

When the Margin Reaches the Mainstream: A Case in Drag

Anna Ferrari

(Sapienza Università di Roma, IT)

Abstract

American culture represents a good example of the contamination of mainstream literature, cinema and television with historically marginalized contents. This bigger presence of underground themes in products intended for mainstream consumption indicates progress, but also entails a shift in content. The paper focuses on this dynamic in the context of LGBTQ+ culture, which contaminates *and* is contaminated by the mainstream. I will observe the implications of marginality reaching the mainstream through the case of on-screen gender-non-conforming portrayals, discussing the progress and problematic results generated by contaminating the mainstream with the marginal through on-screen representations of drag and drag culture, exploring how the element of drag has appeared in mainstream and not-as-mainstream films and TV series.

Keywords: drag, subculture; queer studies; queer representation; assimilation.

Introduction

As a consequence of social and political change, in the past few decades American mainstream culture and canon have opened up to communities and contents historically relegated to the margins. This increased contact between mainstream culture and marginal or underground contents has the potential to develop in different directions, from influence to appropriation. While the presence of underground themes in products intended for mainstream consumption indicates progress, it can also entail a shift in content, including generalizations and assumptions. This relationship between the margin and the mainstream is nuanced, and its implications are not necessarily obvious.

In the pages that follow, I will analyze this dynamic in the context of queer culture, which has a specific and complex relationship of mutual contamination with the mainstream. I will observe this contamination in different on-screen representations of drag and drag culture, exploring how the element of drag has appeared in mainstream and nonmainstream films and TV series. I will focus on visual media as they are the most pervasive, and thus can exert the biggest influence on popular culture.

As the materials in this analysis embrace several decades of queer and mainstream culture, I should clarify here that I will employ the term drag broadly when referring to gender-non-conforming portrayals. In some cases, for instance, it can overlap with crossdressing or transsexuality, while there will be works featuring drag as a disguise that bears no relation with LGBTQ+ culture; in other instances it appears as a medium of queer expression, a practice with deep roots in the subculture that generated it. This is due not only to the ever-evolving terminology on gender identity and sexual orientation, but also to how certain representations were received at the time they were created¹. I will also discuss quotes from seminal queer

¹ In this sense, the most fitting definition for the purposes of this article is the one outlined by Monica Baroni in David Gerstner's *Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*: "although drag is often associated with cross-dressing, transvestitism, transsexualism and transgender, it is not synonymous with any of these terms. Drag is essentially action, not identity: it shakes up all rigid definitions for gender and sexuality, parodying the stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. In this connection we find expressions such as gender-fuck or gender bending being used. In a sense, drag cuts across the other categories, which may enact drag situations" (Baroni 2011, 191).

scholarship employing terms that are now outdated, when not considered derogatory (for instance, the words 'transvestite' and/or 'transvestitism'). Naturally, these should be understood as they were intended when they were written and not as they would be interpreted today.

The term drag is generally used to refer to the act of wearing clothes of the opposite sex². However, as Esther Newton observed in *Mother Camp*, her seminal book on drag culture, "homosexuality is symbolized in American culture by transvestism. The homosexual term for a transvestite is 'drag queen.' 'Queen' is a generic noun for any homosexual man. [...] Drag queens symbolize homosexuality despite the truthful assertions of many homosexuals that they never go to see professional drag queens" (Newton 1979, 3). This definition well encapsulates also how drag has traditionally appeared on film: as a signifier of homosexuality. The decision to employ 'drag' as an umbrella term in this essay is motivated by its flexibility, as it has been used in different times and contexts to broadly refer to the practice of wearing clothes of the opposite sex. As argued by Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, "drag does [...] 'trouble' gender and sexuality by making people question the naturalness of what it means to be a man or a woman and what it means to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Drag embodies ambiguity and ambivalence," and thus "can serve as a catalyst for changes in values, ideas, and identities in twenty-first century American society" (Rupp-Taylor 2003, 6). As works featuring different incarnations of this practice have tended to be conflated and interpreted in a similar way by mainstream audiences, it may be useful to analyze this relationship in more detail.

Throughout the essay I will discuss several on-screen works that have employed drag in as broad a manner as I described above. It is interesting to note that, with the obvious exception of the documentaries, almost all of the films discussed here are based on source material produced in Europe - either films, plays to novels - which may suggest more openness in the

² Cfr. Rodgers 1979, 67; and Newton 1979, 3.

old world when it comes to queer content.³ However, the American versions of these narratives all went on to achieve popular success and ‘classic’ status. The first category includes four popular films in which drag appears as a comedic device bearing no relation to the queer world. These films have been particularly influential in popular culture, both because of the inclusion of drag and the success of the pictures themselves. The second group discusses works created in the underground LGBTQ+ milieu, and hence feature drag in a way that is more coherent to its history as a queer practice. The third category deals with the different incarnations drag has had in more assimilated works, that is, works that mediate between the underground and the mainstream. The essay will explore the implications of this interaction between the dimensions of assimilation and appropriation, and reveal the powerful subversion that drag still represents at a time in which it is threatened by institutionalized oppression.

1. Drag and the Mainstream: Points of Contact

Due to its nature, the art of drag exists on the border of mainstream and underground culture. On the one hand, as we will see below, drag feeds on signifiers from mainstream culture and is employed to challenge and subvert the values of that culture. On the other hand, mainstream culture has a history of employing drag in ways that tend to trivialize the subversion that characterizes it, often for comedic purposes. This ambivalent presence of drag has the potential to convey different meanings.

Similarly to queer culture in general, the relationship of drag culture with the mainstream has been what David Halperin calls parasitic: “drag, camp, and various cultural appropriations

³ Among the films discussed below, *Some Like It Hot* is based on the 1935 French comedy *Fanfare of Love*, which will also be remade in West Germany in 1951 before being adapted by Billy Wilder in 1959; Edwards’ *Victor/Victoria* is based on the German 1933 musical *Victor and Victoria* (which had also been already adapted into a comedy in Britain in 1935); and *Mrs. Doubtfire* is based on the 1987 British novel *Madame Doubtfire*. Perhaps best known is the history of *The Birdcage*: first a French play, in 1978 it was turned into a film by the same name, *La Cage aux Folles*, a French-Italian production. This material will have two American incarnations: in 1983, Harvey Fierstein will turn it into a successful Broadway musical, and Mike Nichols will remake the movie in 1996.

and identifications are all, properly speaking, subcultural practices, insofar as they are in a dependent, secondary relation to the preexisting non-gay cultural forms to which they respond and to which they owe their very existence” (Halperin 2012, 422). Queer culture has historically appropriated and resignified themes and symbols from mainstream culture - that is, straight culture. In this sense, Halperin argues, “gay culture is parasitic on mainstream culture” (Halperin 2012, 422). Particularly in the case of drag, this parasitic relationship often develops through parody.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler notes that drag parodies “the notion of an original or primary gender identity” (Butler 1990, 137). This parody, Butler argues, “is of the very notion of an original; [...] so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation.” (Butler 1990, 138). This relationship of drag with traditional notions of gender identity makes it so that “at best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (Butler 1993, 125). While this is true, as the acceptance of a term of reference is crucial for a variation of said reference to exist, the implications of this ambivalence are vastly different depending on the author of the variation.

As we will see below, the parodic nature of drag has subversive roots. Newton argues that “drag is code for queer: professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world” (Newton 1979, 3). Thus, even beyond professional entertainment drag has been employed regularly to symbolize or imply homosexuality, as it is the most evident and immediate form to express queerness, while challenging normative assumptions on gender and sexuality. However, parody can also be present when drag is employed in mainstream on-screen narratives, which tend to present a more diluted form of drag. In these cases, queerness itself is usually the bottom of the joke: as drag is interpreted as a signifier of homosexuality, the implication that a character could be gay or trans is intended

as cause for humor. The element of marginality is therefore always present in on-screen drag appearances, but with rather varied implications. The tensions between these two incarnations of drag will be explored in the following pages.

2. Drag in Mainstream Culture

Despite its history as an underground, even countercultural form, drag appears in mainstream works. These are, however, subdued incarnations of the form and have no relationship with its queer roots. In American popular culture drag is not related to LGBTQ+ culture, and is generally portrayed as the source of comic relief. I will explore below how drag appears in four popular American films: *Some Like It Hot* (1959) by Billy Wilder, *Victor/Victoria* (1982) by Blake Edwards, *Tootsie* (1982) by Sidney Pollack and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) by Chris Columbus. These are all examples of movies produced for the consumption of a broad audience, in some cases children, that have received both critical and popular acclaim – and hence had an impact on mainstream culture. In these films, drag appears merely as a comedic plotline to unsettle the premises of the story, but has nothing to do with identity or gender subversion.

In *Some Like It Hot*, two jazz musicians dress as women to escape gangsters in 1920s-Chicago. In Wilder's movie drag provides endless comedic possibilities: one of the musicians, played by Tony Curtis, goes back and forth between genders – he becomes Marilyn Monroe's confidant when he's in drag while pursuing her in male clothes. The other, played by Jack Lemmon, represents the main source of comedy due to his more constant 'female' presence in the film: we see him succumb more and more to concerns traditionally associated with women, such as vanity and jealousy (he tells Curtis, "I saw you, [...] borrowing each other's lipstick!") as well as marriage (after getting engaged, he wonders if the fiancé is too old for 'her' and identifies his mother as their main problem as a couple). As a woman, however, Lemmon's character also clues the audience in on the struggles of the female condition, from the difficulty of walking in heels to sexual harassment (Lemmon's character gets patted on the butt and subsequently groped in an elevator, to which Curtis comments "Now you know how the other



half lives"). However, Wilder's comedic intent always prevails, and none of these moments leads to in-depth exploration. Eventually, Lemmon's character becomes tempted by the idea of becoming a millionaire's 'wife,' leading to more source for comedy ("Why would a guy wanna marry a guy?", asks Curtis, "Security", replies Lemmon). The reveal in the last scene of the film, in which Lemmon's fiancé pronounces the immortal line "Nobody's perfect" upon finding out he fell in love with a man, is all played on the implication that a man marrying another man is funny.

A similar dynamic is identifiable in *Tootsie*, where Dustin Hoffman plays an actor unable to get work because of his bad temperament. After attempting an audition dressed as a woman, he gets a job on a soap opera where he immediately achieves great success. Similarly to *Some Like It Hot*, he is both pursuer and confidant of the woman he is interested in, played by Jessica Lange. Hoffman also gets informed by other characters about the sexual harassment happening on set (one of the stars has earned the nickname 'the tongue' from the actresses). In fact, resistance to sexual harassment is what will make a star of Hoffman's female alter ego, who is able to be more assertive than the female characters: as a man, he hasn't been brought up to just take it. As the story unfolds, other forms of sexism are shown: male characters in positions of power answering questions addressed to women (Lange is asked if she's hungry, the director says that "she's fine"), talking over or ignoring them, and always, always touching female subordinates. In fact, the very title of the film comes from a scene in which Hoffman's character insists on being called by 'her' name. Pollack's film also highlights the physical and financial strain endured by women in order to be considered presentable: after going shopping, Hoffman remarks, "I don't know how a woman can keep herself attractive and not starve these days" – later he will also have to diet, once again concerning himself with his appearance. In both these films, the main character ends up becoming a better man after his experience in drag, having achieved a new perspective on what it's like to be a woman. Then again, this growth is rewarded, first and foremost, with romantic involvement with the woman they pursued while in drag – hardly a subversive message. Queer issues are never included.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

There is, however, a subcategory of mainstream films featuring drag that are more inclusive to gay characters. For instance, in *Victor/Victoria* drag is used by a singer, played by Julie Andrews, pretending that she's a female impersonator in order to get work. These 'two levels' of drag allow a more nuanced representation of sexual orientation and gender identity. The film also includes gay characters not in drag: one of them, played by Robert Preston, has a prominent role as Andrews's partner. Edwards' film thus includes a humorous but progressive portrayal of homosexuality: for instance, Preston's character has a conversation with a woman who thinks he could be "reformed" by the right woman, to which he replies "I think the right woman could reform you, too." Moreover, the intersection between feminism and queerness is touched on when, after being discovered, Andrews discusses her future with her now lover, played by James Garner: she remarks on the "things available to me as a man that I could never have as a woman," and on feeling "emancipated." Andrews talks about the injustice of being expected, as a woman, to give up a successful career, while Garner clearly states that he is worried about being considered a homosexual if they stay together and Victoria continues to perform as Victor. The romantic happy ending, however, is inevitable here, too.

Finally, in *Mrs. Doubtfire* Robin Williams is a man in the middle of a divorce who dresses as an elderly woman to get a job as his children's nanny. Similar to the examples above, he also tries to win back his ex wife by becoming her confidant as Mrs. Doubtfire. Coincidentally, queerness is not completely foreign to him: in his enterprise he is helped by his makeup-artist gay brother (played by gay playwright Harvey Fierstein) and his partner, whom his kids call 'uncle Frank and aunt Jack.' Here drag also provides an opportunity for comedy on traditional gender roles: Williams learns how to become a great homemaker, and scenes such as the one in which he vacuums to Aerosmith's *Dude Looks Like a Lady* are familiar even to those who have never watched the film. Although there is not as explicit a discussion on the female condition as in the previous example, it is worth noticing that in *Mrs. Doubtfire* it is the mother, played by Sally Field, who has a big career and is the family's primary breadwinner. We also see how

she struggles between family and career without her husband's help. Therefore, in this film the portrayal of femininity has moved in a more progressive direction.

These pictures are representative examples of a tendency: drag never appears as an act of self expression, but as a way for – mostly – men to obtain something they want that is precluded to them in their own identity⁴. There are also a few tropes recurring in each film in which a man does drag: for instance, the character gets discovered and has to clarify to someone that they are doing drag for practical reasons, not because they enjoy the 'lifestyle.' Another recurring gag is the involuntary seduction of a person of their own sex (usually an older man) with humorous consequences for the audience. This trope also has a variation in which the man in drag is physically attacked or assaulted, generally in the street, and saves himself by using his real voice to scare off the aggressor. Albeit with a humorous tone, the characters who get in drag end up empathizing with the opposite sex, as the act of – literally – walking in someone else's shoes provides a new perspective. However, even when traditional assumptions on gender roles are questioned the traditional happy ending restores normativity: Tony Curtis gets Marilyn, Hoffman ends up with Lange, Andrews is with Garner. The only exceptions are Williams, who stays divorced, and Lemmon, whose bewildered look upon hearing "Nobody's perfect" at the end of the film has been leaving audiences in suspense about his destiny for decades.

These examples do not indicate appropriation per se as much as the employment of drag for humorous purposes. In each of these films, drag expresses a form of deceit, usually towards women, and the inevitable discovery of the truth is associated with feelings of betrayal toward the women. Moreover, there is often an underlying implication that a genuine involvement with the gender-non-conforming world would be dangerous and unacceptable: Butler argues that in these films "the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected" (Butler 1993, 126). In fact, these works are structured around a strictly binary

⁴ It is interesting to notice that all the aforementioned characters already belong to the world of show business, either as actors or musicians.

interpretation of gender⁵. They are, ultimately, forms of drag that straight culture produces for itself – and therefore have little to do with the underground milieu that generated drag as a form of expression.

The forms of drag produced for the mainstream are clearly easier to find in works from a time in which LGBTQ+ rights and culture were not prominent in the national conversation. However, it is possible to find examples of authentic, subversive expressions of drag in works produced roughly around the same time as the ones discussed above. While these films did not reach the public in the same way, their presence had a significant impact on the culture, either directly or through cultural appropriation, as we will see in the next section.

3. Queer Drag

The queer world has historically been relegated to the underground, especially in the time preceding the Stonewall Riots. In this sense, drag may very well represent the underworld of the underworld. One of the most significant documents from this era is represented by *The Queen* by Frank Simon (1968), a documentary about the backstage of the Miss All-America Camp Beauty contest in New York in the 1960s. The film would influence many on-screen works featuring drag, particularly because of the final scene in which a furious Crystal LaBeija reads⁶ the queen who has won the pageant.

⁵ In Eve Sedgwick's book *Tendencies*, scholar Michael Moon argues that "in the film and theater of the past two decades, as well as in the body of critical gender theory and performance theory that has arisen during the same period, transvestism has often been trivialized and domesticated into mere 'crossdressing,' as if its practice had principally to do with something that can be put on and off as easily as a costume. [...] As such, it is sometimes treated as sinister-when men are seen as being empowered by a pretense of femininity they can doff at will, leaving their underlying gender identity and privilege untouched or indeed enhanced. Alternatively, a very similar understanding of transvestism can take on a utopian tinge: as a denaturalizing and defamiliarizing exposure of the constructed character of all gender; as a translation of what are often compulsory gender behaviors to a caricatural, exciting, chosen plane of arbitrariness and free play" (Sedgwick 1994, 219).

⁶ Rodgers defines reading as "to tell somebody to f— off - but good" (Rodgers 1979, 169). Originating in ballroom culture, reading can be described as the art of caustic insult as performance. In *Paris Is Burning*, Dorian Corey describes it as "the real art form of insult. [...] You get in a smart crack, and everyone laughs and kee-kees because you found a flaw and exaggerated it. Then you've got a good read going."



When it comes to fictional content, the films by John Waters are probably the best example of underground productions featuring drag. Waters' muse, Divine, is a drag queen whose identity is unacknowledged in the plot of the films. Butler argues that her "impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates" (Butler 1990, XXVIII). Waters' espousal of an aesthetic of the excess and the abject⁷ signals an embrace of this underground condition. As Halperin notes, "a subculture is not the same thing as a culture. [...] A subculture is in an oppositional (if not adversarial) relationship to an already existing set of authoritative cultural values, and it refers, explicitly or implicitly, to a world that is not its own independent creation. It is an expression of resistance to a dominant culture and a defiance of a social order" (Halperin 2012, 423). Waters is a perfect example of this description.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) by Jim Sharman probably represents an unprecedented case, as an underground work which gradually conquered cult status⁸. The film is explicit in its celebration of queerness: the song *Sweet Transvestite*, according to Vito Russo "the essence of what every parent in America fears will happen if our sexual standards are relaxed" (Russo 1987, 53), is the best example. Dr. Frank-N-Furter, a modern Dr. Frankenstein in drag⁹, makes fun of the fears and assumptions on gender of the super-heteronormative couple played by Susan Sarandon and Barry Bostwick. Newton notes that "if the symbolism of the film is familiar, the fact that it was made, and that apparently thousands of American adolescents flocked to see it at midnight showings is not" (Newton 1979, XII). In

⁷ Cfr. Kristeva 1982.

⁸ Vito Russo remarks that "Twentieth Century-Fox has never given [the film] a proper release in the United States" (Russo 1987, 52).

⁹ Newton remarks that "though Dr. Frank N. Furter's drag is drawn more from pornography (black garter belt, tight corset) than from gay drag, and though he is represented as an androgynous bisexual, his creation of a witless muscle man as an ideal lover puts us back on familiar ground. The muscle man and the drag queen are true Gemini: the make-believe man and the make-believe woman" (Newton 1979, XII).

Sharman's film drag is used, to use Butler's words, "for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy" (Butler 1993, 21). In this film, part of the legitimacy comes from the connection of the theme of drag with gayness and sex, a dimension that was absent in the previous examples.

In queer culture, the original intent of drag is a subversive one: the "appropriation and resignification of heterosexual forms and artifacts" (Halperin 2012, 424) as an expression of resistance to and subversion of heteronormativity. Butler argues that "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler 1993, 125). The practice of female impersonation, in particular, represents a challenge to social behavior.

As Butler observes, "although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself." (Butler 1990, 176). In *Mother Camp*, Newton had noted that "masculinity also depends crucially on differentiation from, and dominance over women" (Newton 1979, 4), and while it is true that to parody a certain social model can mean to accept it – or at least to acknowledge it - in the case of drag "parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (Butler 1990, 138). In a heteronormative culture in which "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" (Bersani 2010, 19), the idea of not only being a gay male, but of incarnating femininity in the way a drag queen does implies a complete subversion of the patriarchal system.

The first documentary to look at the world of drag after *The Queen* is *Paris Is Burning* (1990). Jennie Livingston's film started as an independent movie, but ended up as an influential cult object. *Paris Is Burning* focuses on the house ballroom community in New York, a community composed of gender-non-conforming people of color. In the world immortalized

by Livingston, drag and transsexuality intersect and often overlap, thus offering a more complex view of gender: “members of the ballroom community function under more expanded notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Unlike in dominant U.S. society, ballroom communities view and adopt categories of identity as malleable and mutable” (Bailey 2011, 369). Race and class are also central in the film, as the subjects of the documentary are marginalized on both levels – on top of the oppression endured for being trans and/or queer. Ballroom culture carved a space for these identities that were not allowed to exist anywhere else. Therefore, here drag is a way to express the aspiration to be a member of high society, to pass (i.e., realness¹⁰), and the ironic critique which is intrinsic to this portrayal of heteronormativity. One of the boys interviewed in the film says that it’s “as close [...] as we’re gonna get” to the reality of inclusion and professional self-affirmation that is more easily available to cis, straight, white people.

This form of aspiration poses the real concern, highlighted by Judith Butler and Venus, one of the queens in the film, of “whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (Butler 1993, 125). I would argue, however, that the film more accurately reflects Halperin’s definition of drag as a “response to social conditions and cultural codes that they cannot alter, but can only resist” (Halperin 2012, 217). George Chauncey points to the very employment of the ball as an event as “appropriating rituals of the dominant culture – debutante and masquerade balls – and investing them with new meaning” (Chauncey 1994, 25). It is interesting to notice, however, that the film most frequently described as an authentic portrayal of the gender-non-conforming world points to heteronormativity as much as it does – even if this aspirational tension is mostly associated to an acknowledgment of the disparity of access to wealth and social mobility. The legacy of the

¹⁰ Marlon Bailey describes realness as “a set of performance criteria [...] used to create the illusion of gender and sexual conformity in the outside world. [...] to be ‘real’ is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society” (Bailey 2011, 377-78).

film itself is complex for other reasons as well: on the one hand Livingston, who is white and cisgender, records the experience of a community often overlooked, when not oppressed. On the other, the film's release also raised the question of whether it is appropriate to observe the experience of a community to which we don't belong like a curious phenomenon. bell hooks, in particular, wrote a scathing review of the documentary (cfr. hooks 2015), arguing that Livingston's work provided entertainment for straight white audiences¹¹. Regardless, the film's influence has been enormous, both in queer culture and on American pop culture at large.

The most immediate impact of *Paris Is Burning* on mainstream culture is represented by Madonna's *Vogue* era, a time in which, according to Carsten Balzer, "the rich diversity of gender identities and performativities in this urban subculture was reduced to stereotypes and the drag queens' homosexuality" (Balzer 2005, 112). Madonna represents a good example of appropriation of minority and underground culture in general¹². Balzer argues that the release of Madonna's *Vogue* video on MTV in the early 1990s (along with RuPaul's success shortly after) is what started "the beginning of the international drag queen hype of the 1990s" (Balzer 2005, 117). Rosemary Hennessy highlights the contradictions within this phenomenon:

the appropriation of gay cultural codes in the cosmopolitan revamping of gender displays the arbitrariness of bourgeois patriarchy's gender system and helps to reconfigure it in a more postmodern mode [...]. In itself, of course, this limited assimilation of gays into mainstream middle-class culture does not disrupt postmodern patriarchy and its intersection with capitalism; indeed, it is in some ways quite integral to it (Hennessy 1994, 63).

The bigger presence in mainstream culture of queer subjects (in this case, of drag) on the one hand represents an obvious positive improvement, as representation tends to reduce marginalization and oppression. On the other hand, this presence tends to be filtered through

¹¹ hooks herself, however, consistently misgenders the protagonists of the film in her review, and repeatedly characterizes the community in the film just as Black (a point on which she builds much of her argument against Livingston), thus ignoring the many Hispanic people that appear in the film.

¹² The *Sex Book*, for instance, looks like a tamed remake of Robert Mapplethorpe's S&M portraits.

a heteronormative gaze. The “entertaining transvestite” (Hennessy 1994, 117), Hennessy remarks, is a stereotypical caricature meant for the entertainment of a heterosexual audience, and in mainstream culture “as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line” (Hennessy 1994, 32). This description fits more the films described in the first section of this article than the ones discussed above.

4. Forms of Assimilation

As American culture at large gradually becomes more comfortable with the marginal, it is easier to recognize authentic queer elements in mainstream cultural products. There is always, however, a negotiation that aims at making marginal content more palatable, a dynamic Halperin described as an “accommodation to the mainstream” (Halperin 2012, 441). Content produced with an awareness of its larger audience has complex implications. On the one hand, in a context of marginalization, a bigger presence of underground themes in works intended for mainstream consumption indicates a cultural and social progress that should be welcomed. On the other, when contamination turns into assimilation there is also an inevitable shift in content. Danielle Fosler-Luisser describes a similar dynamic with race, highlighting a lingering power disparity, “people within a minority or less powerful group changing their behavior to be more like a dominant group. We might think of assimilation as a companion concept to appropriation: it emerges from contact between groups who have unequal authority” (Fosler-Luisser 2020, 86). This tendency to conformity has the inevitable consequence of smoothing the edges which represent a crucial part of queer and drag culture.

A fascinating way in which queer culture permeates mainstream culture is the phenomenon of queer coding. If we pay attention, we’ll notice that queer content has always been present in mainstream works, albeit in a sneaky way. In his groundbreaking book *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo identifies and catalogues queer content in film since the dawn of cinema. When it could not be mentioned, particularly at the time of the Hays Code, queerness would be suggested or hinted at in what Russo identifies as “coded references” (Russo 1987,

59) and “gay overtones” (Russo 1987, 74-75) in film¹³. These references usually had to do with sexual orientation, as drag is more difficult to allude to in a subtle way. Despite this, John Musker and Ron Clements managed to sneak drag into *The Little Mermaid* (1989): the look of Ursula was inspired by Divine¹⁴. As a general tendency, drag representation was also about to become more explicit in the 1990s.

In *The Birdcage* (1996), for instance, queer content is more prominent. The film by Mike Nichols is, again, an adaptation of European material; a French play subsequently adapted into a film. Among these, *The Birdcage* is certainly the work more directly aimed at a mainstream audience. Nevertheless, the film is filled with gay characters and revolves around a queer family, in which Albert, played by Nathan Lane, routinely refers to himself as his son’s mother. Here we don’t have a straight man who goes in drag for practical purposes (not until the end, anyway), but a professional drag queen who uses her skills to achieve Barbara Bush realness, so to speak, in order to impress the conservative future in-laws, who are unaware their daughter is marrying the son of a gay couple. When Albert dresses as a credible upper-middle-class housewife, drag is employed for comic relief in a way that is different from the previous examples. Here most characters are in on the plot, and the comedy comes from the attempts of the couple at looking normative: redecorating the house switching the art with a crucifix, mimicking John Wayne’s walk to seem manly, loudly disapproving of gays in the military (albeit because of the haircuts and uniforms).

Writing about the French original¹⁵, Russo remarks that “a gay reading ... that escapes most audiences [...] shows that in fact the film is about passing for straight and the accommodations gays make, large and small, each day of their lives in order to meet the expectations of the straight world” (Russo 1987, 263). The audience never laughs at the gay characters, but rather with them at the incongruities posed by so-called ‘respectability.’ Most

¹³ Eve Sedgwick also makes reference to “coding” (Sedgwick 1994, 83) in *Tendencies*.

¹⁴ It must be clarified that the practice of queer coding has been a tendency particularly concerning the portrayal of villains (including Disney villains), which raises problematic implications (cfr. Brown 2021).

¹⁵ Having died in 1990, Russo did not live to see the American version.

importantly, in this film the inevitable happy ending does not include a return to normativity: Albert and his partner Armand, played by Robin Williams, sign a palimony agreement halfway through the film, thus giving legal status to the gay family. Moreover, now it is the father-in-law, a Republican senator, who is eventually forced into drag to escape journalists, thus subverting the trope discussed in the first category.

When it comes to drag, however, the best example of the margin reaching the mainstream is represented by RuPaul, arguably the first drag superstar in history. Starting out in the underground queer world in the 1980s, she later appeared on MTV and hosted a TV talk show in the 1990s, walking on the line between mainstream and underground. In mainstream culture, she represented the outsider and, as such, was welcomed – and employed – as a symbol of change¹⁶. RuPaul also highlighted the commonalities between drag and regular people:

when I go to work, it's no different than a businessman wearing his three-piece suit on Wall Street. I'm like a nurse, a fireman, or a cop on the beat – they all wear their uniforms to work, and I'm no different. And, like all professionals, I love my uniform. After all, whether we are at work or at play we are all wearing masks and playing roles all the time. Like I've always said, 'You're born naked and the rest is drag' (RuPaul 1995, *forw.*).

However, following the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on TV, RuPaul has now evolved into a polished entertainment machine.

The show is a good example of the concept of assimilation, as opposed to appropriation. Started on Logo, a gay network, *Drag Race* moved on to VH1 and now MTV, thus addressing decidedly mainstream audiences. Using the reality TV format, according to Eir-Anne Edgar, is “a way to present new elements (such as drag queens) in a framing device that viewers feel comfortable with.” (Edgar 2011, 138). Scholars have found many ways in which the show caters to the mainstream. Ben Robbins, for instance, argues that *Drag Race* “frequently flattens individual expressions of protest into a standardized package through its normative

¹⁶ For instance, the brand Mac Cosmetics employed her in a 1994 campaign.

production values” (Robbins 2024, 404). Furthermore, the show has a checkered history when it comes to trans representation, as for most of its run it excluded trans contestants¹⁷.

Drag Race is filled with queer references, particularly to works like *Paris Is Burning* which inform the lexicon with words like ‘reading’ and ‘realness.’ Edgar argues that

this connection not only legitimates the queerness of the show in the queer historical continuum; it is also an attempt to equate the two in terms of social value. [...] Through these references to knowing viewers, RuPaul situates her show in the context of a long and complex queer historical record. However, viewers and critics must ask themselves whether or not *Drag Race* belongs in this queer canon or if an act of encroachment has taken place (Edgar 2011, 136).

The success of *Drag Race* also has the consequence of making queer phrases popular and of common use¹⁸, with an inevitable trivialization and commodification of what originally was underground content of a minority culture. This commodification is behind what José Esteban Munoz calls “commercial drag,” which he describes as a “sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption. [...] The sanitized queen is meant to be enjoyed as an entertainer who will hopefully lead to social understanding and tolerance” (Munoz 1999, 99). However, while Munoz lamented that this visibility on mainstream media did not have a positive effect on LGBTQ+ civil rights, we can now say that it did¹⁹.

Drag Race is not the only contemporary work to be influenced by *Paris Is Burning*: a further evolution of this content is represented by shows like Ryan Murphy’s *Pose*, which portrays the world of ballroom. A series produced by a big network, FX, the show has achieved large commercial success by telling parts of queer and drag history rarely dealt with in mainstream media, all the while employing a gender-non-conforming cast. *Pose* certainly presents features that compromise with commercial success - for instance, queer themes are dealt with in a way

¹⁷ Cfr., Robbins 2024, 409.

¹⁸ Cfr. Campana et al. 2022, 1963.

¹⁹ Both marriage equality and the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell happened after the publication of Munoz’s book, arguably as a consequence of gay rights being more broadly accepted in the United States - and thus as a consequence of the positive impact of increased gay representation in mainstream media.

can feel didactic to the audience. At the same time, *Pose* also shows a deep knowledge of its roots, with several references that wink at those who know the culture: for instance, the character of Elektra is clearly inspired by Crystal LaBeija, Candy's death references the murder of Venus Xtravaganza, and there is a storyline that clearly references the discovery of a mummified body in the closet of Dorian Corey (both Xtravaganza and Corey are queens featured in *Paris Is Burning*).

Pose is perhaps the best example when it comes to a balance between marginality and commodification. Despite being a big production distributed by an important network, the knowledge of queer subculture on the part of the show runners is evident – and the involvement of figures such as Janet Mock, who is trans and black, in the production team helped stave off accusations of cultural appropriation. The largely trans cast (including Dominique Jackson, who in her youth participated in the ballroom scene) also contributes to giving the show credibility. *Pose* includes storylines dealing with the marginalization and oppression endured by trans people of color. The strength of the community is also featured prominently. However, there are moments expressing a sentimentalism clearly meant to cater to a mainstream audience. The best example is in season 2, when the character of Candy is murdered. Her spirit attends her own funeral, tearfully saying goodbye to her friends before reconciling with her estranged parents. Needless to say, this is not a plotline that is often found in underground narratives. This sentimentalism is a product of commercial domestication. However, instances such as this do not diminish the invaluable contribution *Pose* gave to trans representation.

Even beyond the arts, one of the consequences of a more prominent queer presence in the mainstream concerns profit. When queer culture seems to be a popular subject, for example, not only does it appear in films or TV series, but corporations (even those having nothing to do with cultural production) participate as well: for instance, the World Pride march held in New York City in 2019 had such a big corporate sponsorship that a second march was held in

protest²⁰. Profit, however, does not well align with subversion. While provisionally positive, this kind of involvement is superficial. While substantial initiatives originating from the contact with the mainstream exist – for instance the Drag Queen Story Hour program, in which public libraries host book readings for children made by drag queens, thus making a tangible effort toward education and inclusivity – most steps forward can have problematic implications. Charvel et al., for example, reported on the positive impact of *Drag Race* on cis, straight viewers as a consequence of exposure to representation²¹. At the same time, there is a process of corporate capitalization on the stigma endured by the queer community²² that remains problematic.

In a more assimilated culture, Halperin has warned, these steps forward could also lead to a belief that queer subculture should be regarded as no longer necessary, “a vestige from an earlier time” (Halperin 2012, 442). As subculture develops in contrast to mainstream culture, once assimilation and the ‘accommodation to the mainstream’ have taken place, the resistance of gay subculture could be regarded as “the sign of failure (or refusal) to assimilate” (Halperin 2012, 442). Once a minority reaches a certain kind of assimilation, especially if it comes with forms of legal recognition²³, it is generally assumed that certain subcultural expressions of that culture have become obsolete. If assimilation is regarded as a sign of acceptance, a lingering attitude toward subversion in the face of so-called respectability politics runs the risk of being interpreted as a refusal of integration. On the other hand, Halperin argues, queer subculture is essential as it continues to “provide an important, if implicit, vehicle of social critique and political resistance” (Halperin 2012, 430). I would argue that the latter is a crucial point, particularly in light of the political developments that took place in recent years.

²⁰ Cfr. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/millions-celebrate-lgbtq-pride-in-new-york-amid-global-fight-for-equality-organ-idUSKCN1TV0SP/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/30/new-york-pride-parade-lgbtq-rights>.

²¹ Cfr. Charvel et al. 2024.

²² Cfr. Campana et al. 2022.

²³ For instance, marriage equality or the ability of serving in the military.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

*Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali*

As it is dependent upon profit, mainstream representation is not a stable condition: the popularity of a subject has not as much to do with content as it does with the market. A recent example of this phenomenon is the reverse course on inclusivity initiatives many corporations took in 2025 following Donald Trump's reelection, most notably their participation in Pride Month initiatives²⁴. Similarly, in the past few years drag shows have been banned by Republican governors in several American states²⁵. These events demonstrate that the subversion and social critique inherent to queer subculture are still necessary, and need to be simmering below the mainstream surface. While there are civil rights advancements that have been reached in the last few years, such as marriage equality and the ability for LGBTQ+ people to serve in the military, recent developments prove that minorities have to remain vigilant (for instance, in a concurring opinion on the Dobbs ruling, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas signaled that marriage equality may not be settled precedent²⁶). And while mainstream representation can help, its dependence on profit does not make it a reliable ally.

Conclusions

The fact that the marginal has reached the mainstream does not entail that the marginal has to become palatable to the mainstream: on the contrary, its role as a vehicle of critique and resistance can be particularly valuable during a time of assimilation, as a point of reference and contrast toward appropriation or exploitation.

²⁴ Cfr. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/22/revealed-how-big-businesses-are-rolling-back-public-support-for-pride>; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebekahbastian/2025/06/18/pride-month-2025-exposes-the-limits-of-corporate-allyship/>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/02/business/brands-pride-month-trump-lgbtq>.

²⁵ Cfr. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/commentisfree/2023/mar/10/drag-show-bans-tennessee-lgbtq-rights>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/02/politics/tennessee-ban-drag-show-performances-governor>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/tennessee-takes-lead-republican-effort-restrict-drag-shows-2023-02-23/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/21/anti-drag-show-laws-bans-republican-states>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/27/us/texas-law-drag-shows-restriction.html>.

²⁶ Cfr. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/24/thomas-constitutional-rights-00042256>.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

It is also important that subculture not be considered a fixed, settled entity, but something that changes and evolves along with the kinds of oppression and challenges that society poses while maintaining an awareness of its subversive roots. In this sense, the best role for assimilated queer products may be that of cultural gateway. Seductive as it may be, the idea that the general public could directly come in contact with subcultural content is not realistic. There is a need for a map, a yellow brick road to follow in order to get to the underground. In this sense, assimilation can prove to be helpful: products that are more accessible, the ones easier to get in contact with, maybe not the most provocative or the most profound, can lead people deeper down into the subcultural rabbit hole. Provided that these assimilated texts do not embrace oppressive practices toward that marginalized community, they can play an important role in culture not only by softening the ground for civil rights (it is not by chance that LGBTQ+ rights were more embraced after the increase of gay content in mainstream works that started in the 1990s), but also by representing the first step into a minority culture (something that is particularly important with queer culture, which is not passed down by blood). Thus, *Pose* can lead to *Paris Is Burning*, which can lead to John Waters, and who knows what else. Like breadcrumbs, there are older but still quite sparkling sequins to follow.

Bibliography

- Bailey, Marlon. 2011. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture". *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2: 365-386.
- Balzer, Carsten. 2005. "The Great Drag Queen Hype: Thoughts on Cultural Globalisation and Autochthony." *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 51: 111-131.
- Baroni, Monica. 2011. "Drag." In *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, edited by David Gerstner. New York: Routledge: 91.
- Bersani, Leo. 2010. *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, Adelia. 2021. "Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s." *The Macksey Journal* 2 (1): 1-14.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

- Campana, Mario et al. 2022. "'We're All Born Naked and the Rest Is Drag': Spectacularization of Core Stigma in *RuPaul's Drag Race*." *Journal of Management Studies* 59, no. 8: 1950-1986.
- Charvel, Paloma et al. 2024. "The Impact of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on Cisgender, Heterosexual Individuals' Understanding of LGBTQ+ Experiences." *Psychology of Popular Media* 14, no. 3: 449-457.
- Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York. Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male Underworld*. New York: Basic Books.
- Columbus, Chris. 1993. *Mrs. Doubtfire*, 20th Century Fox.
- Edgar, Eir-Anne. 2011. "'Xtravaganza!': Drag Representation and Articulation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*." *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, No. 1: 133-146.
- Edwards, Blake. 1982. *Victor/Victoria*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Fosler-Luisser, Danielle. 2020. *Music on the Move*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Halperin, David. 2012. *How To Be Gay*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. 1994. "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture." *Cultural Critique* 29: 31-76.
- hooks, bell. 2015. *Black Looks. Race and Representation*. New York: Routledge.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Livingston, Jennie. 1990. *Paris Is Burning*, Off White Productions.
- Munoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murphy, Ryan. 2018. *Pose*, FX.
- Musker, John and Clemens, Ron. 1989. *The Little Mermaid*, Disney.
- Newton, Esther. 1979. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nichols, Mike. 1996. *The Birdcage*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Pollack, Sidney. 1982. *Tootsie*, Columbia Pictures.
- Robbins, Ben. 2024. "'This Wave Feels Like a Tsunami': The Political Responses of *RuPaul's Drag Race* to Anti-Drag Legislation in the United States." *American Studies* 69, no. 4: 403-423.
- Rodgers, Bruce. 1979. *Gay Talk. A (Sometimes Outrageous) Dictionary of Gay Slang*. New York: Paragon.
- Rupaul. 1995. *Lettin' It All Hang Out*. New York: Hyperion, epub.
- Rupp, Leila and Taylor, Verta. 2003. *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Russo, Vito. 1987. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. New York: Harper&Row.
- Sedgwick, Eve. 1994. *Tendencies*. London: Routledge.
- Sharman, Jim. 1975. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 20th Century Fox.

Wilder, Billy. 1959. *Some Like It Hot*, United Artists.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Bio-bibliographical note

Anna Ferrari holds a PhD in American literature from Sapienza, University of Rome and teaches American Literature and English at Sapienza University of Rome and at the University of Florence as an adjunct professor. Her writing has appeared in *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di Studi Nordamericani*, *Book 2.0*, *RSA Journal*, among others. Among her research interests are AIDS literature, LGBTQ+ culture, camp, Jewish humor, pop culture, and representation of the urban space.

Email address: anna.mv.ferrari@uniroma1.it