding sexual acts between men (Senelick, 2000). As drag became popularized on various stages, Senelick (2000) states; “By transferring taboo behavior to the

stage, such gay deceivers did more than find sanctuary for it. They offered surrogate gender alternatives to the general public and exercised a potent effect on members of the audience with cross-dressing tendencies,” (p. 306).

Due to the confusion and conflation of drag and homosexuality, however, the drag queen has become a symbol for sexual uncertainty and is understood as, “an agent of release from it. She slips fluently between the assertiveness of women and the passivity of men, creating a kind of balance which can make both men and women feel more secure,” (Baker, 1994, p. 156). Not only does the queen create a balance, but it is the audience participation that allows for a construction and space for all to feel more liberated and self-actualize. The ambivalence leading to a security is key in the formation of a transformative space.

With all of these tensions existing on stage, it was important for the drag performer to continue in the mode of deception in order not to be found out or associated with the stereotypical understandings of homosexual perversion. This led to another convention of drag performers, de-wigging themselves. Unlike the great revelation of the actor’s genitals, de-wigging was utilized as a revelation that brought the performance back under the dominant scope of reality. De-wigging was a “reassurance that order had been restored,” (Senelick, 2000, p. 306) to destroy the illusion and garner a cheap laugh. The process reminded the audience of the roles that we are allowed to play off the stage, though the entire performance offered an alternative understanding of gender performance, and attested the artistry and skill of the performer by revealing the act.

We continue to see drag garner influences in places of privilege in the twentieth century because of its seeming necessity in male dominated spaces, similar to its start. We see

universities in the United States replicating all-male theatrics after English models; “Since most universities before the Second World War were largely bastions of privilege. Colleges in the United States tended to replicate the English models of all-male theatricals,” (Senelick, 2000, p. 358). The Hasty Pudding Club at Harvard and the Wig Club at University of Pennsylvania are just two examples, yet by the early 20th century every sizable education institution in the United States had flourishing all-male companies.

Another male dominated space where drag and all-male theatrics were implemented was in the military. In the twentieth century with the variety of wars, by the time the United States joined the First World War, “the provision of theatrical units had become a matter of military logistics,” (Senelick, 2000, p. 360). It is important to note the amount of audience involvement in the military shows, particularly because of the long periods of time troops would go without interacting with women. The mirage of femininity, coupled with the suspension of disbelief for these men who had gone so long without feminine performances, was more potent than the physical consummation of a woman (Senelick, 2000). Many times these performances were also allowed in these privileged male spaces, because the acts were not interpreted as homosexually coded, rather as an essential piece to the entertainment available under the circumstances of war, and prison. The impersonators also followed current fashions to the tee in order to create an impressive illusion, because as the understandings of femininity change for women, they also change for the impersonator and drag queen. As wars came to a close, however, the U.S. authorities took many precautions to augment the amount of drag performances occurring in soldier shows, so that the practice of drag would become abnormal by the close of the war and enforce legislation through the 1950s restricting drag performances at nightclubs (Senelick,

2000).

Municipal legislation largely regulated and restricted drag performances, however drag balls in large cities were typically overlooked, especially when they were sponsored by previously existing organizations and the proceeds were donated to charity (Sneleick, 2000). During the prohibition, speakeasies and clubs that were protected by organized crime and black markets still utilized drag as a form of entertainment, but no alcohol was served and police would commonly raid and enforce laws against same-sex dancing (Senelick, 2000). Clubs that did feature drag shows had to market their shows to heterosexual audiences in order to avoid police harassment and also capitalized on performers who were known for a certain specialty. With the marketing towards heterosexual clientele, normative understandings of gender performance were also perpetuated where effeminate men were highly demonized due to understandings that, “normal men and women like they men manly and their women effeminate,” (Senelick, 2000, p. 382).

With drag becoming so scrutinizingly regulated, performers were harder to come by and clubs were losing money. This helped inspire a new convention that is still popular in drag today, lip-synching. With the high cost of accompanying musicians and live vocalists, combined with dwindling audiences, club owners were able to cut cost and open the ranks to a wider range of talented performers through lip-synching (Senelick, 2000). The closeted nature and perpetuation of normative masculine and feminine understandings also inspired a connection between gay men and their diva icons. Senelick (2000) states, “The appeals of Garland and Monroe to drag artists is all too obvious: women who staked their being on ‘their beautiful outward forms, felt cheated because no one appreciated their beautiful inner selves, and then couldn’t face living’.

That a homosexual, of unstable status in society, should feel a bond of sympathy, should identify with the risks and ruination of these queens of sex is a commonplace of cultural criticism,” (p. 389).

With police raids and regulations being so prevalent in queer communities, along with being incarcerated for cross-dressing, drag queens were the lowest caste in an “underprivileged substratum” (Senelick, 2000, p. 463). Besides resisting cultural norms, drag queens have been foundational in the activity of queer politics. The Gay Liberation Front is understood to have been started on June 27, 1969 by drag queens at the Stonewall Inn leading to three days of riots. They were pivotal in resisting the closeting queer people experience, however, as the liberation movement continued and assimilationist movements of gay men conformed to masculine norms, drag queens were once again disregarded and marginalized (Senelick, 2000).

Drag was also involved in queer politics surrounding the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s as a tool of protest. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence dressed in full nun habits and would zap politicians, or set up a protest that humiliated politicians or certain Christian movements in order to bring attention to gay rights, as well as pass out condoms and sexual health pamphlets during the AIDS crisis (Senelick, 2000). A lot of their involvements were to collect for charity and support queer politics, and despite the nun outfits they were less interested in making converts, and focused on personal liberation and spreading joy.

Additionally, in poor, queer communities of color drag was also used in ballrooms, which has garnered more exposure due to Madonna’s integration of “voguing” into the mainstream. Drag balls have also been investigated in movies such as *Paris is Burning* and were ways for men of color to empower themselves, create familial units, and gain their fifteen minutes of fame

by emulating the upper class aesthetics seen in magazines, hence the term voguing. There would be various houses each with a mother who would be the founding matriarch most times and instill others in the house with certain values and aesthetics. At the balls you would perform in different categories for titles and trophies on behalf of your house.

Today, drag has been integrated into many industries besides entertainment such as fashion, music, and more mainstream television channels. It is still most common in gay bars and queer spaces where performances appeal to audiences who tip performers who dance, lip-sync, sing, and recite stand-up performances. As a queer person, gay clubs and bars are the social centers for queer communities and safe spaces. They are the queer sanctuaries where queer people get to self-actualize and be in community together.

Performance

Tracing drag history to this contemporary point and bracketing it within a system of queer politics and resistance to the assimilation of dominant norms within queer spaces such as clubs, there are several characteristics that define the discourse of drag today such as irony, glamour, and camp that correspond with the conventions previously discussed (Niles, 2004). Camp specifically is a strategy utilized by queer communities that is understood to come from a “gay sensibility” (Niles, 2004, p. 42). In its operation it appropriates from mainstream popular culture and then reinterprets them in a way that is used to empower and communicate within gay and lesbian communities (Niles, 2004). In the case of drag and its appropriation of gender roles, it makes the threatening and domineering gender expectations placed upon women a satirical critique of the ridiculous inhibitions these roles produce. Niles (2004) states, “Camp makes a real

and threatening world unthreatening to certain people,” it turns the respectable and important into trivial and laughable situations (p. 42). Due to the confining and “closeted” nature that gender creates, camp is a sensibility that queer audiences can understand and pick up on because they saw and identified with the contradiction in the characters, characters that were “trapped in conventions that’s titled their ‘true natures and’ rebelled against them,” (Niles, 2004, p. 43).

Drag works within a system of binaries, which allows the critical potential. With the idea that social categories work in opposition to one another in the construction of the paradigm of gender (Lock, 2004) drag works in between the social categories to reconstruct, reinterpret, and re-articulate identity. However, not only do drag queens work solely within the binary of gender, yet as Schacht (2004) states, “They represent an array of disparate, often contradictory cultural values, limitations and possibilities,” (p. 3). Not only are the performances contingent on performing gender, yet work within race and sexual orientation as two other prominent identifiers. It is through the constant re-enactment that social categories and identities become understood and seem rigid. Yet drag appropriates the scripts of women and in their exaggerated performance from men, they reinterpret and rewrite the script of the gender performance. The scripts also alter and change as times change, gender roles adapt, and norms evolve.

Theories

Spectacle

These performances of drag are subversive because of their existence within a society that is contextualized as one of spectacle. Spectacle as understood by Debord (1977) states, “The spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity... reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real,” (p. 14). The idea of spectacle works to turn everyone into passive participants, motivating them to conform to the commodified world. The values inspired by the dominant majority of those in power, mainly white, heterosexual men, work to make our values and aspirations work for their benefit, mainly having us buy into their lifestyles as the ideal way of existence. We either live as sheep who passively conform and enjoy the values placed upon us, or as active resisters who work to counteract the spectacle though never being able to deconstruct or completely work outside of its ideologies. With this understanding, the things we take to be truth are moments of falsehood, able to be identified as constructed but difficult to escape (Debord, 1977). This does not mean that there are two inseparable categories of people, passive and active, yet everyone fluctuates between resisting the flow of the spectacle due to a discrepancy in experience and it being more easily identifiable, and gaining pleasure from partaking in it. When the spectacle is disrupted we work to project and mitigate our experience back into a dominant understanding, or we allow the tension to persist as a form of differentiation and resistance.

The spectacle is ruler over the realm of appearances and normalizes all of the images we see as how they are supposed to be, “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear,” (Debord, 1977, p. 15). In order for what is good to be initiated it requires passive

acceptance of its seeming incontrovertibility and distracts us from the most urgent task of real life, “recovering the full range of human powers through revolutionary change,” (Best, 1999, p. 133). Spectacle shows us what society can deliver, however, in these depictions what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible (Debord, 1977). Drag utilizes what is permitted by passing as women, along with the audiences passive acceptance of the performance and willingness to suspend disbelief, in order to use the normative appearances in resistance because of their appropriation by those who are not supposed to be enacting the performance. The passive audience utilizes this method that tries to dominate them in subversive ways. Because of the enculturation of passivity that is asked of them in everyday life, when this is taken into a drag space, they can suspend disbelief and remain passive long enough for the performer to draw the audience in. Then when the performer initiates and disrupts their own performance, audiences and performers actively work together to construct new understandings that resist the numbing effects of spectacle. No longer projecting themselves into an idealized image of life, but constructing reality around the ideal versions and understandings they have of self and gender. Over the top performances of femininity are not only critical when performed by men, however, the spectacle becomes most transgressive and uncomfortable in excess from a man. Shugart and Egley Waggoner (2005) state, “The landscape of contemporary popular culture is littered with mediated spectacles in the form of outrageous performances of femininity... they are the staple of pop culture,” (p. 65).

Spectacle creates an abstract illusion, but at the same time is very real where excess and spectacle are understood to be experiential categories due to their relationship with the senses (Barker, 2008). An example of this would be listening to a band over the radio, there is no band

present, however we hear a band due to the commodification of spectacle. Spectacle helps reinforce the social reproduction necessary to neutralize the consumer class and stabilize the constitution of society (Best, 1999). Various institutions work in a society of spectacle in order to bring people under the ideological norms as a tool of pacification and depoliticization of the masses (Debord, 1977). The pacification distracts social subjects from regaining their full range of human ability by conforming to the normative ideologies, which is connected to the separation of being engaged in the production of one's life (Best, 1999). Ultimately, a society of spectacle allows people to participate in their oppression by not being angry and working to assimilate to the higher-class norms (Best, 1999).

In society there are also active participants who, rather than projecting themselves into the spectral in order to give their life meaning, enact their own individuality and imagination (Best, 1999). This is where the drag queen would fall into society when performing in drag. When the drag queen creates a spectacle, the audience is no longer projecting themselves into normative ideologies to give their life meaning, but rather the new imagination and individuality of someone else. The audience then has the choice of passively ignoring the critical resistance and allowing it to be brought back under normative ideologies by demonizing drag as “abnormal” or allows them to actively partake in the reconstruction of a new understanding of society, reality, and performance.

Even after being injected with dominant ideologies and working within those limitations, there can still be an active resistance through adopting this critical lens (Best, 1999). Debord (1997) states; “Like modern society itself, the spectacle is at once united and divided,” showing how the society of spectacle is alright with calling itself out because, “division is presented as

unity, and unity as division,” (p. 36). It always seems to be at odds with itself and because we believe that something divided is unable to be effective, we dismiss it as powerful when taking a passive stance allowing it to continue. The active audience who takes a critical stance sees this division and is not able to escape the spectacle, but become an independent and active subject.

Spectacle is powerful because not only do we dismiss it as influential, it claims, “unchanging excellence with uncontested arrogance,” (Debord, 1977, p. 46) however, changes nonetheless in order to survive. We attribute the construction of society to our leaders, icons, and influencers, when really the spectacle is using these people as figureheads to continue the system. Once those celebrities or leaders are gone we believe the system has changed because the people influencing us have, however, the spectacle continues as the invisible force driving our norms and understanding (Debord, 1977). We see this in gender performance specifically because there are ways in which we act because they are “normal” or “natural,” however the performances have been changing, and must change, in order for spectacle to continue. It claims that this way of living has always been the best way in which to be and we cannot imagine a better way ourselves to do so, yet our actions today would seem completely unnatural in the context of other time periods or cultures.

As these changes occur, we continue to preserve the old culture in congealed form, showing that these manifestations are implicit in their totality, making the norms and values explicitly understood, yet incommunicable (Debord, 1977). The ideas and norms must improve and adapt with us however, so we take these congealed and seemingly solidified values and plagiarize them. Debord (1977) states; “Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author’s phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, and replaces

them with correct ideas,” (p. 145). This can be done passively perpetuating normative ideologies, or actively as drag does. Drag queens appropriate the gender performances and plagiarize them, pumping the old understanding full of glamour and camp in order to correct our ideas and criticize previous notions. Drag is criticized for perpetuating stereotypes of women, however, it is essential for the critical nature of drag to continue for them to adopt the stereotypes of femininity, not in order to reinforce stereotypes, but to criticize and deconstruct the restricting compartments of gender that envelope us all as a form of corrective plagiarism. Drag does not allow ideology to be, “an assertion of the obvious,” (Debord, 1977, p. 150), but re-situates ideology as a historical choice which we have all participated, in either a passive or active understanding, to construct.

Transformance

Transformance initially works to place spectator and spectacle inside of space rather than the confines of a place with rigid characteristics. The place is able to be altered and changed into a new and ambivalent space (McCune, 2004). The transformance that takes place does not completely command a change of the entire space, however, transitions the space from one place to another, forming a sense of ambivalence while maintaining some of the original characteristics which can lead to tension, construction, and the collision of queer phenomenon (McCune, 2004).

In the case of drag queens performing in ballrooms or clubs, the space sustains characteristics of the club, but transitions into another scene where gender can be performed almost as if in a dream that rests outside of normative confines while still being contextualized within them. The performer and audience all take part in this suspension of disbelief, where even

keen eyes and critical minds can be deceived by the illusion of gender performance. Drag queens themselves create an ambivalence as performers, transitioning their bodies from a rigid place to another more ambivalent space where it is sustained that the performers are men, yet they are transitioned and transformed into women creating a dual ambivalence of performance and space. Their bodies work as textual places themselves and can inspire new understandings of gender through the invitation of audience performance and collaborative construction.

Transformation is instigated by the drag queen, however it is the audience involvement that transforms the space itself (McCune, 2004). McCune (2004) states, “Not just the performance becomes transformed, but the space itself allows for these interactions and reciprocated performances of audience members,” (p. 163). Just like all performances, the success is not contingent solely on the merit of the performer, but the audience involvement in providing feedback and performing their own social cues whatever those may be in a designated space from theaters, to ballrooms, to clubs, to the everyday world. With the body of the performer becoming an ambivalent site, the audience can appropriate and reciprocate new performances and understandings of gender that are not allowed in the regimented performances of the dominant and normative society.

The actions the audience members at a drag show take, knowing that they are in a space that is performative and over the top, is to suspend disbelief and respond accordingly. Drag performers use our willingness to accept the drag impersonation as authentic in order to point to the intrinsic quality of masquerade in gender expectations (Niles, 2004). There is also an expectation from the performer that the camp and queer jokes will land with the audience to be entertaining and critical. This does not necessitate that the entire audience must be queer,

however. The people who do understand the criticisms and political nature of the queer identity, camp, and drag towards social norms and understandings will answer their cues as an audience with laughter and other gestures, alerting those who originally missed the joke how to join in on it. It opens the space to be more egalitarian by trivializing the norms that were originally threatening to some and confining to all, making it unimportant and laughable.

Argument

Meta-Performance

With the ambivalent space in place and the cues being reciprocated by the audience the two can work to co-construct. This is a salient critique and blurred area because of the transformation of the body of the drag queen from a politically charged site of a man, to the ambivalent space of a quasi-woman, the conflation of queer identities and experiences of the audience, and the blurring of exterior and interior senses of self because of the new constructions that are being made. The self and the other, in regards to performer and audience, as well as audience and other audience members, are blurred in this sharing of communal ideas and performances, but also in the individual disposition one experiences during the performance (Barker, 2008). The saliency of the criticism is able to work in this ambivalent space and still carry meaning because of its communal act which the group accedes to, as well as its individual participation and meaning making.

The meta-performance of drag, where a man appropriates the gendered performance of a woman and makes the restrictive roles and stereotypes into a performance in a spectacled nature opens our eyes to see the true nature of gender norms. The “normal” performances, which so

often seem unthreatening and natural are called out, and when transferred onto the ambiguous male/female drag body can no longer be brought under ideological normative understandings once the audience has participated in the process of transformation. This performance of the drag queen that initiated the transformation process is the plagiarism Debord (1977) spoke of in appropriating ideas in order to improve them, and in this case work in modes of liberation for both queer and dominant audiences who are contained by gender roles.

In this spectacle, the performer invites the audience into their transformative and ambivalent embodiment. With every person partaking in the process people accede to a new form of social control, yet find personalized liberation because of their various dispositions involved in the construction, which leads to a more egalitarian performance of gender. Each person brings their needs and contained desires to the construction space and is able to discover more about themselves once the illusion of gender performance is more blatantly pointed out. Drag is a meta-spectacle or an excessive performance of a performance. It consciously and actively appropriates the gender performance placed upon women, as queens, and enacts that natural performance by making it excessive and over-the-top. In this excessive meta-performance where natural and normal performances are taken and made unnatural through excess, there is critical potential leading to new resistance. New resistance to cultural imperialism, marginalization, and powerlessness.

This plagiarized paradigm works to mitigate current discourse which requires a binaries understanding of gender performance to operate in everyday activities. This new paradigm is one of resistance, where stereotypes and performances are enacted to undermine and open a space for self-actualization. Rather than standing in blatant opposition to conformity and further drawing

the distinctive gender lines, this mode of opposition and resistance is a communal act where individuals can self-actualize and form an aggregate that is able to accede to, but every person because of their own dispositions can construct what seems most like gender they identify and expressing at the time. A more fluid and malleable idea of individuals who create a heterogeneous collective, inherently different in its parts, but make up a whole.

Gender Utopia

It is important to distinguish that drag is not the performance that is liberating and frees us from the confines of gender. If my argument were to work to reinstate a new idealized performance, especially one which takes a lot of time to enact, then I would be reinstating a new and oppressive structure of gender performance. Drag is simply a conduit of disruption that leads to a transformative construction between performer and audience, which could be experienced in other spaces by other marginalized communities when looking at other marginalized groups such as the Black Church as a liberation space. Drag is a ritual set apart by its difference from everyday enactments of gender, that allows a community to accede to new understandings and sacred space, while self actualizing and constructing because of the involvement of their individual dispositions. Instead of giving us the options of performing our supposed gender as assumed and demanded by society, “Drag queens, like their drag king brothers, put a paradoxical spin on the notion of “to be or not to be” by demonstrating that ‘being’ need not be an either/or proposition and that there are actually multiple ways that gender can be performed and experienced,” (Schacht, 2004, p. 4).

The very liminal, regulated, and rare space in the lives of queer people is also not to say

work should stop being done towards gender equality. The simple fact that liberation is possible from oppressive structures such as cultural imperialism and powerlessness in this one context is not to say we live in a post-feminist society where we have finished making the progress necessary for equity to be enacted. It is also important to explain why I emphasize drag queens, rather than their king counterparts, which has to do with the ways in which women have experienced more marginalization, oppression, and discrimination throughout history and still do today. I believed that liberating them from the confines of gender roles that men have placed on them is an important role for men, especially gay and effeminate men to play since we can stand in solidarity and also feel the backlash of implications from sexism and misogyny. Due to women's marginalized status in society because of the demonization of effeminacy and domination of their bodies, it is important for the liberation of all people to support women in reclaiming agency and liberating all people from stereotypes.

Conclusion

Baker (1994) defines drag queens as the “exuberant exhibitionist anarchic figure who overturns the rulebook of polite society, mocks its manners, and parodies its modest social strategies,” (p. 151). In laying down some of the progressive histories and conventions of drag with their intersections of queer politics within a society of spectacle, it is possible to draw subversive conclusions from the performance. Further, when performer and audience work in collaboration to construct new understandings of gender as “both” and “neither” in light of the typical binary, the collective efforts can produce individual discovery and actualization of a new gender liberation. These liberation spaces are important for queer people who commonly

experience cultural imperialism and silencing, compiled with assigned stereotypes of them as “Other”. Constructing a method where self-actualization and the undermining of paradigms that reinvent oppressive power structures, works in the hope that all people can identify the restrictive shackles that assumed gender places us, hoping to show how we can actively participate in a more fluid and conscious gender performance in light of these expectations.

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