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Tilted: Exploring the Mainstreaming and Diversity of Modern Drag

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Tilted: Exploring the Mainstreaming and Diversity of Modern Drag

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Introduction

The act of presenting oneself to the world around them is a performance. Gender takes a massive part in this “performance” as the “gender roles” that we as humans embody due to preconceived societal constructs shape the world’s perception of us (Butler 92-95). The world’s normality of performing the gender that closely matches one’s sex assignment is not the only option. The long practiced Queer art form of Drag, blurs and changes the lines of gender through performance. This in turn plays with the fluidity in the manmade construct of gender. Drag is a necessary art form within the Queer community as it creates a visible spectacle of queerness. It beckons visibility of identities that are chastised, “othered”, and oppressed by heteronormativity. This essay will examine how the art of Drag is for anyone looking to explore their gender identity and how the art form’s growth in popularity within the last decade has transformed it from being subversive into mainstream.

While drag is often recognized to be men dressing and performing as women, there is a community of women, and gender-nonconforming individuals that also participate in the art form. Their visibility is not as predominate, as their population is far out weighed by participating CIS gender men (Rupp). However, this does not mean their existence is disregarded. Drag Kings (self identifying females performing as male) and Bio Queens (cisgender women performing as hyper-feminized individuals) have always been apart of the queer and drag communities. There are many people in the drag community that believe that their acts are not as subversive because they are not renouncing masculinity. However I believe this is a

misogynistic perspective that holds masculinity to a higher regard than femininity. The othering of these performers is hypocritical and goes against the purpose of drag's exploration of gender identity in the first place. I believe this othering phenomenon has become exacerbated by the exponential popularity in drag recently.

With the "mainstreaming" of drag since the launch of the tv show *Rupaul's Drag Race* in 2009, exposure to the art form has left the night clubs and bars and moved to living rooms. Audiences of these gender performances have moved away from primarily LGBTQ+ communities to now include Heteronormative communities. This has positive outcomes in that more people are able to appreciate, and understand the spectacle of the art form. This in turn produces greater respect for the performers. However the negative side is that what is presented to television audiences is a selective view of what drag is. The competition setting that *Drag Race* creates nearly sets up a rulebook for an art form that prides itself on "having no rules" (Gudelunas, 240). Performers on the show are urged to "pad" "paint" and "perform" specific ways and if they are not done to the judges liking they are scrutinized and eliminated. This notion has created a huge cultural backlash within our Internet age as viewers of the show also assume the roles of judges and go on to post and criticize the drag they are presented with. With websites like Reddit and Twitter this phenomenon has gone on to the point where performers on the show have received death threats and hate mail based on the way they are presented on the show. The show's head producer Rupaul Charles almost strictly casts CIS gender men. Recently the show, within its ninth season, casted its first openly transgender

performer Peppermint. The show has still yet to cast any CIS gender female performers. Now in its tenth season, the show has stuck to nearly the same format for years and has yet to push the boundaries of drag any further. The constant self-references that the show makes to past challenges and conversations beckons that it might be losing ground on new material.

As an amateur drag performer, and theatrical artist I strive to find the drag that goes back to its roots of subversity and otherness. I believe that's where the art form holds its power. Drag has the ability to unapologetically state its existence and take the oppression, and absurdity of the heteronormative world around us and call its bluff. When society or science states that you may be one thing drag gives the ability to anyone to become whoever they want to be. I wanted this to be at the forefront of my documentary as I interview New York City drag artists with a variety of gender identities, experiences, and type of performances.

Literature Review

Drag has always had its niches throughout its history. From families to pageants, the art form is varied amongst location and time period. When researching documentaries on New York drag before delving into my own, I knew it was important to focus in on the communities that highlight the specificity of the drag performances amongst that period. Finding the influences and drive to the artists to perform is important to understanding the drag in that period of time before I may compare it to today's.

One of the earliest Drag documentaries is that of *The Queen* made in 1968 predating the Stonewall Riots. This shows a highly niched and secluded

presentation of drag. At the time of the film's inception, the art form was in a more subverse state due to its unpopularity and misunderstanding amongst heteronormative society's morals at the time. The film follows the workings of a CIS gender gay man named Jack who lives and works in New York City as a Drag performer named Sabrina. The viewers see as Sabrina hosts the Miss All America Camp Beauty Contest which is run very much like other heteronormative beauty pageants. Drag performers have various categories of walking, interviews, runways for evening wear and swimwear. The documentary also shows the pageant performers in their rehearsals through the events of final deliberations. While the performers depicted in the film are racially diverse they are all presumed to be CIS gender men. Drag performers naturally draw inspiration from celebrities whom may be popular in that time period. This can be seen in costuming, hair, makeup, and attitude. Within this documentary there is visible comparisons to gay icons like Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, and Brigitte Bardot. This comparison can be seen in the winner of the pageant Harlow, as she sports an attire and hairstyle very similar to the one made famous by Bardot. *The Queen* presents a perspective on drag that is highly glamorized and rigorously criticized. Much like the show *RuPaul's Drag Race* the film presents drag in a state for it to be judged. One of the most notable moments in the film that is often quoted and referenced in the Drag and Queer community today, is that of drag performer Crystal Lebeja. When she mouths off on camera after she loses the crown to an amateur queen named Harlow. She goes on to lead a "house" or drag family of other drag performers that

are apart of the “House of LeBeja”. Another member of the House of Lebeja takes the forefront of the famous drag documentary *Paris is Burning* in 1990.

Over 20 years later following *The Queen*, Drag takes the subject of the screen again with *Paris is Burning*. This documentary primarily focuses in on the performance lives of black, Latin CIS and Trans drag performers in the “Harlem Ball Scene”. The documentary differs from any other previous in that it discusses the home lives of the performers and the homophobia, racism, and familial neglect they receive from society that prompts them to perform. The documentary also goes on to explain some of the vernacular and rules that come with competing in the “ball scene”. Viewers are shown a wide variety of “Categories” that performers are able to compete in ranging from more masculine ones like “Military Realness” or “Butch Queen First Time in Drags at a Ball” and more feminine ones like “High Fashion Evening Wear.” The documentary has been criticized for displaying a white supremacist gaze as the director of the film Jennie Livingston is an upper class white woman that presents an outsider perspective on the subjects of the film.

Livingston’s “imperial overseeing position” does not immediately delineate a racist (hooks 151). Although it does in fact create an outside perspective that makes the documentary necessary for the viewer to understand the ball circuit. If the film were shot from a position of one of the ball members, the majority of viewers would likely have lost much of the explanation of ball elements. Because Livingston is this outsider that has become educated in drag, she knows exactly how to organize lessons to the viewers. She organizes the documentary with two clear trajectories, the pageantry of the balls, and the outside lives of a few of its participants (Butler

136). Pepper La Beija, explains that gay and transsexual men are often ostracized by their families. This causes them to seek for that affection, normally given by their families, elsewhere. Le Beija herself speaks of this prejudice as her mother burned a mink coat she found in Le Beija's closet because she "couldn't take the embarrassment" of her son "becoming a woman before her eyes" (Livingston). It is traumatic stories like these in the film that explain why the discussion of blood related family is minimized. Moreover, Livingston's documentary effectively recounts the daily struggles with prejudice, from the ideals of the 1980s conservative society that these drag performers face. It is because of this recount, the documentary has become one of the most quoted and noteworthy documentaries on the culture of drag. The film also documents an expansion of what is considered to be drag as there are CIS Gay Men portraying themselves as extremely masculine in categories like "Military Realness." This begs the question of how to define drag. A man performing himself to be more masculine is still a gendered performance thus he is still participating in the art form. Since its release almost 30 years ago, the types of Drag and categories to compete in have been expanded. Although much of the slang used in the late 80s ball scene is very much still alive today and often appropriated by non-queer folk.

Within the late 1980s and 1990s another drag subculture that took reigns for its seemingly strange diversity was that of the "Club Kids." This period of drag culture is captured in the 1998 documentary *Party Monster: The Shockumentary*. The film gives viewers a glimpse into the seedy life of club promoter Michael Alig as his rise to fame within New York City's gay nightlife turns him down a path of drugs

and crime. The documentary describes these drag performers as kids “involved in a life of sexual disorientation, and drug induced states of euphoria and glamour” (Bailey & Barbato). The documentary primarily focuses on Alig’s murder of the drug dealer Andre “Angel” Melendez. Much of the documentary is told through interviews of Alig in prison, friends of Alig and reporters on the community like Michael Musto. The documentary also takes much of its findings from a friend of Alig and club drag performer, James St. James. His memoir *Disco Bloodbath: A Fabulous but True Tale of Murder in Clubland*. further dictates details on their life in the club. The drag presented in this period was unlike anything before. Drag became less about the illusion of presenting as another gender and more about dismantling it. Performers would create outlandish costumes that were themed to the club parties they were attending. Instead of drawing upon references of celebrities, performers drew inspiration off art movements and artists like Andy Warhol. Drag became a movement of being elevated to become walking art pieces or timeless “looks” that could exist in photographs. “Looks” or drag performance wear could be made of anything from, clothes that were altered, trash, to even just painted bodies (Simmons 634). The goal of glamour was thrown out. The goal became “to be seen, to be recognized, to become famous” (St. James 121). Famous is exactly what became of them, however many of them for the wrong reasons. Heteronormative society severely questioned this community of performers as many of them were underage and participating in this community without their parents knowledge. Major TV talk shows like *The Joan Rivers Show*, *Phil Donahue* and *Geraldo* all had episodes featuring several Club kids in drag. During many of these shows, the live

audiences questioned the purpose and integrity of these artists stating, “they would never get jobs” and were “screw-ups” (*Geraldo “Club Kids ’92”*) The severe othering of these kids is partially due to the political climate of America at the time. With many gay rights of today not yet being implemented and laws like “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” in affect, questioning any “form” of homosexuality was common. In addition, all of these kids were in drag that was estrappalted from its safe space environment and put within a heteronormative space for it to be judged and questioned by outsiders. The club kid scene was nearly dismantled after many of the clubs were shut down for drug dealing, and underage drinking.

Today, many of these New York drag communities still exist and perform. The pageant scene is still prevalent however many of the pageants within NYC are of a smaller scale then the ones presented in *The Queen*. Because of the popularization of drag, there is a greater amount of funding that is gifted to pageants like Miss Gay America. The pageant is hosted in a new city every year and is run very much like the Miss America Pageant. The drag ball scene is still thriving today. Sectors and Houses are still competing across New York. These are still found within the more ethic neighborhoods of New York like Harlem, and Brooklyn. Many of the same houses are still in affect today. Club Kids are still very prevalent today as well. A large rebirth of them recently has been seen since 2013 when a popular NYC queer nightlife host named Lady Fag began hosting themed club parties across the Chelsea and midtown neighborhoods. Many of the same ideas of previous club kids are still seen however the diversity of people at these clubs has opened up due to drag’s popularity.

Drag Today

Since the growth and popularity of *Rupaul's Drag Race*, Drag has nearly exploded in its public following and participation across the world. This is largely due to the internet and social media age the present day is in as well. However, what is said to hook audiences is the humanization of the performers on the show. Very much like *Paris is Burning*, *Drag Race* not only shows the beauty of each performer's drag but gives glimpse's into the lives of the performers (Gudelunas 242). Many instances on the show competitors have opened up about the hardships they have faced in their lives like Season 1 and "Ongina" opening up about being HIV positive during the Mac Viva Glam challenge, or in Season 5 with "Roxxxy Andrews" discussing her abandonment of her mother when she was a child. This is something that the show very much succeeds in with bringing the humanity behind the drag persona to the heteronormative audiences. Many of these audiences may have never met a Drag performer or have a very limited view of what Drag is and can do, but seeing the person behind the persona broadens this and allows them to connect with the performer. Now with the nature of reality TV, it is likely that many of the moments are over dramatized or even somewhat scripted in, but the inclusion of them nonetheless aids in broadening the scope of Drag.

Another outlet that has expanded Drag's horizons amongst a diverse audience is that of the website Youtube. The online video sharing platform has allowed the sharing of many drag performers all over the world. Videos dedicated to sharing the methods, and tools to participate in the art form are seen in the form of "Makeup Tutorials" or "Hauls". Videos recounting the history of drag and the

defining of drag terms allow for people to become educated on the community without ever stepping foot in the room with a drag performer. Performances of drag are posted from clubs, bars, and events so people are able to follow specific performers without ever even seeing them. It is this documentation and visibility of the community that has exponentially grown it. The amount of video content based off of reviewing, recounting, and discussing *Rupaul's Drag Race* far surpasses the content actually produced by the show. The production company, WOWPresents is responsible for *Drag Race* and much of the content about the show or featuring many of the performers that were on the show. All of this content has flooded the community especially in the last five years. WOWPresents has made careers for drag artists after leaving the show as they have set up an international tour called "Battle of the Seasons" allowing for the clubs around the world to book these now famous performers.

All of this content on Drag not only has broaden the audience but has created a standard for the way drag should be done. James St. James' the *Disco Bloodbath* author hosts a Youtube show called *Transformations* where he features various makeup and drag artists. Now with over a hundred episodes many of the same steps are taken to accomplish the makeup transformation. Commentary on the makeup lingo like the "beige rainbow" which is used to paint contouring shadows on ones forehead to is referenced time and time again by many artists. These commonalities amongst the drag artistry could minimize the diversity of the final performance product. However, there is an emerging opposing force that seeks to push drag back to embracing its subversive roots. The YouTube competition series called *Dragula*

pushes the boundaries of modern drag as it seeks to judge a wide variety of types of queens based off of the notion that they must embody the “three pillars of Glamour, Horror, and Filth”. Their search for “America’s next drag supermonster” jokes about *Drag Race* as they search for the next “Superstar”. *Dragula* allows the queens on the show to interpret these pillars as they seem fit and because of this diversity in what is presented on screen is remarkable. Performers on the show can look to present themselves as aliens, monsters, to simply just creatures. The show very much so dismantles the idea of gender and pushes the drag on the show to be more than just pretty.

Tilted

It is the prevalence of all of these various drag communities today that prompted me to explore the perspectives of people I know within these communities alongside people who are wanting to break into these communities. As a theatrical artist, I wanted to really focus on showing the art of transforming itself rather than just discussing it. Interviews were a large part of the processes in making the film. I started with what I wanted to know about the subject. What is happening currently with Drag? How popularity has affected the scene? How diversity has affected the community? Finally what prompts my subjects as artists to create drag?

After finding the questions I wanted answered I needed to find the experts that could answer them. Two friends of mine that definitely inspired me to lean into Drag, started a drag House called the House of Femanon that centers on the notion of redefining the meaning of femininity. The name came from the words feminine

and anonymous. Taking the idea that drag allows them to create a new anonymous identity almost like “Mystique” from Xmen. The two of them have grown the house to include 5 of their friends that all represent various types of drag. Although each member of the house leans into a different style they all remain a unit. Maggie or Magdelana Femanon often wears stilts when she performs. She does this because she has always been insecure about her shorter height and struggled to make friends within the drag community because of it. She states, “Everyone was six feet and wearing heels. Nobody wanted to bend down to talk to me. So I said screw I’ll be taller than all of you.” Jessie is another founding member of the house. His drag name is Peroxide Femanon and it comes from his love of toxic beauty. He states he “wanted something that was repulsive but mystifying”. He combines elements of glamour and alien like qualities as he often creates other worldly looks with various colored skin makeup designs. Both Peroxide and Magdelana push the standards of drag today as both have elements of non-conventional beauty. Their drag works to embody everything that is not the norm in drag culture today.

After interviewing the House of Femanon I documented a typical night of transformation. We see the process of their transformation and the final result of their performances. I wanted to intermix this with cuts of their interviews to allow for fluidity when watching the film. The two of them represent a specific level in their career. Because they have both been doing drag for about two years and are very visible in the NYC club scene they have developed a large following of fans and friends on instagram. They both discuss the importance of instagram to maintain visibility in the scene and as a tool to find more inspiration from others. Both

Peroxide and Magdalena have frequent club promotion jobs as well as performance jobs. They have frequently worked at Lady Fag's events around the city as well.

After following the House of Femanon I knew that I wanted to move into a different circle of drag. When starting my journey of this film I had many friends and colleagues come to me interested in the art form itself and questioned me about how to get started in it. I decided to team up with a student production company at school and host an event for amateur drag performers or people looking to try it out. This became an interesting section in my film, as I was able to delve into the stories of these people and why they wanted to pursue it. Each performer was told to design their own look and create a name, and a performance. We opened up the event to anyone and everyone interested. We ended up getting a mix of bio queens, drag kings, drag queens, and everything in between. I co-hosted the show with my friend and colleague Ryan who also has delved into the art of drag. Together we organized the evening, by decorating the venue, packing the house, and keeping the audience entertained. I was able to have friend film sections of the night to be featured in the documentary as well. Following the very successful evening I sat down with Ryan to discuss his perspective on drag only to realize we share many of the same ideas. Ryan differs from me as he mainly focuses on the performance aspect of the art rather than the design. He also brought up an interesting psychological idea of disassociation and its link to drag. He explained that with being able to disassociate from oneself and become someone else, one is able to find what makes up themselves. The act of shedding what makes you, you, reveals what you are.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the commercialization of drag in mainstream has opened it up for the art form to be reinterpreted by everyone. The sheer visibility the art form gets on the Internet makes it more accessible and understandable for everyone that clicks on it. This makes the diversity of the performers in the drag that are presented today far more diverse than the drag performers that were seen predating stonewall. Drag may have become mainstream but its goal in blurring the lines of gender norms will always spark subversity.

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