

FINAL ESSAY ON
FILM STUDIES

Challenges to gender and heteronormativity

GENDER AND SEXUALITY:

*A case study on Ocaña retrato
intermitente and The adventures of
Priscilla Queen of the Desert*

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Throughout the course of the cinema's history, the hetero-patriarchal *dictatum* played a very important role, delimiting what was normal and what was not, and labeling as "homosexual" everything that challenged what was normalized and heterosexual (García Calderón, 2020). This heterosexual mandate has invisibilized any experience of sexuality that went beyond its limits, forcing LGBT people to find a place within the film industry as a way to show their perspective, thus beginning the queer narratives, being cinema a channel for gender technologies (García Calderón, 2020). Queer creation arose as a reaction to the toxic discourse surrounding the homosexual figure, whose stories always had a sad ending, with the LGBT person being a victim, a clown or a villain. (Ibiti, 2015). Conscious of the great danger of stereotyping minority groups, queer creators began to change the course of history and generate content with films that presented a much more realistic portrayal. As Victor Manuel Rodríguez points out in his essay *Cine menor y performatividad queer*:

The notions of queer cinema and minor cinema are related in the sense that both could be considered as political interventions through which major culture is appropriated, decentered and altered for queer, eccentric and minor uses [My translation] (Rodríguez, 2002, p.113).

That is to say, queer cinema is political and a tool of vindication. Through this essay, the limits of gender technology will be explored, showing the politics behind it. We will analyze the drag and transvestite figure as a radical element against heteronormativity, delving into the process of gender performativity, through the case study of two films, *Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait* (Pons, 1978) and *The Adventures of Priscilla queen of desert* (Elliot, 1994). Two rupturist representations with the hetero-patriarchy, in two very different places and moments in the LGBT panorama.

Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait, is one of the best representations of homosexual pressure in Spain in the 1960s (Mira Nouselles, 2004). The film follows the day-to-day activities of José Pérez Ocaña. Through this documentary about his life, we enter into his intimacy, accessing his inner world, his reflections and his social struggle. At that time, in Spain in the 1970s, LGBT representation was reduced to the gay portrait. They were represented in a pejorative way, being reduced to "the crazy, the transvestite, the effeminate sissy [My translation]" (Mira Nouselles, 2004). The reality of personalities like Ocaña goes far beyond this type of representation. Through the eccentricity of his clothing, his performances, he manages to sow doubt in the population of Barcelona, exploring his femininity through a purely rupturist

attitude. His dances, his songs and his own discourse show that he is an activist who embraces gender performativity, exposing that gender is a construct and that the boundary between feminine and masculine is sometimes blurred.

The figure of Ocaña has the need to express himself in first person, showing his perspective from his own word, not through journalistic opinions and word of mouth. Ocaña accesses political action through a manifestation of camp culture with an empowering purpose (Mira Nouselles, 2004).

From 1975 onwards, with the Spanish Transition, a large number of docudramas began to appear with a strong tendency towards sensationalism, addressing issues that generated morbidity in the audience, showing unseen realities and delving into controversial topics (Mira Nouselles, 2004). Ocaña began to express this claim of gender and sexuality at a premature age in Spain, so he was one of the first individuals who showed and stood up against homosexual repression in this country. Experiencing his difference in an enthusiastic way, convinced to be himself in spite of and against everything (Mira Nouselles, 2004).

Today's viewing of *Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait* demonstrates the huge need of homosexual representation that existed at the time. The missing treatment and education on sexual issues and in particular on sexual orientation and gender, awakens a lack that will be overcome in the next generations (Mira Nouselles, 2004). All this frustration, this physical and verbal violence, this pain caused by marginalization, by self-exile, this lack of a community to belong to, the rejection of the label... is embodied by the figure of Ocaña. All this is summarized in the fear of otherness, in this case fear of homosexuality. Ocaña was born into a society of systematic homophobia that will mark, of course, his whole life and the way he relates to the world around him.

Ocaña lives repressed by a conservative and extremely traditional society, yet he transformed repression into art. He could not ignore the beauty of the Church and would canalize it years later in his transvestite acts, reconstructing his past and exploring his, more than probable, trauma with the repressive Catholic religion with which he coexisted as a child. Ocaña's transvestite acts are a form of a means of expression, transforming scandal and transgression into a defense of his own rights (Naranjo-Ferrari, 2013). Therefore, the transvestite acts of Ocaña, portrayed with care by Ventura Pons, are a new counter-political tool through which this sexual dissidence was exercised.

The documentary feature is a perfect example of gender rupture, Ocaña is not an activist who focuses entirely on homosexual visibility, "I do not fight for homosexuality, what I fight for is to be me and to be a person [My translation]" (Pons, 1978, 0:17.00), but explores that subversion of the masculine towards the feminine, shows the performative nature of gender, and takes that performance into his own life. By means of performances, he aims to confront oppression and create a secular art by reshaping religious imagery and turning it into camp (Mira Nouselles, 2004).

He shows that just as he can act as a masculine person, he can also perform femininity, since it is not something innate, but something learned. In short, using the words of Guillermo Vellojín Aguilera "the artist's body becomes an apolitical space, detached from biopolitical normativization, a countercultural tactic that questions gender attributions through the simultaneous performance of elements attributable to both." (Vellojín Aguilera, 2017, p.870).

Although Ocaña's performances may nowadays seem childish, since many of his speeches have become outdated, we cannot forget that at the time, his performances were groundbreaking, awakening many reflections in the Spanish society of the 70s. Looking through the historical press of the time, we can find extremely offensive speeches:

The different (the lame, the crippled, the madman, the black, the homosexual, the pedophile) can only hide his difference (identified with sin or with the exception to the norm) or proclaim it, shout it out. The only social option he lacks is the healthy one: to assume his identity comfortably. [My translation] (Peri Rossi, 1978, p.57)

In this case, the author of this article considered that Ocaña's vindictive fight against gender, through performance, had in fact a traumatic origin. The writer went so far as to establish an equivalence of his actions and his homosexual nature to pederasty or insanity. Articles like these prove Spain's necessity towards a break with tradition. Individuals like Ocaña mark an evolution towards a much more inclusive society.

Years later, in 1994, *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* was released, a film that was a great example of challenging both heteronormativity and gender identity, thus becoming a cult classic film, inspiring musical theater and becoming a film festivals' favorite (Cook, 2010). Through the three drag performers, the audience may find themselves reflecting on things they had never thought of before. Using Camp aesthetics, which plays an essential role in the queer treatment of this film (Cook, 2010), Stephan Elliott shows the

reality of so many queer men. Films like this, mark a social rupture, giving a space to homosexuals, transsexuals, transvestites... in this world, people who have been limited to hide, due to the representation that has historically been given in television and cinema, finally find depictions in where they feel understood (Ibiti, 2015).

In the 1990s, when the film was premiered, new stories appeared that showed diversity in a positive way. Previously, any minority was considered strange or deviant, with a hierarchy of normativity that justified the visibility of some realities over others (Ibiti, 2015). The queer theory breaks with this hierarchy and puts normality into question. This is something very present in the portrayal of drag in this film, which presents the three protagonists as totally normal people, with their problems, their illusions and their way of perceiving life.

The story only aims to discover the homosexual and drag universe, delving into loneliness and rebellion through the spectacle. The drag persona is not shown as a person from another world, instead the spectator accompanies the characters, empathizing with them, becoming part of them in this journey through the desert. A journey that will not be easy, seeing themselves rejected but also accepted by society, and which will be an escape route that will allow the characters to get to know themselves (Rufi, 2007).

The film provoked controversy, many LGBT activists felt that *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* was not truly a complete rupture with the canon of homosexual representation, but that it constantly fell into stereotypes that did not attack the root of the problem (McKee, 2000). It is true that *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* is not a disruptive film capable of conveying all the pain that the LGBT population suffers every day, but precisely because of this it is a tool that can reach a much wider audience, giving visibility to the community. The audience that does not belong to the community may feel appealed, understanding and gradually normalizing the existence of Drags, homosexuals and transsexuals. I believe that if it had been a much more radical and protest-oriented representation, it would probably not be able to connect with a wide audience and therefore would lose effectiveness in terms of visibility. The three characters are presented as human, they are complex beings, and even if they do not fully show the queer struggle of the LGBT community, they accomplish their task of introducing homosexual representation, of raising these issues and, of course, of breaking with heteronormativity on the screen. All this through camp and kitsch, which give extravagance to the image but at the same time visual interest, a style that connects with the drag world.

The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert is an entryway for viewers to examine gender roles and reflect on it, thinking about the origins and limits of gender (Challinor, 2013). At the same time it interacts with the queer community that embraces drag queens as a central element of their collective (McKee, 2000). As noted in the essay *Drag queens and drag kings: The difference gender makes*:

Drag queen performances are transgressive actions that destabilize gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and sexualities (Rupp et al., 2010, p.277).

The film is therefore purely political, just the way *Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait* was, bringing to the table the importance of the queer community as part of our history and our culture. It shows that queer people exist and that they should be treated as human beings, demonstrating that their way of living life is not different from that of other heteronormative people (McKee, 2000). Although some people consider *Priscilla* to be a frivolous representation that does not demonstrate queer reality in depth, its entertaining storyline brings the queer community closer to a general audience. It is true that the three drags are at risk of being relegated to a position of being weird, eccentric... sometimes it may seem that they can only be accepted through the show, through their audience. But indeed Stephan Elliot, aware of drags' position, often considered freaks, blurs this limit by showing humanity in the notion of homosexual, drag, transsexual and transvestite. As Alan McKee points out in his analysis on *The adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, “this hugely visible and successful film began to rewrite the sexuality of ‘Australia’, and radically to alter the circulation of this elusive quality in an international context.” (McKee, 2000, p.5)

All this demonstrates that this representation was necessary and that, sometimes, it is worth allowing the stereotype if it is going to get a better reception. If the film had been more critical and had not been framed in humor and fun, it probably would not have been so successful. *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* is a film that normalizes the existence of the LGBT community, opening the minds of its audience, helping to rewrite sexuality in Australia but also giving queer examples to the rest of the world.

In general, it can be said that *Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait* and *The adventures of Priscilla queen of desert* are two great examples of protest against heteronorm. Transvestism and drag in these feature films act directly as explanatory tools of this gender performativity. Ocaña through his performances embraces his femininity and fades the line between masculine and feminine, just like *The adventures of Priscilla queen of desert*, which shows that performing gender is a way to mock all those written rules that determine what makes you a masculine person or not. *Priscilla* reveals that it is possible to drag and be heterosexual, with the character of Anthony, or even to be a woman and drag, which is the case of Bernadette Bassenger (the misunderstood transsexual of the group). Part of the reason why the queer community is becoming increasingly accepted in the Western world is most likely thanks to groundbreaking representations such as these two feature films. Both have aroused reactions in the general public, standing up against any social definition of normality and succeeding in getting the queer social message across.

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