

On the Bridge. Of Carnavalesque, Homosexuality, inbetween Spaces and Border Crossing

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In both LGTB and postcolonial cultures, the tools of the carnivalesque, more or less in the same period, have been alternatively used for identity construction and for critical deconstruction. Two different, though often overlapping, forms of otherness have started walking the bridge between the margins and a gradually less and less defined centre. For both, the main issue of their representational practices used to be found in their resistance to what Foucault called “regulatory ideal” disciplining the relation between accepted social norm and anomaly. My contention is that the same tools exploited to resist and react to the pressures towards normalization – tools in themselves very functional to the process of *coming out* in the homosexual community and that of integration for the postcolonial Other – are now being transformed into a strategy to keep both the sexual and the colonial Other on the bridge, in the ghetto of a carnival that, being marked as an exception to the social rule, fails to be dangerous. Drawing on some very recent versions of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque in literature, films and visual and performative arts, I will try to show how the disruptive power of the grotesque/carnavalesque body, with reference to both postcolonial and LGTB otherness, has gradually gone lost, to be replaced by the reassuring feeling that these kinds of difference do not belong with the real world and therefore do not imply the actual revision of social and political practices.

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Wrong bodies on the bridge

*Don't judge a book by its cover
I'm not much of a man
By the light of day
But by night I'm one hell of a lover
I'm just a sweet transvestite
From "Transsexual, Transylvania"
(Sharman 1975, 24:30:00-27:50:00)*

These are the words pronounced by Dr Frank-N-Furter, brilliantly performed by Tim Curry, when he first appears to the astonished Brad and Janet (Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon), who got into trouble with their car and accidentally plunged into the Carnival of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). The song and the sequence perfectly suit my purposes in this article. Dr Frank-N-Furter makes a prodigious appearance on the stage, marching out of a lift and walking along a red carpet between two wings of crowd. While going up and down the catwalk, he is actually moving on a bridge, connecting a number of binary worlds: night and day, normal and queer, appearance and essence, and ultimately male and female. The excessive femininity he flaunts is justified by his being a “Sweet transvestite”, evidently ““showing an excess of gendered external signifiers” (Hanson 1999, 52) that results in a parodic performance of both genders.¹

The Rocky Horror Picture Show – both the original play by Richard O'Brien (1973) and the much more famous film by Sharman (1975) – finds its core in the notion of being on a bridge, neither one thing nor the other, and drawing from this position an artistic vision based on two key aspects: the negation of any binary principle and the validity of the technique of subversive laughter.

In my reflection on laughter and the intersections of gender, I will focus on the metaphor of the bridge as another version of the idea of border, so strongly implied in critical reflections on laughter, however it is inflected. I will mostly focus on the figure of the MtoF transvestite, though sometimes including the transsexual in full awareness of the difference between the two profiles as clearly stated by Sandy Stone (Stone 1987). Grounded in the awareness of how much the downgrading of the male body to a female body is a traditional focus on the carnivalesque, in which Butler's notion of “gender performance” is intensely implied (Butler 1990, 107-205), my line of reasoning will be oriented by the purpose of showing how “standing on a bridge” can be a double-edged condition, on the one hand stating one's own irrevocable difference but on the other mediating – through the tolls of laughter and irony – a counterhegemonic practice.

Bakhtin appears an obvious departure point here. Part of his reflections on Dostoevskij's world include the introduction of the notion of threshold, a place where separation and connection combine: as Sini puts it in her very perceptive study of Bakhtin's critical theory, the word “porog” is to be intended as defining a kind of

¹ There have recently been rumors of a remake of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, starring the transgender actress and LGTB advocate Laverne Cox. The choice would present a number of interesting implications, mostly in the symbolic switching from transvestite to transsexual and from the British youth culture to the African American one.

threshold, separating and at the same time connecting different spaces as to make interchange between them possible and therefore allowing contacts, changes, evolution and, in short, the formation of a community (Sini 2011, 131). Quite obviously this notion of a threshold may be inflected in several different ways, both physical and symbolic. The ghetto, the political faction, the night clubs, the provincial town, the asylum, the hospital, the castle... all of these places may easily be morphed into sites of transition, where a sudden reversal of current societal rules appears possible. As in the carnival, an extraordinary condition is created, and in this suspended context, a change is bound to happen. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, lost in the night and in search of help, Brad and Janet get to a mysterious castle and there, they cross a bridge and experience a change. In *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994), it is the wilderness of the Australian interior that is responsible for the creation of anarchy. And in the same way in *Angels in America* (Tony Kushner, 1994), Roy Cohn, secluded in a hospital and dying of AIDS, meets the nurse and ex drag queen Norman Belize Arriega, whose help and irony cause him to rethink his previous, highly racist opinion (Kushner 1994, 90). The fact that Belize is not “white” (and not pretending to be) obviously introduces the issue of race side by side with the sexual difference.

The character of Belize is a particularly interesting profile, both in the play and in the TV miniseries. An ex-drag queen and Prior Walter’s ex-lover, he is a dark-skinned Latino, therefore his ethnic difference is *visible*.² He is a master of irony and *bon mot*, able to update and exploit the tradition of Oscar Wilde’s thorough camp humour, thus evoking an extremely popular archetype in gay cultures and at the same time ironically combining Wilde’s model of wit an openly non-white belonging.

Belize helps to explain how easily the notion of “porog” may open the way to the postcolonial reflection on the kinds of marginality related to the end of empires. Homi Bhabha in particular works very much on the definition of interstitial spaces, places of transition where the new hybrid identities produced by the postcolonial process find their own though impermanent new location (Bhabha 1983). Bhabha, as many others, appears fully aware of the way in which the production of interstitial spaces where “different identities” are located results from the persisting exercise of Western colonial power, and interestingly enough when Bhabha elaborates on the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, he defines the articulation of forms of racial and sexual difference as the imposition of colonial power through discourse, specifying that, in this process, “the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power” (1983, 19). Stuart Hall’s reflection on race as a “floating signifier”, more easily defined by discourse rather than by “nature”, is to be kept in mind here, as power and knowledge create the very idea of race in representation.³ A bridge – another kind of bridge - between race and gender is created at once in positing the need to think different forms of marginality together. As De Lauretis shows, “the terms of our sexualities have to be recast or reinvented so as to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (De Lauretis 1991, IV).

² As opposed to the “different” Louis Ironson, Prior’s lover, who is constantly hiding his homosexuality.

³ The issue is inflected in the very famous lecture Stuart Hall held at Media Education Foundation in Northampton (MA) in 1997; for transcript see Hall 1997.

This is definitely what Frank-N-Furter does in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: he posits “another way of thinking the sexual”, also entering an order of discourse that easily allows transgression. Carnavalesque laughter, after Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* but also Cixous’s *Le rire de la Meduse*, has this potential. Bakhtin in particular writes that “the comic, in general, is based upon the contrast between the feeling of pleasure and displeasure” (1984, 305). It is therefore born of a discrepancy, an unresolved conflict that may be temporarily accepted provided it keeps within the frame of Carnavalesque exhilaration. At least in the Western cultures, Carnival appears to be based on the temporary reversal of the stated rules, though with some ambiguities: the Caribbean Carnival, for example, results from the syncretic mix-up of Christian traditions and various African precolonial influences; apparently subversive, it has sometimes been used, as Featherstone observes, to reinforce the hierarchies already in place (2005, 225-26). When trespassing the socially agreed borders of time and space, this reversion triggers two diverging needs: a call for normalization and the resistance of the identity that is to be normalized. It is my position that laughter answers both needs. It may be exploited as a tool of resistance but also a way to neutralize the discrepancy locating it in the extraordinary condition of the Carnival, that has a beginning and an end.

Humour’s peculiarity lies in its elastic polarity: it can operate for and against, deny or affirm, oppress or liberate. On the one hand, it reinforces pejorative images; on the other, it facilitates the inversion of such stereotypes. Just as it has been utilized as a weapon of insult and persecution, so, too, has humour been implemented as a device of subversion and protest. In the absence of cosmological affirmation, humour fills a void. (Boskin 1997, 38)

The issue of power is called into play here. When working on Rabelais, Bakhtin focuses on the relation between carnival and authority on the one hand and knowledge on the other, showing how laughter may determine the subversion of authoritative discourse and at the same time produce a form of knowledge that would otherwise be unreachable. If laughter is, at its broadest, a reaction to the perception of a discrepancy and a lack of congruence with what we deem normal and familiar, it also works as a cognitive device: reversing the usual perception, laughter encourages and actually produces a different perspective. In *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), when Bob falls in love with the transgender Bernadette, he also finds out that the paths of affection may diverge from the normative prescriptions of a strongly heterosexual culture. Of course, it takes time for him to accept his feelings, decide to remain with Bernadette and try and build a future with her/him, but he eventually gives in.

Bob’s resistance is perfectly plausible. Any “deviant” identity – be it defined in terms of gender, class, ethnicity – implies a specific danger: it continually destroys the political safety promised by sameness. This is very much the issue with Sandy Stone’s definition of a transsexual:

A transsexual is a person who identifies his or her gender identity with that of the “opposite” gender. Sex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction by confusing the performative character of gender with the physical “fact” of sex, referring to their perceptions of their situation as being in the “wrong body”. (Stone 1987, n.p.)

In this respect, the figure of the transvestite appears even more disquieting than that of the transsexual. Having chosen to resist the “passing” – that somehow determines at least the attempt at normalizing one’s own physical body so as to make it more congruent with one’s chosen gender – the transvestite *abides on the bridge*. S/He discusses gender identity by proposing the identification of her/his body with the opposite gender, though this identification mostly takes place as a performance of the chosen gender model rather than a *real* change. The transvestite – as will be made clear in my analysis of *Paris Is Burning* (1990) – overrules the physical “fact” of sex rehearsing it as its opposite gender. Again, he stays on the bridge. His “being in the wrong body” is exhibited and exaggerated instead of being hidden, and it generates laughter, or better the kind of laughter that arises “out of some kind of incompatibility or some incongruity” (Reichl 2005, 9). At this juncture, the notions of postcolonial body and homosexual body interlace through the tools of the carnivalesque.

At the same time, in everyday life more than in the practice of art, the issue of transvestism has a strong potential for social affirmation and has been exploited as a political statement. In other words, clothes may work as litmus paper and the hyperbolic interpretation of femininity that often marks transvestism is a crystal clear method for ridiculing the roles imposed by the rest of society. Gay Pride – both in fiction and in the world of actual experience – is much more than a carnivalesque masquerade. It becomes the anarchist reversal of the patriarchal heterosexual rule: as in the Latin phrase adapted by Bakunin to the Anarchist movement, “a laughter will bury you”.

Of Stonewall Riots and other carnivals

When working on bodily categories as I am doing now, any deviation from the norm produces a visible discrepancy, coupled with the feeling that what we see should not exist. In the very birth of gay movements, this discrepancy soon becomes a political tool. During the Stonewall Riots (1969), when New York City gays reacted against one of the increasingly frequent police raids at the Stonewall Inn, in Greenwich Village, the transvestites were the ones who fought most passionately and were subsequently seen as icons of the struggle to affirm LGTB people’s rights. They were openly positing a sex/gender duplicity that had to be accepted as part of the real world. This was of course the result of a process, effectively synthesized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet*:

The word “homosexual” entered Euro-American discourse during the last third of the nineteenth century – its popularization preceding, as it happens, even that of the word “heterosexual”. It seems clear that the sexual behaviours and even for some people the conscious identities denoted by the new term “homosexual” and its contemporary variants already had a long, rich history. So, indeed, did a wide range of other sexual behaviours and behavioural clusters. What was new from the turn of the century was the world mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. (Sedgwick 1994, 2)

Stonewall was the trigger. One year later, on June 28th 1970, the first Gay Pride Parade took place. Labelled as the Christopher Street Liberation Day, the event gathered thousands of people marching from Greenwich Village to Central Park, and it started a tradition that was soon picked up by LGTB people and their supporters in London (the Gay Pride Rally in July 1972) and was replicated in many other cities all over the world. Right from the beginning, the demonstrations shared their own peculiar flavour. They chose to celebrate difference through a sexually and socially connoted iconography that was meant to work on mainstream icons of gender to produce a strongly counterhegemonic and collective practice. Marked as a festive celebration, the Gay Pride ideally replicates the Stonewall clashes, transforming the memory of a fight into a festival of difference performed as a Carnival.

When adapting Martin Duberman's book of the same title (1994), Nigel Finch chooses to emphasize the role of black homosexuals and transvestites, particularly the drag queens gathering around the Village's gay bars. Set shortly before the Stonewall Riots, *Stonewall* (1995) focuses mainly on the character of La Miranda (Guillermo Díaz), supported by a group of fellow drag queens, who are given the task of telling the story of the sexual revolution from their point of view. Glamorously performed, the film is a celebration of irony as a tool for re-appropriating one's own identity. And it is through the voice of La Miranda that one of the most meaningful statements in the film is made:

Everyone has their own Stonewall legend. That's mine. I maybe didn't get exactly every detail down perfect. But that's the story of my life, What the hell! I am a drag queen. And we don't always deal with reality. You could say we deal in something kinda realer. We deal in dreams. We're American as apple pie. (Finch 1995, 21:03:00)

The quotation – together with both the historical and the fictional context it refers to – calls into play two collateral considerations: the relevance of being a community (“we”), endowed with specific traits that come to be defined as counter-hegemonic, and the political relevance of crossdressing within this context.

The spreading of the practice of Gay Pride parades all over the world has been basic in starting the process of defining the homosexual community and making it visible. The event has come to be seen as a moment for gathering together and for performance, and has been told and re-told in several forms of narratives. All of them share the tendency to magnify and celebrate difference, a key term in approaching both laughter and the postcolonial (Reichl and Stein, 2005, 7-8): in both fields, the notion of difference and the perception of a form of deviance from what is believed to be normative is a problem to be dealt with, revising the very concept of “normality”. What we see while watching the colorful brigade marching, singing and laughing along the street closely evokes Anderson's notion of the “imagined community” and encourages the process of conceptualizing a community of laughter marked by a new belonging (Anderson 1996).

The whole process comes to the foreground in *Pride* (2014), the film by Matthew Warchus inspired by the real story of the group of gay and lesbian activists supporting the miners during the 1984 strike. Within the framework of the London's Gay Pride March, Joe Cooper (George MacKay) – through whose eyes we mainly come to experience the events narrated in the film – finds his identity and a community to belong to. His coming-of-age is framed within the process collating the

group of activists that collect money to support the families of the striking miners, then find out the the Union is embarrassed to receive funds from LGTB, and eventually decide to take the money to a mining town in Wales, where a new allegiance is progressively created.

The film effectively translates the hardships of crossing a border as well as the inexhaustible power of laughter. Both issues are very much present in Bakhtin's interpretation of Carnival, where the border is functional to both denial and affirmation and whose subversive vitality has the power to contradict the institutional oppression (Sini 2011, 131-35). At the same time, the two notions have to be applied to a social and cultural context in which changes are extremely fast, and the issue of homosexuality – though historically “made visible” in the UK at the end of the nineteenth century by the trials of Oscar Wilde – is still very much an insufficiently charted territory, made up out of borders rather than free land. Wilde's sudden loss of any credibility and right as a consequence of the accusation of being homosexual obviously created what we may call a contact zone (Pratt 1992) where the definition of the homosexual body as a wrong body results in a legal sanction (and punished through imprisonment), but at the same time it makes it issue visible though the passing from visibility to real inclusion will take hard work and a long time.

In the meantime, cross-dressing is increasingly posited as a “category crisis” (Garber 1992, 16-20). Symbolically but not physically female, the transvestite stands on a border, posited as he is on the verge of “passing”. In Sandy Stone's words,

the most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that *constitutes* success, is to “pass”. In terms of sexual belonging, in fact, passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a “natural” member of that gender. Passing, therefore, means the denial of mixture. (Stone, 1987, n.p.)

The kind of suspension you experience as a transvestite, points out Sandy Stone, shows some analogies with the condition lived through by ethnic minorities:

Under the principle of passing, denying the destabilizing power of being “read”, relationships begin as lies – and passing, of course, is not an activity restricted to transsexuals. This is familiar to the person of colour whose skin is light enough to pass as white, or to the closet gay or lesbian [...] or to anyone who has chosen invisibility as an imperfect solution to personal dissonance. (Stone 1987, n.p.)

In more ways than one, however, the condition and behaviour of the transvestite work against invisibility. Though being by definition an interstitial subject, an inbetween creature closely evoking the inhuman nature acknowledged to different ethnicities, the MtoF transvestite makes a point of playing his hyperbolic femininity straight and loud. And he is normally aware that the “personal dissonance” Stone alludes to may be inflected in two different ways: accepting the ghetto though aspiring to something better (as in *Paris Is Burning*), or resisting seclusion and silence and exhibiting one's difference in the open, choosing at the same time to be the solitary drag in an adverse world (as in *Breakfast on Pluto*).

In both cases, however different they may be, laughter – from subtle camp humour to kitsch exaggeration – comes into play, historically even before than critically. By default, transvestites already *are* an object of jokes and laughter. What happens after Stonewall is that they generally turn the ridiculous back into a weapon, performing the radical social change grounding Menippean satire. The doubling of the

male body into a female one – and excessively so – emphasizes the kind of deviation from the norm that produces the grotesque (Russo 1994, 11). This duplicity is never resolved. The existence of the transvestite is developed “on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection” (Bakhtin 1984, 322). And in this intersection, resistance through humour may develop.

If we add to this the critical statement that “the most significant form of laughter can arise from the margins, challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies” (Pfister 2002, vi-vii), we may come to the understanding of how intense is the disruption introduced into patriarchal cultures by Stonewall and by the development of Gay Pride as a statement of identity. This disruption is well played in Francesco Scarponi’s short animated film *Stonewall* (2015). The text’s colourful rendering of the event, combining newsreels’ excerpts and animation, avoids providing reassuring answers, but keeps the notion of being inbetween, and proudly so. Roland Emmerich’s feature film released in the same year and bearing the same title chooses a totally different path, blurring the conflict and neutralizing the political potential. As many reviews pointed out, Emmerich’s *Stonewall* tells a story that is carefully doctored of any possibly disturbing aspect and in fact whitewashed.⁴ In so doing, it misses the mark, depicting a story that has gender as well as ethnic implications that cannot be removed. It also removes the double-edged irony that proves so strong and relevant in other representations of the same issue. An analysis of the available related texts – some of which are discussed here – may show that precisely this double-edged irony may be exploited – and is in fact very much there – to provide a representation which, instead of solving the dichotomy between denial and affirmation, between oppression and liberation, embraces the ambiguity of both ethnicity and gender, choosing to stay on the bridge, and to watch things from there.

A strikingly similar, though thematically different, perspective is offered by *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (Beeban Kidron, 1995). Somehow adapting the storyline of *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, the film develops around three stars of New York’s drag-queen beauty circuit embarking on a trip to Hollywood. The ethnically mixed group – Vida Boheme is white, Noxeema Jackson is African American and Chi Chi Rodriguez is Latino – ends up in a small Midwestern town, where they are seen as Martians. In the web of conflicting reactions triggered by their mere appearance in the small community, the African American character – played by the otherwise “hyper-macho” actor Wesley Snipes – though never explicitly raising racial issues, is quite openly there to show how two different kinds of exclusion interlace. While crossing the wilderness of the interior and provincial US, all three of them become gradually aware of the risks implied in declaring their cross-dressing (invisible gender). What makes the difference between Noxeema, Vida and Chi Chi is that Noxeema is soon challenged for her (visible) ethnic belonging, while Vida and Chi Chi declare their “wrong body” later on.

The same process is outlined in the character of Norman “Belize” Arriega in *Angels in America*. In both the play and the TV miniseries, Belize derives his acrimony from the awareness of having been granted a freedom that is not really there in the US:

⁴ The debate springing from the film’s premiere is summed up in Loughrey 2016.

The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word 'free' to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing sounds less like freedom to me. (Kushner 1994, 96)

At the same time his experience makes him compassionate enough to take care of Roy Cohn, who calls him any derogatory name he can think of, insults him and openly shows his disgust. As Belize declares, "A queen can forgive her vanquished foe" (Kushner 1994, 48).

Which is not always the case, as *Paris Is Burning* shows.

The neverending (sad) carnival

Paris Is Burning (Jennie Livingstone, 1991) was conceived as a documentary film focussing on what passed for a big hit in Harlem in the Eighties. Set in 1987, the film portrays the drag queen balls that animated the social scene at the time, focussing on both stage performances and backstage. Due to the setting of the balls, quite obviously, both the competitors and the audience mostly combine sexual difference and black, Latino or mixed ethnic belonging. So the protagonists of *Paris Is Burning* disclose a double difference and two parallel reasons for marginalization. Being a documentary,⁵ the text provides a real-life exploration of the black and Latino drag world, pointing out the craving for social and cultural visibility and showing how the race for the catwalk challenge – another version of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show's* red carpet – is posited simultaneously as an inbetween space and the site where the stigma may be swept away by the temporary possibility of faking as white, a woman and upper-class. Transvestites and transsexuals – both the old legends like Pepper LaBeija and the new entries like Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia Saint Laurent – try different paths to embody not only the feminine ideal they have in mind but also a socially winning model, be it a young Ivy League student or an Upper Class lady.

The many ways in which, all through this process, gender and ethnicity interlace in *Paris is Burning* are quite obvious. They result in a curiously split experience: the protagonists are extremely glamorous while taking part in their catwalk challenge and extremely poor and desperate when seen off-stage. Again, they stay on the bridge, where life is safe and appears not merely bearable, but beautiful, as long as they can. And when they fall off, they still conserve the grace of fallen angels and the irony of whoever is aware of the phantasmagorical quality of his dream.

More than one generation of transvestites/drag queens are seen while they struggle to face the catwalk challenge and impersonate an ideal that, curiously enough, is not only and not primarily female, but most of all white and upper class. Basically poor black boys and men embodying transvestites and transsexuals are seen as they try to mimic not a female or a male ideal, but an ideal of human being replacing their everyday reality. The slightly amused, at times melancholy, almost always inoffensive irony they show when they describe their own dilapidated living conditions and their absolute invisibility in the larger community they belong to seems to indicate a condition quite familiar for ethnic minorities, now marked as inhuman.

⁵ Though the difference between documentary filmmaking and feature cinema is not so clear-cut as it seems (Corner 1996; Aufderheide 2008), the fact that the portrayed characters are not imaginary is worth keeping in mind.

The very rich and interesting backstage – the most successful part of the movie in fact – provides plenty of details on the different phases of preparation, coupling the secrets of a careful make up with the anecdotes forming the complex mythology of the ball scene. The active competitions, instead, are modelled on a carnivalesque imagery made out of exhilarating and at times farcical transvestism and disclosing a poetics of hyperbole and climax.

One of the ways in which *Paris Is Burning* is different from *Hoop Dreams*⁶ is that the filmmaker and audience are not the only ones producing irony, for many of the gay men and transvestites interviewed here – the subjects themselves – are also keenly sensitive to irony. The practice of transvestitism itself can be seen as a political and ironic move, a rubbing together of the said (the outward self, the clothes) and the unsaid (the biological sex) that destabilizes our culture's insistence on rigid gender categories. (Davis 1999, 41)

Meaningfully enough, the balls sites are called “houses”. There the older queens offer support to the young boys who like cross-dressing: they teach make up, provide suggestions on suitable clothes and glamorous hairdos, and in between this practical training, they also listen to them and try to pass on a sort of survival strategy. In most cases, the young people come from the same difficult background as the older ones – broken homes, single-parent (if any) upbringing, reduced or no school education; in short, one cannot do much for them besides teaching them a bit of irony, a basic tool for treading on the bridge.

Bordering the Bachtinian grotesque, they seem mostly aware of their isolation, though not from the inner community, and they have given in. They only rise when taking part in the balls, the very moment when, through the subversive power of irony and glamorous performance, they exploit the characteristic Pfister acknowledges in laughter, in its broadest sense: the ability of “challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies” (Pfister 2002, vi-vii). Economic distress, social marginalization, racial and sexual stigma, all of this can be exorcised through an explicit, extreme and often exhilarating mimicry of the white straight male or female counterpart each queen has chosen as his/her model. While on stage, the dilapidated reality they have to face outside the balls is temporarily forgotten. They are on the bridge, and free while they are there. Free and *white*.

Until the very end of the film, the ethnic and gender issues are constantly combined, interacting on each other and it gradually becomes quite clear that “whiteness” is one of the most keenly required physical features to have some chance of winning the catwalk challenge. Two of the most memorable characters in the film – Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia Saint Laurent – with their light complexions and remotely Caucasian traits, do confirm that the African American type is doomed in such a competition. And in fact, while Venus remarks that she would like “to be a spoiled, rich, white girl”, Octavia says she wants “a big future out there with a lot of beautiful things. A lot of handsome men. A lot of luxury.”

In her “Gender is Burning”, Judith Butler states very clearly that “the signifiers of whiteness and femaleness, as well as some forms of hegemonic maleness constructed through class privilege, are sites of phantasmatic promise” (Butler 1993, 130). This

⁶ *Hoop Dreams* is a documentary film by Steve James (1994) set in Chicago and portraying the struggle of two African American boys struggling to become professional basketball players in a predominantly white high school.

happens to be particularly true in the kind of reality portrayed in *Paris Is Burning*, where it is exactly this phantasmatic promise that almost neutralizes any provocative stance. Weakened by multiple elements of stigmatization, the protagonists of the film – though mostly able to exploit irony as a tool of resistance – are not only black and male, but also homosexual and poor. This could easily lead to see their cross-dressing being as an additional form of marginalization rather than as a carnivalesque spectacle of vitality. This is an aspect that often emerges in new Queer Cinema dealing with ethnicity and gender together; as Hanson puts it, they often result in “a parodic role which does not necessarily suggest convention-breaking notions of sexual identity” (Hanson 1999, 52).

It is quite obvious that the ball in itself – religiously prepared and looked forward to as the only possibility of becoming visible - results in “the phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimizing norms by which it itself has been degraded” (Butler 1993, 131) which at the same time reinforces the normative paradigm it refers to (and tries faithfully to reproduce). It is true - as Harper points out, discussing Butler’s position – that “the critical difference between normative subjects and those produced in the enactment of Realness is that the former are discursively constituted as recognizable within the governing social structure and thus are legitimated in a way that the latter are not” (Harper, 1994, p.52). But the latter do exist only in a secluded and separate space – the Harlem balls universe – and crossing the bridge from there to the real world would be impossible. It is at this juncture that the drag queens’ living parody of the notion of white femininity becomes, simply, a masquerade, producing that kind of unobtrusive laughter that is reassuring for the social order instead of being disturbing: a permitted form of anarchy, taken for granted, which is to be developed within a stated perimeter and according to a certain schedule.

For this reason, I share the position of Kimberley Chabot Davis, who is deeply critical of the attitude taken by the director Jenny Livingstone all through the film. According to Davis, Livingstone – being white and female – tends to adopt a position of superiority that appears quite evident. Moreover, “her use of irony also encourages viewers of the film to separate themselves from these Latina and black transsexual subjects and to look down at them as insufficiently radical or feminist” (Davis 1999, 41). Davis’s analysis in this respect is very direct and effective. She reminds us that “even when a director’s leftist political perspective (as a feminist) or marginalized identity (Livingstone is a Jewish lesbian) may seem to remove her from the category of oppressor, her work might still be capable of marginalizing or objectifying even less powerful others. Livingstone’s “realness” gives her the privilege of deconstructing gender, but her ironic flippancy seems insensitive to those who have never felt appropriately sexed and who suffer real violence because of their gender ambiguity” (Davis 1999, 41).

It continues to be true that the use of irony has subversive potential, but it tends to lose it, or to soften a lot as a political tool, when the representation implicitly replicates the marginality and exclusion of African American and Latino transsexual subjects, so implicitly re-stating the primary position of the white men, which, by the way, is likely to constitute the implied audience for the text (Davis 1999, 40).

Paradoxically the result of this whole operation – both the Harlem drag queen balls and their documentation in *Paris Is Burning* – ends up being a situation in which the very stereotypes that should be reversed in the carnivalesque parody are replicated

and supported, in a celebration of the most traditional feminine roles in a white, Western patriarchal culture: the queens are “female bodies”, built on imitation of the kind of body they desire, and simply exhibiting their excessive femininity to a public ready to celebrate it, though also taking distance from this “monstrous” femininity. In so doing, they confirm the white heteronormative set of rules instead of destabilizing them. So an agency that is socially significant and politically potent is yet to be acquired.

Not merely a laughing matter

My final references go precisely in this direction and show the possible political implications of a number of representations – mostly filmic, but in some cases adapted from literature – where a style easily definable as gay humour acquires a more specific political flavour. “Political” is intended here in its etymological sense: politics is what affects the polis, what imposes adjustments to its structure, changes that are functional to produce a more balanced relationship among its members. In this sense, though the process is often incomplete, I would say that many representations that we could loosely label as “gay humour” try to take the fruitful anarchy of the Carnival into the “real world” of everyday life, proposing new adjustments and forms of social flexibility that are not the case today.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert may be approached as a very interesting text in this respect. The film, written and directed by Stephan Elliott and issued in 1994, is a road movie portraying the bus journey of two drag queens and a transsexual through the Australian desert from Sydney to Alice Springs. Bernadette Bassinger (Terence Stamp), Mitzi Del Bra (Hugo Weaving) and Felicia Jollygoodfellow (Guy Pearce) exemplify a kind of transvestism that goes beyond the mere imitation of a female appearance, but wants to show and embrace artificiality as a form of art, closely reproducing the kind of attitude that was more frequent in camp culture. Sontag’s reflections on camp aesthetics may come handy here (Sontag 1964, 100 ff), though at the same time her statement that “the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” appears inapplicable. I would rather say that *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* – as many other representations of the same kind – proposes a different way of being political, exploiting the kind of joyous and proto-anarchic rebellion quite apparent in Gay Pride Parades.⁷ Their apparels and behavioral style inspired by the familiar poetics of hyperbole and climax, Bernadette, Mitzi and Felicia openly refuse any socially acceptable form of transvestism, deliberately favoring the kind of kitsch excesses and gross artificiality that may reverse the discursive structure of power. All through their journey, both the two transvestites and the transsexual are fully aware – and often reminded – of the desecratory gender stereotypes operating in the isolated all-white communities in the Australian desert. Instead of rejecting this role model, they play with it, showing the tricks of their vain and effeminate apparels, taking their farcical transvestism to a climax and by so doing showing how ridiculous the stereotype may become. What they put in practice is part of a convention in the drag queens’ world, the kind of behavior that Roger Baker labels “false disguise”. The practice consists in making the

⁷ A more complete and nuanced vision of Camp aesthetics is to be found in the volume edited by Fabio Cleto and first published in 1999 (Cleto 1999), that also includes Sontag’s *Notes on Campus* together with other relevant texts.

tricks of artifice all the more visible, consciously denying any claim to the possibility of being identified as a “real woman” (Baker 1994, 14-16).

Probably the most interesting aspect of the film, however, does not spring from the encounter the three travelers make with the white Australian provincial culture, but from their accidental, vaguely disquieting meeting with the Aboriginal community in the desert, an Australian bush that may be easily read as a postcolonial landscape. The fact that the Native Australians are not only ready to accept the team of transvestites and transsexual but also enthusiastic about the drag queens improvised performance show to what extent the reception and social acceptability of sex/gender role models is a function of cultural belonging. Since in the Aboriginal society, some gender-crossing rites are explicitly implied in the process of passing from childhood to adulthood (Leane 2013, 107-115), the Native Australians are perfectly familiar with what Bernadette, Mitzi and Felicia propose as an exceptionally disturbing and anomalous performance in the white Australian context.

The almost accidental but enthusiastically embraced political potential of their being in between two worlds – the white Australian and the Native Australian one – somehow evokes Bhabha’s notion of interstitial space: a space of overlapping, mixture and ambiguity, a site of transition and hybridity, a dimension of change (Bhabha 1987).

Quite explicitly, this also evokes the Bakhtinian threshold: a borderland, inhabited by a community whose members are in transition; some of them will choose while some will prefer to stay on the bridge. So, again, the question that is raised here is: what if the on-the-bridge identities refuse to cross to the other side? What if they want to stay on the bridge and play their inbetweenness so as to produce new forms of cognition? What if they exploit their double nature in order to see, understand, show more than those who have only one? What if they mobilize the discrepancy marking their body as a source of cognitive laughter?

This is roughly what happens in *Breakfast on Pluto*, both the novel by McCabe (1998) and its film adaptation by Neil Jordan (2007). The story calls into play notions related to class politics and gender, fruitfully interlacing them. Basically a coming-of-age novel, *Breakfast on Pluto* is the naïf, dream-like narration of the paradoxical experiences of a young Irish transvestite, Patrick/Patricia Braden, fighting to posit his/her own identity as *different* against the backdrop of provincial Ireland and cosmopolitan England, around the Seventies and after. Born the illegitimate child of a clergyman in a small town near the Northern Irish border, Patrick/Patricia soon experiences the hardships of being a female soul in a male body when exhibiting his pleasure in wearing female clothes. Caught *in flagrante delicto* when he is more or less thirteen, he is slapped right in the face and then almost expelled by his foster family (McCabe 1998, 12-3).

The bigotry of the provincial Irish environment appears reinforced by the widely circulated military role models inspired by the IRA, moulded on a very traditional notion of virility and so authoritative as to affect even children’s games. When obliged to take part in this “simulation of war” rehearsed by his/her friends, Patrick/Patricia plays his transvestite nature as an ironic tool in fact operating against the kind of gender roles supported by the Irish Army Propaganda (McCabe 1998, 16-9). Besides boycotting the game, the protagonist accidentally assumes an intensely political stance, though mediated and partly determined by his naïve nature, a source of humour in itself.

It may be agreed that, in the overall ironic and fairy-tale atmosphere of the story, the approach is never directly political. Posing as a Tristram Shandy in drag, Patrick/Patricia does not even seem aware of the tragedy of terrorism. It is quite clear that laughter is triggered by the constant clash between Patrick/Patricia's queer identity and both the Catholic environment (while s/he is still in Ireland) and the political fight during the Irish Troubles.

The patent inadequacy of the protagonist becomes even more evident when s/he moves from his/her home town to London and is soon accidentally involved in a terrorist attack staged by IRA guerrilla soldiers (McCabe 1998, 140-44). Frightened to death but still not dead, Patrick/Patricia seems unable to grasp the tragic consequences of the situation and reacts by taking shelter in a fairy-like fantasia of all-female heroism, culminating in the consideration that "it's bombing night and I haven't got anything to wear" (McCabe 1998, 145). In so doing, s/he ridicules the machismo of the IRA and at the same time successfully exploits irony as the most effective tool for surviving the double psychological backlash of terrorist warfare and of the stigmatization of his/her transvestite identity. When making his/her body visible as deviant in an openly unfriendly context,⁸ s/he places himself at risk and questions the dominant notions of what is "normal" in the Western society (Nevelidine 1998, XVIII). His/her farcical transvestism becomes a liberating practice at the very moment Patrick/Patricia refuses to hide his/her "otherness", instead choosing to use his body as a sign of difference. Quite obviously, exhibiting his/her "wrong" body, s/he somehow replicates the process that Peter Brooks identifies in any kind of bodily marking, that "not only serves to recognize and identify, it also indicates the body's passage into the realm of the letter, into literature: the bodily mark is in some manner a 'character', a hieroglyph, a sign that can eventually, at the right moment of the narrative, be read. Signing the body indicates its recovery for the realm of the semiotic" (Brooks 1993, 22).

And this hieroglyph, in the very moment it is posited as a fluid signifier, stands out in both *Breakfast on Pluto* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* as the mark of a heteronormative identity, standing on the bridge and proudly showing a different path to freedom.

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⁸ The illegitimate son of a priest and a maid, Patrick/Patricia is accidentally involved in political issues s/he is not interested in: being Irish, s/he is bound to be felt as complicit with the struggle to free Ireland from the English domination, though not voluntarily endorsing it.

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