

“Shattering Gender Taboos in Gabriel Baur’s *Venus Boyz*”

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Abstract: The representation of female masculinity is a relatively new cultural phenomenon that started in the mid-1990s, mainly in Anglo-American contexts and which was highly influenced by the tenets of queer theory. As part of the recent renaissance of drag within gender and sexuality studies, the drag king phenomenon has not received the academic attention that it should, especially when compared to representations of femininity by men. Thus, the present contribution will analyze the film *Venus Boyz* as one of the most influential visual vehicles through which to foster visibility onto different embodiments of female masculinities. *Venus Boyz* has the merit of being the first documentary feature film that portrays the drag king phenomenon and other queer FTM transgender persons, a pioneering task whose merit should be acknowledged. As will be seen, then, by dislodging masculinity from maleness, the social and cultural codes of gender identity can be altered and troubled, not only to shake the foundations of orthodox configurations of gender, but also to articulate new paradigms of identity configuration.

Keywords: drag king; parody; gender; queer; sexuality; FTM transgender; heteronormativity

Venus Boyz is the first documentary feature film that fosters visibility and new light on the issue of female masculinity in general, and of drag kings in particular. However, in spite of decades of research, the task of theorizing and analyzing drag king culture has been mostly overlooked by the disciplines related to gender studies, such as women’s and men’s studies, gay and lesbian studies or even queer theory. This is so because the scarcity of representations of female masculinities continues to be at odds with the abundance of depictions of both male masculinities and male femininities. Thus, while there has been a long tradition in popular media, literature, and film of men imitating and performing femininity in drag, often developed as a means to underline the ‘intimate relations shared between gay men and straight women’ (Halberstam 2005, p. 125), there are no such strong bonds on TV, sitcoms, talk-shows, or entertainment venues between women and

theorize and approach non-male embodiments of masculinity, my contribution will not only attempt to render the drag king phenomenon more visible but also to illustrate how the concept of gender identity can be a malleable site of subversive resignifications to contest orthodox paradigms of identity politics. By revealing masculinity as a social and cultural construct enacted through drag performance, *Venus Boyz* posits the main tenets of queer theory: namely, the disruption of a stable sex/gender system and an overt critique marshaled against heteronormative paradigms of identity categories. Furthermore, it also engages with theoretical works that interrogate the formation of a hegemonic masculinity as ‘a particular variety of masculinity to which others – among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men – are subordinated’ (MacKinnon 2003, p. 110).

For decades, masculinity has been linked to white heterosexual middle-class men who enjoy power and health. From the mid-1980s onwards, theorists such as Anthony Easthope (1986), Victor Seidler (1989) or Richard Dyer (1997) have pointed out the importance of rendering masculinity visible and revealing its cultural contingency. In this way, although the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Connell 1995) set the grounds for a growing awareness that masculinity is subject to historical, social, ethnic and sexual variations, it is not until analyses of masculinity start to draw upon the insights of poststructuralist and queer theories that masculinity is defined as a concept not always related to men. Indeed, the disruption of masculinity from the realm of biological maleness allows drag kings both to challenge existing frameworks of gender identity and to question hegemonic masculinity. In order to find out the mechanisms through which hegemonic masculinity is formed, Adams and Savran have claimed that ‘because masculinity has for so long stood as the transcendental anchor and guarantor of cultural authority and “truth”, demonstrating its materiality, its “constructedness” requires an

especially energetic rhetorical and critical insistence' (2002, p. 2). Hence, in line with this performative insistence, my article seeks to reinforce and articulate a new topography of female masculinities which will, hopefully, widen the scope of gender representations in this century and open new epistemological and ontological venues of research.

Gender is such a drag: towards an epistemological challenge of identity

Apart from divulging drag king culture and introducing us to the most representative canonical drag kings, *Venus Boyz* tackles a set of theoretical questions of utmost relevance for the articulation of transformative paradigms of gender identity categories. Some of the film's main concerns are related to the problematization of stable identity categories and its subversive effects on the so-called natural gender system. Informed by deconstruction and poststructuralist theory, feminist thinkers like Judith Butler (1990), E. Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Donna Haraway (1991), or Elisabeth Grosz (1995) have questioned binary oppositions such as sex/gender, natural/cultural, essence/construction, being/doing, heterosexual/homosexual, etc. More specifically, Butler states that universalizing notions such as 'woman', 'man', 'masculinity', 'femininity' and so on, are not fixed entities which have necessarily to comply with the correlative 'sex/gender system'; rather, these notions form part of an ongoing process by which traditional identity categories can be contested and revisited. Butler's overcited statement that 'gender is performative' signals the process of reiteration of cultural forms, not as a singular act, but rather 'as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names; performativity is a renewable action without clear origin or end; the subject is not constrained by its originating context' (1993, p. 234). For Butler, the concept of 'performativity' is the mediating term between sex and gender; the notion of gender as performative marks the threatening disjunction of gender from sex, the

possibility of a masculine identity in a female subject and a feminine identity in a male one. The performative gender act that drag kings enact in *Venus Boyz* allows for the construction of an array of gender conditions which may not have been ontologically imagined but which nevertheless exist and challenge the epistemology of gender formation. In this sense, the correlative link between sex and gender is effaced inasmuch as a given gendered body may not be grafted onto its biologically prescribed one. In Butler's words:

when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (1990, p. 5)

The multiplication of gender identities, as proposed by Butler, certainly brings about the proliferation of discontinuous and incoherent genders. In turn, this queer topography of identity propitiates the dismantling of heterosexuality as the natural given and posits it as a cultural fiction. The potential of queer discourse to break up the continuous line between gender, sex and sexuality becomes an essential background with which to redefine the orthodox parameters that have traditionally defined normative gender identity categories. Remarkably enough, the performances of drag kings and FTM transgender persons in *Venus Boyz* dislodge male sex from masculine gender, thus questioning the idea that there exists a fixed, gendered and sexed subject behind its act. Furthermore, their use of self-conscious strategies such as parody, camp and drag performance becomes central both to reveal the imitative structure of all gender identities and to denounce the more insidious aspects attached to hegemonic masculinity (i.e. misogyny, racism, homophobia, etc.). In this regard, Butler has claimed that 'although

gender meanings used in drag are part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization' (Butler 1990, p. 138). What this means is that the configuration of new gender meanings entails an ambivalent process of cultural and semantic recontextualization. The above-mentioned strategies are ambivalent because drag kings' performances of masculinity can also reinforce, rather than disrupt, hegemonic notions of masculinity. In order for 'drag' to succeed and become a subversive weapon, it must be both self-consciously enacted and socially recognized as such. Drag performance is a practice of blurring gender norms and of creating an ambiguity in which gender can be questioned. According to Esther Newton, drag, like camp, is one of 'the most representative and widely used symbols of homosexuality in the English world' (1979, p. 100). More importantly, drag breaks the illusion of what gender is, thus subverting the distinction between an inner and an outer self. Butler carefully emphasizes that drag is not a parody of an original in the sense that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate, but rather, drag is a parody 'of the very notion of an original' (1990, p. 138). So, gender parody through drag reveals that the supposedly original and natural identity is in itself an imitation without an ontological origin.

On the other hand, camp strategies are defined by 'incongruity, theatricality and humor . . . Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy' (Newton 1979, p. 106). Although camp is mostly related to incongruous gender transformations, it is always dependent on 'the eye of the beholder' (1979, p. 106); that is to say, according to Newton, 'camp' can mean different things to different people. Therefore, a performer may be too camp and yet the audience might not perceive it. In this sense, 'camp' is close to Butler's definition of 'parody':

Parody by itself is not always subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on the context and reception in which subversive connotations can be fostered. (1990, p. 139)

Consequently, the role of reception and the context in which such parodic and/or camp acts take place becomes instrumental in order to test the political effectiveness of these deconstructive strategies. This said, one must stress that the relation between performer and audience constitutes one of the essentials of camp. Owing to this structural link, camp discourses always need a conspiratorial audience as the target of their political charge, since the theatrical status of camp relies on its consciously exaggerated performance of a homosexual identity. *Venus Boyz* not only portrays in explicit ways the reciprocal relationship between audience and drag king performers, but also shows how camp humor can be a valuable pedagogical tool for social and cultural critique.

Gender-bending, parody and self-designed male bodies

Directed by Swiss film-maker Gabriel Baur in 2001, *Venus Boyz* is the first documentary feature film on drag kings and Female-To-Male (FTM) transgender persons. Shot and narrated with a certain epic tone of adventure and personal journey, *Venus Boyz* combines interviews with performances on stage. The protagonists of this film spend a lot of time discoursing on the nature of gender, performance, empowerment and social role playing. Ultimately, the purpose of this film is not only to reverse the traditional assumptions about masculine women, often associated with ugliness and rudeness, and

to show the attractiveness of their performances and queer genders, but also to send a more profound message about the reinvention of gender forms. Interestingly, *Venus Boyz* explores the recent history of the drag king phenomenon, its protagonists' feelings and motivations, and the different locations and gender identity configurations that first and foremost can be attached to queer female masculinities. It also addresses some of the latent controversies underlining the drag king phenomenon, related to 'masculinity and transformation as performance, subversion or existential necessity' (www.venusboyz.net). Moreover, it stresses some of the main differences between the New York drag king scene – more oriented towards parodying masculinity through theatrical strategies and creativity – and the London one – more concerned with experimenting with testosterone and FTM transgenderism either as choice or as existential necessity.

The journey through this universe of female masculinities begins in New York with performer Bridge Markland, a self-identified bisexual woman who enacts in her performances gender transformations from woman to man and vice versa. The film shows to the audience Bridge's process of gender transformation: firstly, when she is constructing 'Angela', a very sexy and feminine woman wearing a long luxurious sequined dress; and then dressed as her most successful male character, 'Steve', a bald businessman in a pin-stripe suit. The theatricality of Bridge's act is not only staged by showing us that femininity and masculinity are constructed effects dependent on cultural and social codes, but also by displaying a dildo in his pocket as an ironic gesture meant to undermine the pervading phallocentrism of Steve's life. Bridge's parody of such a character is even more evident after showing to the audience his birth out of the female character of 'Angela', so much so that Bridge explicitly looks for the audience's participation when she approaches a drag king and thrusts her tongue upon him. It is

within this queer context that the character of 'Steve' will be deconstructed: 'Steve' is no longer the heterosexual man flaunting the power of his penis, for he can also be read as a much more androgynous person who could be engaged in queer sexual practices too.

The recognition and celebration of drag kings' performances of masculinity questions and awakens the audience's desires. This is also the case of Maureen Fisher (alias 'Mo B. Dick'). Fisher opens the drag king show under the guise of 'Reverend Jimmy Johnson', 'a southern preacher with a bad toupee who appeared to be on the spiritual equivalent of Ecstasy' (Hasten 1999, p. 12). As he walks onto the stage shouting 'Hallelujah, Amen', the crowd becomes mad keen on his parodic performance of such a stereotyped US American preacher. 'Reverend Jimmy Johnson's' spiritual ecstasy is here transformed into a euphoric speech on gender-free subjects; moreover, instead of preaching the Gospel, this queer Reverend is holding in his hands drag kings' cult piece, *The drag king book* (Volcano and Halberstam 1999). By parodying the orthodox beliefs on gender definitions and roles that religion has enforced, 'Reverend Jimmy Johnson' elaborates his own discourse on drag kings claiming that:

Right here in chapter 13 it says, and I quote: and on the eighth day the gods realized that there must be a third sex. And then the gods created the royal family of the drag queens and the drag kings. Hallelujah! . . . Brothers and sisters, many people ask me, they say, what is a drag king? What is it? What is it? I'm here to tell you; I'm a special messenger. I am a Reverend. A drag king is a person who wants gender euphoria! A drag king is a person who has accepted his female masculinity! And a drag king is a person who likes fast cars and cheap women. Amen! Amen! Ooh, Lord, I'm feeling it! (*Venus Boyz*)

By appropriating a set of familiar discourses attached to a religious Reverend – i.e. the overstated tone of his speech in order to convince and convert the audience into his

religion, his overt references to the figure of God as the origin of this world – his drag king performance is also dependent on the audience’s recognition and participation. The audience’s implicit knowledge of that stereotype becomes fundamental in order to elicit their pleasure and fun. The display of parodic strategies with which to denaturalize gender ideals is something common to Maureen Fisher’s performances. In this respect, it is interesting to mention another scene in which Maureen Fisher appears, especially when she is photographed by Del LaGrace Volcano as half-woman, half-man. In ‘I am what I am’ the duality of queer genders in her persona is indeed something extraordinary for someone who on stage usually stays completely in character as a man. Yet, as she has admitted, she ‘likes mind-boggling and genderfuck stuff like this . . . It’s funny because it’s a woman dressing as a man dressing as a woman’ (*Venus Boyz*).

Although the performance of femininity by drag kings is not very common, it is worth mentioning MilDred Gerestant, one of the most successful and acclaimed drag kings who masters complex gender transformations in really astonishing ways. MilDred’s performances encode a multiplicity of markers related to identity categories, such as gender, race and sexuality. Furthermore, in *Venus Boyz*, MilDred is filmed together with drag queen Bee Luscious Lenai, thus underlining her performances as more eclectic, hybrid or even comical. The influence of drag queen culture on MilDred’s performances makes them utterly different from the rest of drag kings in the use of visual comic effects; i.e. her clumsy movements when trying to put the big Afro wig on her head, the apple as a substitute for the penis, the gross gesture rubbing her genitals or the act of making-up her lips while wearing a beard. According to Newton, whereas the use of physical dexterity and visual contrasts to create comic effect are characteristics of slapstick comedy, stand- up comedians rely on verbal agility (1979, p. 56). What is relevant here is that we can find both genres in MilDred’s performances, that is to say, she incarnates

humor, wit, social critique and glamour all at once. The gender hybridity found in her shows and costumes also queers the traditional sex/gender system to interesting effects: the audience is required to participate in the redefinition of gender and race premises of identity, thus collaborating and showing its complicity with the destabilization of power hierarchies.

Diane Torr's workshop 'Drag King for a Day' illustrates that embodying male traditional values can be a means of gaining more social power and recognition. As a forerunner of drag king culture, Torr began interrogating gender definitions through theatre and performance in the early 1970s. Since then, she has brought her experience and talent to the drag king scene, mainly through the creation of her drag king workshop. For Torr, there is a strong link between being a man and seizing more social – and physical – power. When in male drag, 'what immediately happens is that people step aside to let you go past . . . when you walk into a room as a woman they just look at how sexy you are' (*Venus Boyz*). This is why in this workshop she shows women different nuances of male gesture and motion, such as how to walk and stand very solidly on the floor so as to gain a sense of ownership, how the gaze can create new facial expressions (as she says when performing on stage: 'smiling is an act of friendliness: you are conceding territory'), or different ways of communicating ('stop apologizing; as a man in a man's world, you are right'). The ultimate goal of these women is to walk into public space, pass as men and experience what it feels like to be a man for a day. On the other hand, parody also plays an important role in Torr's performances; for example, when she plays the character of 'Jim Cross', a representative of the 'American Society of Men', an actual organization devoted to 'protecting and preserving the God-ordained rights and privileges of men' (Hasten 1999, p. 38). As 'Jim Cross' announces:

I am here tonight on behalf of the ‘American Society of Men’ to give you your first lesson on how to gain and retain respect. Rule number one: territory. When you walk into a room, have a sense of ownership, don’t be intimidated . . . Rule number two: stop smiling. It’s nice to see women smiling; it makes them appealing, unthreatening. But as a man, it’s important that you allow no way that somebody can permeate you. Maintain a sense of your decision-making capability at all times. (*Venus Boyz*)

While Torr uses parody as a mechanism to contest male values, her drag king workshop has been criticized precisely for creating a sort of ‘gender espionage’ (Hasten 1999, p. 38) in that this kind of male drag construction allows experimentation with gender but, at the end of the day, most participants go back to their original femininity and order is restored. Torr’s workshop can then be said to resemble the Bakhtinian concept of ‘carnival’, of a world in which people are organized in their own way, ‘outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity’ (Bakhtin 1965, p. 225). For Bakhtin, ‘carnival’ is also characterized by laughter, excessiveness, particularly of the body and the bodily functions, bad taste, offensiveness and degradation. The subversive potential of this carnivalesque world to break off social and cultural rules is temporary and ephemeral, for it only exists within the frame of a specific festivity or event. Right after the enactment of their subversive acts, the participants of this carnivalesque world (read Torr’s workshop participants) return to social order and restriction, thus restoring the balance between their gender and their sex. It is within this outlaw and yet legitimate social context that the workshopers can feel safe by performing their ephemeral roles as males without being attacked or assaulted for looking/being too queer. Obviously, the connotations of the concept of ‘carnival’ could be expanded to other drag kings’

performances, especially because most of them take place in safe venues, such as queer clubs, gay and lesbian pride events, etc. Yet, the controversy surrounding Torr and the subversive potential of her workshop comes mainly from some butch and FTM transgender persons who, apart from safely performing masculinity on stage, live their lives as males and are more exposed to homophobic attacks and bigotry. For FTM transgender persons, there is not a 'reconsolidation of femininity and resolute heterosexuality' (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, p. 79). Rather, they embody those liminal positions that risk becoming non-human because of their queer (un)knowability. In any case, *Venus Boyz* depicts Torr's workshops as a fundamental part of drag king culture committed to the exploration of different female masculinities. Her work is part of an educational process about the importance of making people aware of the fluidity of gender, sex and sexuality. As many other drag kings, the participants in Torr's workshop serve the purpose of pointing out the constructed nature of masculinity, traditionally assumed to be natural, thus questioning the imperative and teleological relationship between masculinity and maleness.

There are in *Venus Boyz* other enactments of masculinities embodied by a group of FTM transgender persons in London. These persons are distinct from drag kings in that their masculinities are not so much based on parody, critique or entertainment as on personal necessity or desire to design their own bodies. Apart from Del LaGrace Volcano, who is the epitome of this group as well as one of the pioneers of the drag king phenomenon, the film introduces us to Svar Simpson, a London-based visual artist working with sculpture as a means of reprogramming the human body and transforming matter. Svar describes himself as a cyborg, 'meaning a new artificially created human being who uses machines and prosthetics to broaden their [sic] own human consciousness' (*Venus Boyz*). Svar uses the available technology to construct his identity

as half-human, half-machine. For Svar, ‘the body is matter entirely’, and as such, it can be transformed into different matter. The explicit reference to cyborgs as potential body embodiments is related to postmodern definitions of identity (Haraway 1991, Deleuze and Guattari 2003) which seek to ‘discover the “deterritorialized” flows of desire, the flows that have not been reduced to Oedipal codes and the neuroticized territorialities’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2003, p. xvii). This quotation pinpoints their constant struggle as queer persons living outside the social codes of gender and sexual identity. In this respect, we cannot forget that, for Deleuze and Guattari, the figure of Oedipus represents hegemonic power and imperialism, just as neurosis is the result of power on individuals. For these thinkers, Oedipus is everywhere and as a result ‘everybody has been oedipalized and neuroticized at home, at school, at work’ (2003, p. xx). Unlike the neurotic, the psychotic or ‘schiz’ cannot be oedipalized, even by psychoanalysis – hence the name of ‘schizoanalysis’ coined by Deleuze and Guattari in their work *Anti-Oedipus* (2003). The concept of ‘cyborg’ can be related to the definitions of the above-mentioned thinkers because Svar, as a ‘cyborg’, blurs the notion of human identity and lives as a ‘schiz’, building for himself an identity that mainstream culture sees as socially into different human, animal or mechanical shapes. This sense of sexual abjection is clearly appreciated in the photographs made by Volcano showing the ambiguous genital shapes of FTM transgender persons or hermaphrodites. Volcano’s words echo the narrative of gender and sexual ‘oedipalization’ to which many newly-born babies with ambiguous genitals are subjected; that is to say, the institutionalized discourses of medicine and psychiatry assign a female or male sex according to the size of the clitoris or penis, respectively. In this way, many people like Volcano are assigned the female sex at birth, even though they have ambiguous genitals. As he says in the film, he did not have female nor male genitals, but rather a ‘dickclit’ (a blending of ‘dick’ and ‘clitoris’). He decided to take close-up

photographs of ambiguous genitals and make them look beautiful – as if they were a valuable piece of art – precisely because they have been traditionally rejected and portrayed in awful ways, as a pathological symptom of sexual deviance. This is why, among other things, Volcano’s personal project is to amplify rather than erase the hermaphroditic traces of his body:

I name myself. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design, (as opposed to diagnosis), in order to distinguish my journey from the thousands of intersex individuals who have had their ‘ambiguous’ bodies mutilated and disfigured in a misguided attempt at ‘normalization’. I believe in crossing the line as many times as it takes to build a bridge we can all walk across. (<http://www.dellagracevolcano.com>)

As Volcano states in *Venus Boyz*, he has crossed the gender line because in the past he lived his life as a woman named Della Grace. Then, he started his own journey towards gender transformation by means of testosterone and deep muscle injections. And yet, Del LaGrace queers his male look with the use of female accessories or clothes – i.e. the wearing of a sari, skirts and make-up. Something similar happens with Hans Scheirl, an independent film-maker, performer and artist who, as if he were the fictional character of Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, states in *Venus Boyz*: ‘I have lived forty years as a woman, I might as well live the rest of my life as a man’. Hans has been always present in Del LaGrace’s projects on queer body photography; thus, he has been portrayed in *The Drag King Book* performing a ‘dandy’ masculinity (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, pp. 23, 24) and in *Sublime Mutations* as a queer FTM transgender person in the section entitled ‘Tranz Portraits’ (Volcano 2000, p. 109). The encounter with Hans ‘forces us again to confront the basic understanding of what is a man and what is a woman and how

confusing this can be' (www.venusboyz.net). As in the cases of Svar and Del LaGrace, Hans is also interested in gender transformations by design; that is to say, although he was born with female genitals, he has self-consciously shaped his identity and is living his life as a gay man now, blurring the boundaries not only of gender but also of sexuality. Apart from their personal interest in widening and disrupting the monolithic meanings of sexuality, *Venus Boyz* echoes these artists' concerns with queer pornographic representations of the body as alternative venues from which to interrogate the link between pornography, exhibitionism and voyeurism as sexual deviance. Not coincidentally, Volcano's work has been frequently censored for being pornographic, since he always inhabits the thin line in-between the erotic and the pornographic. As can be seen in this close-knit community, the queering of gender identity categories becomes an essential part of their daily lives. Although in *Venus Boyz* Volcano performs his gender transition on stage, thus emulating most drag kings' theatrical acts, the truth is that this is an isolated example. Unlike drag kings, whose intentions are to enact the artificiality of masculinity through parody and entertainment, most FTM transgender persons take masculinity as a part of their identities without intending to make a parody of it. Moreover, another key issue in the exploration of their identities can be found in the use of prosthetic devices used to micturate. While 'they' make use of dildos and fake penises out of desire or personal necessity, *Venus Boyz* shows how drag kings' reliance on them is based on parody, critique and entertainment.

The Pun and the Penis

Interestingly, *Venus Boyz* revisits the idea that male signifiers can be removed from male bodies and relocated in female bodies. Such is the case of the male signifier par excellence: the penis, a recurrent and necessary prop in most drag kings' performances

of male stereotypes. The wearing of a fake penis – i.e. a dildo – in drag kings’ acts raises a number of questions related to the configuration of queer structures of desire mainly from a double-edged standpoint: as a potential reinforcement of phallogocentric symbolism and ‘penis-envy’ anxiety and as a deconstructive parodic device used to undermine the myth of heterosexual male sexuality. In her essay ‘The lesbian phallus and the morphological imaginary’, Judith Butler (1993, pp. 57 – 91) traces the origin of the phallus as exposed first in Freud’s works ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’ (1914) and ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923), and then in Lacan’s ‘The Signification of the Phallus’ (1958). For a start, Freud’s writings on the penis as the main exponent of the phallic function are ambivalent, mainly because Freud’s definition of ‘erotogenicity’ does not only refer to ‘that activity of a given bodily area – the penis – which consists in conveying sexually exciting stimuli to the mind’ (Freud 1914, cited in Butler 1993, p. 60), but most importantly because, later on, Freud would acknowledge that ‘certain other areas of the body – the erotogenic zones – may act as substitutes for the genitals and behave analogous to them’ (Freud 1923, cited in Butler 1993, p. 60). Freud already pointed to the transferability and expropriability of the phallus, or at least his writings are subject to multiple interpretations which allow the configuration of other anatomical areas as erotogenic zones. For instance, the displacement of the male genitals as the originating site of erotogenicity to other parts of the body became an important point of departure for different feminist thinkers, like Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (1985), who have sought to rewrite in their work the main tenets of psychoanalytic thought. Lacan’s analyses of the phallus establish a distinction between ‘having’ and ‘being’ the phallus. Admittedly, Lacan explicitly denies that the phallus is a body organ; for him it is instead a ‘privileged signifier’ (1985, p. 82) that generates and controls meanings. Nevertheless,

Lacan attributes the 'having' to the masculine position within a heterosexual matrix, thus linking the phallus to androcentrism and heterosexism. As Butler puts it:

if the phallus only signifies to the extent that it is not the penis, and the penis is qualified as that body part that it must not be, then the phallus is fundamentally dependent upon the penis in order to symbolize at all. Indeed, the phallus would be nothing without the penis. (1993, p. 84)

Moreover, in the course of his (re)writings, Lacan also establishes 'the mirror stage' as a morphology of the body in which the phallus gives access to the mastery and control of significations in discourse. By rendering the phallus as the 'privileged signifier' of the symbolic order, Lacan confers hegemony on the phallus and its ability to link the materiality of the signifier to the materiality of the signified. In other words, in Lacan's scheme there is a teleological relationship between the signifier and the signified; between the materiality of the body and that of its significations and meanings. Although for both Freud and Lacan the phallus can be detached from the penis inasmuch as the phallus can attach itself to a variety of organs, there is in their writings a semantic complicity between phallus and penis.

The problem with equating the concept of phallus as a male sign of power and authority with the penis is that sexual difference is assigned according to anatomical difference, according to whether individual subjects do or do not possess the phallus. As Jacqueline Rose has observed: 'it is not because anatomical difference is sexual difference, but rather because anatomical difference comes to figure sexual difference. The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a seeming value' (Rose 1985 cited in De Lauretis 1994, p. 218). Hence, the tie between the phallus and the penis, between 'having' and 'being' (the phallus) and between the 'signifier' and the 'signified', must be disrupted so that other possibilities of sexual

identity configurations can emerge. In particular, Butler puts forward the deconstructive trope of ‘the lesbian phallus’ as a site of sexual identity contestation and transformation.

In her own words:

In this sense, it is important to consider that it is the lesbian phallus and not the penis that is considered here. For what is needed is not a new body part, as it were, but a displacement of the hegemonic symbolic of (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure. (1993, p. 91)

It must be pointed out that the lesbian phallus is just another fictitious signifier that ‘furthers a crisis in the sense of what it means to “have” one at all’ (Butler 1993, pp. 88–89). The Butlerian trope of ‘the lesbian phallus’ also serves to contest phallic and patriarchal discourses of (hetero)sexuality inasmuch as it is not merely a copy of the phallogocentric construction of sex. Moreover, Butler’s main contention is not just to disjoin the phallus from the penis, as psychoanalytic discourse suggests, but also to displace the heterosexist concept of sexual difference in order to promote an anti-heterosexist sexual imagery. Importantly enough, De Lauretis (1994) also outlined a model of lesbian fetishism through which the mannish lesbian is able to take the signs of masculinity as fetish objects, sometimes in parodied form, so as to contest the heterosexualization of desire by which masculinity represents sexual desire for the female body. De Lauretis’s model opened new cultural and psychoanalytic terrains for the re-elaboration of masculinity as a constructed object of desire, now available for lesbians.

The recirculation and reterritorialization of this ‘privileged signifier’ is a predominant feature in most drag kings’ performances. Not coincidentally, in drag kings’ performances, phallic symbolism is mainly conveyed by the use of dildos. In this sense,

drag kings rely on this device not only because the dildo signifies certain lesbian sexual practices, but also because of its parodic phallic appropriation as a substitute for the male penis. The question of transferring the symbolic power of the penis, mainly but not exclusively, to lesbian sexual practices might become controversial: is the dildo an artificial reproduction of the penis and if so, a phallic imitation of the 'real' penis that would corroborate that the lesbians who use it 'suffer from penis-envy'? Or rather, can the use of dildos evoke a parodic practice with which to denounce not only phallic sexual practices, but also the censorship to which most queer users of dildos have been exposed?⁵ From my perspective, the use of dildos in drag kings' performances of masculinity can be seen as parodic and funny. Their playful insistence on phallic imagery draws attention to the fact that seizing power is not necessarily a male trait. It is important for this purpose to consider the often comic reactions of the audience when drag kings explicitly play with their dildos as main or secondary agents in their performances. This can be seen in one of the opening scenes of *Venus Boyz*, in which a group of young drag kings perform on the stage of 'Club Casanova' dancing and making abrupt movements while emulating sexual intercourse. The crucial role of their 'penises' in such performances brings about the audience's joy and laughs. Such reactions from the audience may not strike us, given the frequency of jokes on and comic representations of the male genital organ. In this regard, Richard Dyer has pointed out that comedy, apart from being a fertile terrain for images of sexuality, 'is an area of expression that is licensed to explore aspects of life that are difficult, contradictory and distressing' (2002, p. 92).

A great part of these contradictory and distressing issues are related to the representation of male sexuality and male fears about what it means to live without what a penis signifies for men (i.e. power, visibility, the wholeness of their identity). In Dyer's

own words, ‘much of this humor plays on the anxiety caused by the gap between what male genitals are actually like and what they are supposed to be like’ (2002, p. 92). Yet, the fact that such representations and anxieties about male sexuality are often treated in gross-out comedies or jokes does not necessarily mean that they are always already subversive, for in comedy, as in parody, we can find both the reinforcement and the undermining of ideas about male sexuality. In any case, although the audience’s hilarious responses to the drag kings’ representations of the male phallus are not in themselves subversive, they are nevertheless very revealing of the necessary complicity between performers and audience. Since drag kings’ reinventions of the phallus are self-consciously enacted on stage with the purpose of provoking an expected audience response, then the parodic dimension of such representations may be more easily discerned. At the same time, drag kings’ hyperbolization of ‘having the phallus’ makes the audience a participant in their project, targeted at releasing the symbolism surrounding the male penis and/or phallus from its usual context. Consequently, the condition of ‘having a phallus’ becomes transferable in drag kings’ acts, producing a new type of eroticism which is, in turn, displaced from traditional heterosexist contexts. In drag kings’ performances, the heightening of the phallus, its transferability and expropriability can be empowering devices to redefine anatomy and sexual difference.

In spite of all these arguments, one can still question most drag kings’ reliance on the act of ‘packing’ as an essential part of their masculinity performances. To put it in other words, by introducing the recurrent theme of wearing a penis in their performances, they are more or less overtly engaged with notions of masculine power and sexuality as only pertaining to men. If some drag kings like Mo B. Dick find packing necessary in their performances of masculinity because ‘the essential element to manhood is the dick, and it’s like a drag queen not wearing tits’, then there is a sense in which their ironic

performances tend to reinforce patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions about ‘having the phallus’, about what it means to wear one. On the other hand, those drag kings who pack with decidedly non-phallic objects (like Mildred) achieve with their performances a greater disturbance of our conceptions of gender and sexuality, mainly because they not only dislodge more effectively – i.e. visually – the phallus and the penis but also because they highlight the constructed status of the penis and provide all its associated phallic meanings with great doses of creativity and wit. Perhaps, then, the drag king’s phallus transferability is more effective in those drag kings’ performances which are more committed to retaining a sense of creativity and transformation in their acts.

Conclusion

Apart from bringing to the fore issues such as the arrangement of unorthodox gender identity categories, the use of dildos as parodic interventions to unmask the seemingly natural connections between sex, gender and sexuality, or the articulation of a complex site of lesbian desire between performer and audience, *Venus Boyz* covers a wide and varied set of questions pertaining to different embodiments of queer female masculinities. This visual work has interestingly helped both insiders and outsiders to get to know what a drag king is and how the concept of gender identity is subject to multiple embodiments. The depiction of FTM transgender persons also serves to undermine the belief that there is an original source of masculinity, thereby dislodging the link between masculinity and biological maleness. Importantly, the effectiveness of drag kings’ acts and FTM’s resignifications of hegemonic masculinity is directly proportional to the readability of their genders. If their subversive genders are not read or are not socially recognized as such, then they may be merely reproducing oppressive gender models. For this reason, the importance of recognizing certain queer strategies such as drag, parody and camp, as

inherent to a specific community becomes a useful cue to trouble essentialist paradigms of gender identity.

Besides these theoretical postulates, *Venus Boyz* makes evident use of lighting, photographic and editing film techniques – montage, dissolves, out-of-focus and hard-grain photography, screen suffused with blocks of color, etc. – meant to achieve ‘a certain distance and refer to the act of constructing film reality. Film is after all ‘reality in drag’ (www.venusboyz.net). In this way, the film attempts to be consistent with the performative staging of gender identity categories that it portrays as well as highlighting the creative role of imagination and fantasy, so necessary for any filming project. The film also shows the role of the audience when witnessing live drag kings’ gender performances since drag kings’ performances bring about a collective ecstasy through which the audience can broaden their freedom of self-expression and claim their otherwise socially censored desires. *Venus Boyz*, then, accurately portrays the eagerness of a close-knit queer community for new forms of performing female masculinities on and off stage. Overall, *Venus Boyz* is a necessary work for the expansion of drag king culture into both queer and non-queer cultural circuits. Otherwise, the visibility and knowledge of the drag king phenomenon and other representations of female masculinities would disappear into social, academic, and even virtual oblivion.

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Notes

1. According to Halberstam, there is a lack of recognition of the influence of lesbian queer culture on straight culture both in cultural and academic contexts. In his last book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), he undertakes a thorough research on the interactions between drag kings and their contributions to popular media representations of masculinities, such as those found in the films *Austin Powers* and *The Full Monty*. Halberstam also notices, however, that the interactions between gay men and straight men are becoming more and more popular in the media (i.e. the TV realities *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Boy Meets Boy*), and they ‘only solidify a general recognition of the important contributions made by gay white men to popular culture’ (2005, p. 125).
2. The ‘theory of disidentification’, a term coined by cultural critic Muñoz, is a strategy of resistance for minority subjects that acknowledges the power of humor and comedy in order to resist mainstream representations of non-white queers in the media: namely, through camp performance the object of phobia and racism ‘is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture’ (Muñoz 1999, p. 3).
3. Shot over a span of five years (1996–2001), filming and financing the film was very difficult at that time. *Venus Boyz* was first released in 2001 mainly within independent film circuits of Queer Cinema. Its DVD format, however, did not come until 2003.
4. The use of surgery – not only of genitals but also of other body parts such as lips, breasts, ears, noses, etc. – to construct gender identity, as well as other ritualistic

ceremonies like scarring, tattooing or circumcising, can be examples of the important role of artificial interventions in defining one's identity.

5. In 1991 Volcano published his photographic book *Love Bites* and some feminist bookstores in London were reluctant to sell it, considering it pornographic. The book portrays lesbians using dildos simulating sexual penetration acts. More recently, in his 2000 book *Sublime Mutations*, Volcano also includes some controversial self-portraits in which the dildo becomes the central component of his queer photographic art.

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