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Trabajo Fin de Grado

**Towards Neutrality:
Queer Identity in *Hedwig
and the Angry Inch***

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Abstract

This essay seeks to analyze the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, directed by John Cameron Mitchell in 2001 and based upon the namesake musical play of 1994. Following the lines of present theories of gender and *queer* studies, it will be demonstrated how Hedwig, the main character, rejects the normative dichotomy of gender by occupying an intermediate space between the masculine and the feminine. Thus, the film advocates for a third category in which *genderqueer* identities are grouped, also establishing *drag* as a new technology of gender.

Keywords: gender, *queer*, normativity, neutrality, *drag*.

Resumen

En este Trabajo de Fin de Grado se pretende analizar la película *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, dirigida por John Cameron Mitchell en 2001 y basada en la obra musical homónima del año 1994. Tomando como modelo las teorías de género y estudios *queer* actuales, se tratará de demostrar cómo Hedwig, protagonista del metraje, rechaza la dicotomía normativa de género al ocupar un espacio intermedio entre lo masculino y lo femenino. De este modo, la película defiende una tercera categoría en la que se agrupan los individuos *genderqueer*, constituyendo a su vez el *drag* como una nueva tecnología de género.

Palabras clave: género, *queer*, normatividad, neutralidad, *drag*.

Introduction

In Butler's writings about her performative theory on gender and sexuality, reference is made to social constructivist theories that had already defined gender as a construction, meaning that the categories of masculine and feminine, or rather, the roles inherent to these categories, were socially constructed and not natural. When explaining the nature of the construction of gender in her work *Bodies that Matter* (1993), she argues the existence of any individual acting temporally or spatially before gender, that is, not being subjected to it. She affirms:

[...] gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being... the 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves. (1993: 7)

By denying the agency of the individual in the process of gendering, Butler exposes the social nature of gender, a cultural construct that modulates the attributes of individuals from the beginning of their social life, that is, from birth. Therefore, ascribing to one's gender identity means to reproduce its behavioural model, that is to say, performing the set of acts that canonically belong to the ideal expression of the assigned gender. On this basis, the conclusion is reached that gender is not something to *be*, but something to *act out* repeatedly, as Butler puts it:

Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (1990¹: 43-44)

The assumption that the essence of gender itself is a fabrication expressed bodily deems real the possibility of bodies *acting* gender in a manner that will stand out from the usual performance, so that it will reveal its artificiality. It is the case of parodic performances such as drag, in which the performer's body generally opposes the gender

¹ Although the work was first published in 1990, Butler revisited *Gender Trouble* in 1999, and this is the version that I found more suitable to work with.

that is being performed, hence disclosing the imitative structure of an identity. In *becoming* a woman, drag performers produce a corporal expression that neither the *masculine* or *feminine* is able to describe, thus partaking in what Butler defines as “an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense.” (1990: 162). The transcendence of the binary through the dispelling of the illusions of sex and gender results in an umbrella category where the masculine and feminine combine, giving place to a new set of features that do not ascribe to just one gender or the other. This new expression of gender could be defined both as a symbol of resistance towards the establishes, thus conforming a neutral gender category; or as a slate where gender features are overlooked and devalued until reaching the dissolution of identity *per se*.

Since drag performances —or other parodic performances, for that matter— are able to contrast anatomically marked bodies with a prominent expression of the gender that is subject of the parody, drag itself deems worthy as an apparatus where a neutral gender can be explored and proliferated. Hence, it could be seen as what Teresa de Lauretis calls a “technology of gender” (1987: ix), that is, a set of cultural practices that makes possible the gendering of a body. Paradoxically, drag as a technology would be fraud, as its subversive nature works against the existence of the concept of gender itself.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Context

Glam rock was born amidst the 70s to break with the false sense of authenticity portrayed by folk and protest rock. Instead of trying to hide this lack of truth as its predecessors did, glam was paradoxically quite honest in admitting its artificiality, celebrating the performance even more than the music's meaning, that is, attributing form a more central position than content. In reminiscence of other writers, musicians or actors that blurred the lines between men and woman, or more accurately, masculine and feminine, figures as David Bowie, Iggy Pop, or Elton John contributed to turn glam in a pivotal cultural referent for gender-bending media. In retrospective, rock music (and glam, specifically) was the only possible language that Hedwig, the protagonist of the musical subject of analysis, could speak. In the most musical sense, Hedwig impersonates the conflict between glam and punk, being the latter another genre conceived from the bosom of glam as a conscious rejection of both the capitalistic depravation of traditional rock music and the excesses of glam aestheticism.

The concept of this musical was very innovative with respect to the traditional features of musical theatre: in the first place, rock was not a genre for musical theatre, and neither were the themes that it spoke about, nor the stage montage, not only represented by the character's attire but also by the decorations and props. From the very beginning, it diverged from critically-acclaimed plays such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* and Irene Mecchi's and Roger Allers' *The Lion King* in the fact that *Hedwig* rebuked their cautiously polished imagery and their pretentiousness. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* started to develop in simultaneity with other musicals featuring queer characters and plot lines, such as *Rent* (Jonathan Larson, 1994), following the recent tradition of LGBT-focused musical plays started in the year 1973 by Al Carmines' *The Faggot* and Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show*.

By the time John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask joined to create Hedwig's story, Mitchell already carried quite a vast musical and non-musical theatrical experience, while the latter, with his band Cheater, had an intimate relationship with rock music, which was an essential requisite in Mitchell's request. Initially, the story revolved around Tommy, a character directly based upon Mitchell's own experience as the young, Catholic, gay son of a military man. This first outline of the play included a character to

whom Trask felt much more fascination: a transsexual, German woman who worked both as the boy's babysitter and a prostitute in Junction City, and who was given the name of Hedwig. Thus, the limelight shone on her, portrayed by Mitchell himself, for the first time in February 1994, at a New Yorker drag club called Squeeze Box. Opposing the tradition of lip syncing in drag shows, this club was one of the few that allowed its performers to sing live, and this first version of Hedwig combined a stand-up comedy number with a carefully selected track list, further explained in its own section, to mimic a rock concert in which she told her story to the audience.

Every few months, a new performance in said nightclub helped the authors refine the character, and Hedwig was gradually becoming a well-rounded, fully human character who was able to express both her emotions and her consistent backstory, leaving thus behind the stereotypical and traditional act of a drag character. In concordance with punk's *do-it-yourself* lifestyle and following a way that was previously paved by Broadway producer Michael Bennett, Mitchell and Trask created their own musical workshop, a technique based on the gradual addition of elements to a very primal idea. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* opened Off-Broadway² for the first time in February 1997, at the Westbeth Theatre Centre, where it ran for more than 850 performances, winning several awards for best Off-Broadway musical. In 2014, a Broadway revival was produced.

The growing popularity of the musical play led to a cinematographic adaptation in 2001 directed by and starring John Cameron Mitchell. He surrounded with other artists as Michael Pitt and Miriam Shor to forge what would become a cult film in the following years. The movie was produced by Killer Films and distributed by New Line Cinema. Nonetheless, it is not possible to talk about a queer-themed film from the 90s-00s without making reference to its source artistic movement: during the late 80s and early 90s, several independent studios started to produce both films and TV series exploring the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgender characters, therefore launching what would be called *New Queer Cinema*. The term was coined by B. Ruby Rich, a

² Originally, the term 'Off-Broadway' made reference to all the theatrical venues (and the plays produced in them) outside New York's Broadway circuit. Later, the League of Off-Broadway Theatres and Producers re-defined the concept as any professional venue, in or out the Broadway Box, with a capacity of 99-499 seatings, whereas 'Broadway' refers to theatres with seating capacities of 500 and larger.

transsexual American scholar and critic of queer films, in the British Film Institute's magazine *Sight & Sound*. Although the expression was created in 1992 to define the growing presence and popularity of queer storylines in cinema during that decade, other scholars as Susan Hayward trace its origin many decades before its coining, with movies exploring new sexual possibilities such as Jean Cocteau's *La Sang d'Un Poète*, or Andy Warhol's avant garde films.³ The movement became tangible with the apparition of Queer Theory in the 80s, which encouraged mainstream genres to include new, subversive elements and themes, such as the perception of pleasure and a quest against heteronormativity and *straightwashing* in cultural media.

This new artistic movement challenged the status quo not only by introducing new plots and characters that rejected the traditional sexual and romantic paradigm, but also by resisting to portray only positive images of queerness, that is, by dismissing the palatability and straight-friendliness shown in some of the previous works, and therefore by depicting the most real, and sometimes crudest, episodes in queer lives. New Queer Cinema comes to an agreement with some contemporary theories on gender, rendering human identity and sexuality as social constructs and, consequently, granting them with the attributes of fluidity and malleability, and the capacity of changing their cultural perception over time. Thus, sexuality is sometimes presented as an alienating force towards the established social structure.

The commercial success of these independent films led Hollywood to follow their example, and bigger studios began to create media seeking to appeal to the niche market of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgender consumers. Films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) or fictional and non-fictional television shows such as *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005) are living proof of the so-called "gay TV revolution". The concept of a niche market, and the inferred commercialisation of queer narratives by mainstream media was criticised by Rich, who saw a clear difference between the mild and palatable Hollywood productions and their independent predecessors, created with a more radical and unapologetic tone:

³ From Matthew Henry's "A One-Inch Mound of Flesh: Troubling Queer Identity in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*", published in *The Journal of American Culture*, Volume 39, Number 1. March 2016. Pages 64-77.

Lacking the concentrated creative presence and produced community responsiveness of the past, the New Queer Cinema has become just another niche market, another product line pitched at one particular type of discerning consumer.⁴

This is one of the reasons why *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is distinct from the majority of queer-themed movies, offering a profound disruption of normative discourses in terms of sex, sexuality and gender, and providing the audience with a tale of empowerment and freedom different from the apparently inherent tragedy that used to accompany most of the stories of homosexual, bisexual and transgender characters.

⁴ From Rich's "Queer and Present Danger: After New Queer Cinema", published in *Sight & Sound*, March 2000.

And All the Rest's Illusion: An Analysis

*"The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us; we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love."
— John Donne, The Canonization.*

Hedwig and the Angry Inch tells Hansel's journey into becoming Hedwig, an over-the-top performer struggling after undergoing a botched sex-reassignment surgery to flee from East Berlin to the United States. After facing rejection and abandonment due to her angry inch — what was left of her genitalia after the failed procedure, and also the name of her rock band—, she will express her feelings through angsty, punk rock songs that will be played in a series of restaurants conveniently called Bilgewater's⁵, as the band follows Hedwig's ex-lover Tommy Gnosis in his much more successful concert tour.

Touring is, in fact, the main narrative device used in the film for telling Hedwig's story, as each of her songs sang in the narratological present evokes a flashback that, little by little, completes the *cadavre exquis* of Hedwig's life. Being a musical film, the soundtrack and its diegetic character are of utmost importance in the construction and, therefore, the analysis of the movie. One of the pivotal, as well as critically acclaimed, performances in the film is "The Origin of Love", which acts as a thread that sews together the rest of songs and their subsequent flashbacks, as it establishes the main themes of the motion picture while including animated sequences that provide the film with a sense of artificiality that was originally based on theatrical artifice. Based on Plato's *Symposium*, the song re-tells the speech made by Aristophanes in which he explains how three sexes existed in olden times:

*The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was
man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double*

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'bilge water' as the "dirty water that collects inside the bilges". The bilge is a cavity in the lowest part of a ship where waste water collects. Its meaning has extended to refer to a filthy, malodorous place. This is why it is quite a significant name to refer to the place of Hedwig's gig, in comparison to Tommy Gnosis' stadium performances.

*nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word 'Androgynous' is only preserved as a term of reproach.*⁶

The use of the myth of the origin of love in the film poses a thematic duality between the primary motif, that is, love; and one that goes beyond sexuality and focuses more on the field of gender identity. With the praise and veneration—or lack thereof—of the god Eros as a subject, Aristophanes introduces a seed of what will become the ideal of romantic love, very much extended in western culture, as explained by Lydia Amir in her essay *Plato's theory of Love: Rationality as Passion*. By stating that “Aristophanes had explained [...] that love is our search for our alter ego, that part of us that will make us whole again” (2001: 7), Amir acknowledges that the basis for Aristophanes' theory on the origin of love is that of incompleteness, implying that human beings will never feel love until we rejoin our scattered half. *Incompletion* is a term closely related to the story of Hedwig, not only in terms of her physical integrity as a result of the botched surgery where she is left with a mound of flesh “where [her] penis used to be, where [her] vagina never was”⁷, but also when referring to her romantic life. Right after singing the aforementioned song, Hedwig is shown lying in bed, wondering about the identity and whereabouts of her soulmate:

It is clear that I must find my other half, but is it a 'he' or a 'she'? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complementary? Does my other half have what I don't? Did he get the looks? The luck? The love? Were we really separated forceably or did he just run off with the good stuff? Or did I? Will this person embarrass me? What about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again? Or can two people actually become one again?

Hedwig in Hedwig and the Angry Inch

What this stream of thoughts confirms is how fervently Hedwig believes in a predesigned encounter with her lost half, and how eager she feels about achieving completion through finding someone who may “have what [she] doesn't”. The audience is made aware that the protagonist has lost an important part of herself: not only her

⁶ From Benjamin Jowett's translation of Plato's *Symposium*. Edited, annotated and compiled by Rhonda L. Kelley. South Georgia State College.

⁷ From the song “Angry Inch”, in which she explains in detail how her surgery was botched and her new vagina closed. This is the origin of Hedwig as a non-sexed body.

genitalia, back in Berlin, but also a person who “just run off with the good stuff”. Her past relationship with Tommy Speck was more than just a romance: it was also based on a transmission of truth and knowledge in which Tommy was the pupil and Hedwig was like a Promethean figure. This dynamic in their relation stems in the conversation that they share about the figure of Jesus Christ, where Tommy offers an analysis of the book of Genesis that concludes with the defence of Eve’s deed of biting the apple, because she “just wanted to know shit”. Eve sharing the apple with Adam so that he would know what was good and what was bad too parallels the climax of Hedwig and Tommy’s love relationship: whereas it was God who created Adam in his image, now it is Hedwig who starts to build up Tommy’s artistic alter ego by drawing a silver cross in his forehead (Figure 1). Tommy’s new name, Gnosis⁸, is quite significant for the understanding of the paradigm in their relationship, as it exposes Hedwig’s role as the bearer of knowledge who was also willing to share it with him out of love. As visually expressed in the close up shot in Figure 2, Hedwig acts as the creator of an equal and gifts him with her music just to have him run away with “all the good stuff”.



Figure 1. Hedwig draws a silver cross, therefore contributing to the creation of Tommy's artistic alter ego. This scene is a symbol of the creator/created dynamic of their relationship.

⁸ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘gnosis’ as “a special knowledge of spiritual mysteries. Of ten with reference to the claim to such knowledge made by the Gnostics.⁷ Gnostic philosophy, Gnosticism.”

Another possible reading for the relationship between them relies on the resemblance of their story and the myth of Pygmalion, as told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (8 AD). The myth narrates how Pygmalion, a Cypriot sculptor, carved a statue of a woman out of ivory. After making offerings at the altar of Aphrodite, the goddess granted the sculpture with the gift of life, and the couple married. Whereas the previously mentioned myth is supported by direct references in the film, as Hedwig giving Tommy the name of *Gnosis*, it is undeniable how easy it is to establish an analogy between Hedwig's articulation of Tommy's alter ego and Pygmalion's power of creating a woman following his desire. As demonstrated by the final sequences of the film, Hedwig reappropriates her former lover's look, therefore hinting that she also created him in a way most pleasant to her.



Figure 2. This shot reinforces the idea of Hedwig being the creator of Tommy Gnosis, as the use of the mirror represents how she made him in her image, as a kind of godlike figure.

Hedwig's internal journey of finding her other half, and the process of completion that she goes through, are symbolised with her tattoo, shown for the first time in a close up shot of her hip, right after singing "The Origin of Love" (Figure 3). The drawing of a face split in two is a direct reference of Aristophanes' myth of the origin of love, although the film offers a twist in differentiating the features of the two half-faces: they are not two parts of a whole, but two different and complementary jigsaw pieces that need to re-join.



Figure 3. Hedwig's hip tattoo had already appeared in the animated scene that shown when the song "The Origin of Love" is playing. It depicts two halves of a whole separated, as told by the myth.

Nonetheless, Hedwig's tattoo is also a representation for the thematic duality that the film provides for the original myth: it is a blazon from which the audience can glimpse both her failed love story and further search of her other half, but also her physical and psychological journey towards completion, alluding, in an early stage of the film, to the theme of gender identity. Gender and its malleability are pivotal parts of the story, paying special attention to how sexual organs —or the lack of any— affects the process of gendering. In the case of Hedwig, the treatment that gender identity gets stems from her body not owning any of the corporeal markers that are historically attributed to the male or female gender. This strictly binary view of the relationship between gender and sex opposes Judith Butler's argument on sex's objectivity and how she compares it with gender as the result of a merely cultural process in *Bodies that Matter*:

[...] the social construction of the natural presupposes the cancellation of the natural by the social. Insofar as it relies on this construal, the sex/gender distinction founders along parallel lines; if gender is the social significance that sex assumed within a given culture [...] then what, if anything, is left of 'sex' once it has assumed its social character as gender? [...] if gender consists on the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties, but rather is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces 'sex'. (1993: v).

What Butler means to say is that sex becomes assimilated by gender after acknowledging the latter's social nature, that is, it becomes one of the corporeal expressions of the ideal of gender. In this sense, Hedwig finds herself in a position where it is physically impossible to be marked of one sex or the other, meaning that she lacks—at least—one of the features that *makes* her gender identity, once again returning to the apparently omnipresent concept of incompleteness. Bearing in mind this situation, Hedwig could be read as a counterpart of Herculine Barbin⁹: in the same way that Judith Butler defines Herculine as “not an ‘identity’, but the sexual impossibility of an identity” (1990: 31), we could contrast both Herculine's and Hedwig's stories and find out that the main essential discrepancy is that, while the intersexual individual is described as having “male and female anatomical elements [...] jointly distributed in and on [her] body”, the body of Hedwig is only marked by the remnants of what used to be a male anatomical element. Nevertheless, both cases would derive in a similar impossibility of categorisation from the perspective of a binary gender system.

This neutrality, added up to the many shared elements in Hedwig's story with those of transsexual or transgender individuals cause *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* to still raise the question about how Hedwig should be perceived and understood. Author and first star John Cameron Mitchell, when interviewed by theatre critic Richard Ouzounian for *The Star* magazine, defined Hedwig as “more than a woman or a man. She's a gender of one and that is accidentally so beautiful.” This clarification introduced the possibility of the protagonist being read as a genderqueer character, rejecting the commonly accepted binary gender system and positioning, therefore, in accordance with the basis of queer theory. Genderqueer, non-binary or non-conforming gender identities refuse to follow the canonical expressions of male and female gender, a framework in which many theories have been produced to explain either the existence of a third or neuter gender, or even the nonexistence of the concept of gender at all.

⁹ Born in France in 1838, Herculine Barbin was an intersex individual who was assigned to be a woman at birth, but whose manly traits caused a judge to declare her to be a man. Her story was used by Michel Foucault in *Herculine Barbin: Being The Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite* (1980) to analyse the influences of social institutions, whose objective was, as he declares, to restrict “the free choice of the individuals” (p. viii).

On the other hand, one of the most extended readings is that it tells the story of a transsexual woman. While it is true that the character is reborn from a sex-reassignment surgery, and that this event holds a central place in the construction of the performer's reality, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* does not follow the traditional model for the narration of a transsexual or transgendered life¹⁰. Even in Hedwig's origins, that is, Hansel's feminine persona, the audience is aware that her motivations for undergoing the sex-reassignment do not stem from a mismatch between her sex and her gender, but from the necessity of fleeing the country. Therefore, not only does this reading clash directly with the author's own perspective on the matter, but it also reinforces the idea of a binary system and the need for an individual's genitalia to match their gender identity, explicitly misreading what seems to be the overall message of the show: the existence of a body above all gender constructions.

Some scholars, as Jordy Jones does in his article *Gender Without Genitals* (2006), delineate transsexual identity in opposition to the codes expressed by queer theory in terms of the subjectivity of gender identity and sexual accordance. Although transgenderism is commonly celebrated as part of the transgressive beliefs of queer theory and Judith Butler's theory on performativity, many other trans theorists argue that transgender subjectivity is not compatible with how queerness is described in her work *Gender Trouble* (1999). Butler describes identity to operate, paradoxically, as non-identity, or a rejection of such, proving itself problematic towards the essence of transgenderism itself. This conflict is easy to observe in Butler's discussion of drag performances as agents suitable to dismantle the socially accepted concept of gender, clarifying that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency" (1999: 175). Essentially, Butler attempts to abolish the construct of gender, which is also the basic distinction usually made between a drag performer and a transsexual or transgendered individual. Taking into account the

¹⁰ In his work *Second Skins* (1998), Jay Prosser examines the phenomenon of transsexuality through the recounting of transsexual people's own experiences. Thus, it is a very reliable source of trans narratives that allows the differentiation and identification of other cultural media such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

performative nature of gender, the participation of a transgender body in *drag* could be read as partaking any attempt to consider gender as other but a construct.

Jones understands this conflict to stem in the authorship of the story, written by a gay man who offers a non-transgender point of view of a transgender subject. Yet, this is not the only case of cis artists creating stories about trans individuals, or heterosexuals writing about homosexuals for that matter. In *Myra Breckinridge* (1986), novelist and essayist Gore Vidal describes the sudden realisation of the misogynistic society of the United States from the point of view of a transsexual woman after her change of sex. Pretty much like Hedwig, Myra offers a caricatured depiction of gender, but Vidal's take on transgenderism has been embraced by trans critics and activists. This split in the general opinion of both stories does not appear because of crucial differences between Hedwig and Myra, but because there is a rift in the conception of identity belonging to the transgender discourse. Roughly speaking, a division could be marked between a part of the discourse that offers an objectifying vision of the transgender body, considering its transgressive signification, and a subjectifying sector attempting to describe the subjective experience of transsexual individuals. While Jones is representative of the latter group, other activists and scholars such as Kate Bornstein tend to be included in the first sector, often embracing the concept of queerness, although still being critical towards—and sometimes rejecting—the Butlerian identity model.

Hedwig's lack of a sexual organ in contrast with her identification as a woman causes a dissonance that grows clearer as she starts to exaggerate her female features until she reaches the point of parody. Figure 4 manifests this hyperbolisation of the character's features with the use of corporeal modifiers: her use of make-up seeks to follow an idealised set of female features, attributing Hedwig her signature strong, defined cheekbones and swollen, overdrawn lips. In the song "Wig in a Box", Hedwig describes the experience of wearing a wig, and shows how she draws inspiration from figures such as Miss Farrah Fawcett or Miss Beehive 1963, both known as canonical models of beauty and pageantry.



Figure 4. Hedwig's use of body modifiers such as makeup, a wig and breast fillers to 'become' an exaggerated version of a woman, therefore participating in Butler's theory of gender's performative nature.

The contrast between one's body and its counterpart gender, or aspects that canonically conform that gender expression, is what Butler finds interesting about drag, which she believes can be "subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (1993: 125). As aforementioned in the theoretical introduction to this essay, drag produces a corporeal expression that cannot be categorised neither as a man or as a woman, but rather could be included in its own category. However, the rejection of both hegemonic genders and the subsequent origin of a third umbrella category would devalue the previous concepts of gender to the extent that the resulting product would work both as an identity or as an apparatus for the dissolution thereof. Taking into consideration this new umbrella category as a non-identity, some similarities could be observed with respect to how Foucault described Hercule's "happy limbo" (1980: xiii) as a concept that exceeds the categories of sex and identity.

Through Hedwig's exposure to both masculine and feminine features, her own perception of the self is modulated to the extent that she is able to transcend gender conventions, thus partaking in the dissolution of a gendered identity. She does so in a

song significantly titled “Exquisite Corpse”¹¹, in which performance Hedwig starts to reject all the elements that used to conform her female illusion: she snatches her wig and smashes the tomatoes used as breast filling. Her ripping off her Saran Wrap dress is of utmost importance in this scene, as it is a symbol of Hedwig reemerging from a chrysalis after her metamorphosis (Figure 5). Hedwig’s emancipation from all the corporeal markers that misrepresented her subversive identity is the first stage in a newly started process of self-completion rather than of searching her other half —or, more accurately, persecuting her other half.



Figure 5. Hedwig strips of the elements that she used to ‘become’ a woman.

The forementioned process culminates in the following scene, depicting a nude Hedwig approaching Tommy Gnosis in a dreamlike atmosphere, while he sings the reprised version of one of her songs, in which he has changed the lyrics to acknowledge his fault in the outcome of their relationship and his intolerance towards her identity: “[...] you were so much more / than any god could even plan / more than a woman or a man / and now I understand / how much I took from you”. The scene ends up with Tommy

¹¹ An ‘exquisite corpse’ or ‘cadavre exquis’ is an artistic method based on the collection of words or images from different collaborators. Each of the participants adds one of more elements to the mixture, that results in a collage of different themes and styles. It is interesting how Hedwig herself seems to be the result of an exquisite corpse made by the rest of characters in the film: she uses her mother’s name, she lost her genitalia to Luther’s proposal of fleeing the country...

leaving, therefore confirming that he was a central tool in the protagonist's journey, but that he is of any use now that the journey is complete. The last shot of this scene shows Hedwig walking towards Tommy Gnosis' symbol: an appropriation of the symbol of primitive Gnostic Christianity (Figure 6) that appears at the same time that Hedwig is regaining and assimilating every part of her that she used to create the boy's artistic persona. The explicit appearance of the word 'gnosis' is also a marker of how the protagonist is approaching the concepts of knowledge and truth for the first time in the film, being this moment a point of no return in her life whose outcome we see in the final appearance of Hedwig's tattoo, whose previously separated faces have joined to become a whole again (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Hedwig approaching the symbol of Tommy Gnosis, representing both the recuperation of the things she lost when creating him, and also the culmination of her journey of self-discovery.



Figure 7. After Hedwig's 'metamorphosis', her tattoo looks like a complete face.

Before the image fades to black, the very last scene is a clear visual representation of a rebirth. After breaking out of her chrysalis in her performance of “Exquisite Corpse”, and approaching a new concept of the self after stripping off of her conflict with Tommy, Hedwig reappears bare-naked, tumbling in a dark alley towards the shine of distant streetlights (Figure 8). The symbol of a rebirth is reinforced by the use of lights in the scene, gradually changing from the pitch black of the beginning of the alley —where Hedwig comes from— to a much brighter street, representing the outer world. This general shot of the alley also introduces the idea of public exposure of a queer body, that is, it leads the audience to wonder how the world will assume and accept a body that defies the established models of sex and gender.



Figure 8. The use of lights, the movement and Hedwig's attire represent her rebirth.

A Voice of One's Own: Music in Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Taking glam rock and punk music as a foundation for the construction of Hedwig, it is clear that the character and her story should be understood through music, as they are an essential part of the film and not just a complement to the plot. Hedwig's songs are diegetic, and they play an active role in the events of the movie. The do-it-yourself nature of the play and its gradual creation led to the final soundtrack, but Hedwig's first run at the Squeeze Box club was accompanied by a different set of songs: Fleetwood Mac's "Oh Well", Television's "See No Evil", Wreckless Eric's "Whole Wide World", Yoko Ono's "Death of Samantha", Pere Ubu's "Non-alignment Pact", Cher's "Half Breed", David Bowie's "Boys Keep Swinging", Mott the Hoople's "All the Young Dudes", The Velvet's Underground's "Femme Fatale", and a German version of Debby Boone's "You Light Up My Life" worked as the medium by which the protagonist's emotions and experiences were shown to the audience.

As previously mentioned, the singularity of this club was that it allowed drag performers to actually sing, whereas it was traditional for them to lip sync in most of the clubs. The reason for lip syncing instead of singing is found in the nature of drag itself, an art form based on the impersonation of the female gender, that is, the creation of an illusion by which the performance enhances and hyperbolises the attributes that are canonically considered to belong to womanhood. The use of feminine voices to perform stems not only from this seek of a gender illusion, but also from an identification between the performers and the artists. Drag performance was a craft conventionally reserved for gay men and trans women, communities that felt the need to borrow women's voices to be able to express themselves in a world that concealed and marginalised them¹². Lyrics in the vein of Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" or Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" gave off powerful messages that felt compelling towards the LGBT community, who appropriated the voices of strong, independent women who unapologetically sang about love and freedom. This process of assimilation often attributed the songs with new meanings more suitable to the context in which they were being sung, as it was the case of Sister Sledge's "We Are Family". This song is performed by a group of drag queens

¹² From Shorey, Eric. "Read Our Lips: On the Power Of And Meaning Behind Lip Syncing", *NYLON*, 05 December 2017.

in the opening scene of *The Birdcage*, and thus, its original meaning of blood-related sisters singing the song was substituted with a call for queer sisterhood.

While Mitchell diverged in using his own male voice in his performances as Hedwig, thus breaking with the illusion of gender, the use of other artists' music was still a rock on the road of Hedwig's emancipation. In order to portray a completely unique character, author and composer joined to create Hedwig's own original soundtrack, a set of songs and lyrics that, pretty much like their performer, did not have to fit into the moulds of pre-existent music that, though similar in tone and imagery, was not accurate enough for the story that needed to be told.

Conclusion

Hedwig and the Angry Inch opened in 1994 to become one of the largest cult shows in the history of North American musical theatre. The play and its main character stood out among other musical shows of the time due to many reasons, being of utmost relevance the turn of the screw given to the concept of gender, as it has already been illustrated in this essay. Nonetheless, we cannot obviate other nuances such as the Hedwig's embodiment of the clash between two cultural movements such as punk rock and glam, clearly influential in the construction of the musical not only in the configuration of the soundtrack, but also when it came to the selection and development of themes and events as irreverent as subversive. Taking the fall of the Berlin Wall as a narratological central point, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* presents to the audience a series of conflicts in which the protagonist is a key element, comparing herself with the wall but rejecting, at the same time, its dividing character and embracing a much more conciliatory tone by acknowledging that "there ain't much of a difference between a bridge and a wall", in the song *Tear Me Down*.

The fact that Hedwig acts as a bridge instead of as a wall is quite relevant, as it supports the main purpose of the film, that is the exposure and defence of a grey zone in between both extremes of the binary gender system. On this matter, the authors seem to take inspiration in the revolutionary theories on gender appearing in the last decades of the twentieth century, which seek to examine and, to a certain extent, undermine the normative system of gender identity. This is the case of Judith Butler's theories, aforementioned in the essay to provide a foundation in which we could build the analysis for the film. However, Hedwig needs a medium by which she can become her true self, and her drag-like performances seem to be the perfect vehicle for the matter, as they create a suspension in the sex-gender paradigm that allows her to experiment and eventually become what Butler and other scholars would describe as a *genderqueer* character.

The theory that Hedwig is, in fact, performing a drag act has been widely criticised due to many elements in her story sharing similarities with transgender or transsexual stories. However, we must take into account that, essentially, drag's ultimate aim is to create a female illusion (that is, when talking about drag queens –drag kings, on the other hand, seek to create a male illusion), and the concept of femininity, if it truly exists, is conformed by an everchanging set of rules. What I mean with this statement is that the

limitations –physical, psychological and societal— that affect women are bound to either transform or disappear. We could take as an example the North American reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009 – present), which has become one of the most followed competitions worldwide, introducing drag queens to the cultural main stream.

Its host, RuPaul Charles, was put under the spotlight due to his declarations in an interview with *The Guardian* in which, when asked about cis and trans women performing as drag queens, he responded that “drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it”, and added that he would not have a trans woman in the show after transitioning, as “it changes the whole concept of [drag]”¹³. With these declarations, he is both looking at the past of drag to erase crucial figures in the fight for queer rights as Marsha P. Johnson, and at the future to establish a new boundary for women –trans or not—to face. Drag, as a hyperbolised representation of femininity, should be capable of including all the features that conform a woman without having its foundation crumble. This problematic of what should be considered drag and what should not seems to be taking baby steps towards change thanks to the labour of many artists as Sasha Velour or Peppermint, who reject the established rules of an art form that allows them to perform as a queen who wears no wig and draws on facial hair to depreciate the canonical standards of beauty, the first; and as a fully transitioned trans woman, the latter.

It is also worth mentioning the growth and flourishing that drag as an art form has gone through in these past few years as a result of the increasing presence of drag performances in mainstream cultural productions. Revisiting New Queer Cinema, already mentioned in the context for this essay, it is undeniable how much of a difference those films made for the representation of queer individuals in cinema, with the examples of *The Birdcage* (1996) or *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995). However problematic or misleading these productions could result in the eyes of heteronormative mainstream culture of the time, they sure paved the way for many other depictions of queer lives, not only in cinema and TV fiction, but also in literature, drama and reality television. Still, the use of queer storylines in mainstream media should be looked at with an ice-cold eye, especially since the apparition of *queerbaiting* as just one

¹³ Interview by Decca Aitkenhead for *The Guardian*. 3 March 2018.

of the most effective capitalistic apparatus to engage lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual audiences and get them to consume a certain product with the promise of accurate queer representation. Eventually, said representation will be unveiled as just another way of appropriating queer problematics and experiences in order to profit from said community. Cameras, pens and papers are the only weapons left for queer individuals to reappropriate what should not have been stolen in the first place.

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