



Transvestism in Film

by Andrew Grossman

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Trying to figure out what cinematic transvestism has meant for queer audiences is problematic not only because transvestism has never meant one single thing, but also because representations of transvestism have often fallen short of what we today consider "queer."

While today we may take for granted the subversive possibilities of drag, it nevertheless remains true that actual representations of drag in film have reinforced conventional ideas of gender more often than they have challenged them.

The decorative, eye-catching, and parodic qualities of drag have made it the most easily appropriated and commodified facet of queer culture in mainstream films. Too often, however, cinematic drag is reduced to a mere joke, a harmless tease that tacitly reassures us that people can change their clothes but not their sexual identities.

Early Drag

In the silent era, drag was typically a ridiculous farce that only reinforced the "comical" discrepancy between a performer's biology and his or her costume. We may think of a young Harold Lloyd disguised as a female pitcher in *Spitball Sadie* (1915), or Charlie Chaplin mischievously cross-dressed in *A Busy Day* (1914), *The Masquerader* (1914), and *The Perfect Lady* (1915).

A little more daringly, Al Christie's *Rowdy Ann* (1919) featured comedienne Fay Tincher as an ultra-butch cowgirl, the brawny equal of any man until she is "tamed" by the civilizing institution of marriage.

That early portrayals of drag were usually allowed only in slapstick comedies, where the sexuality of the drag performer is either neutered or denied altogether, obviously reveals built-in limitations of generic silent film comedy.

This primitive, farcical aspect of drag--which, of course, still lingers today--may even be reducible to the familiar image of an insane, cross-dressed Bugs Bunny impishly smacking an infantile Elmer Fudd on the lips: both participants must be first desexualized in order for the farce to be clownishly effective.

In the slapstick era, we may remember Cary Grant "suddenly going gay" in a frilly bathrobe in Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1939), or the transvestite disguise plots of Arthur Leonard's *Boy! What a Girl* (1945), Hawks' *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), or, most famously, Billy Wilder's later, oft-imitated *Some Like it Hot* (1959).

The Continuing Treatment of Transvestism as Comedy

The continuing treatment of transvestism as comedy--including what can be called the "transvestite plot,"



An advertisement for Ed Wood's film *Glen Or Glenda* (1953), an autobiographical account of the filmmaker's own penchant for cross-dressing.

wherein a heterosexual character must temporarily cross-dress in accordance with a narrative contrivance, only to be happily unmasked at the conclusion--may be seen today as, by turns, quaint or coy, playful or conservative, potentially subversive or ultimately homophobic.

Indeed, we may think little has changed since Amos Vogel's 1974 critique of Wilder's *Some Like It Hot*: "The Hollywood view of transvestism: it must be portrayed flippantly or in jest to be acceptable. The titillation is built-in and sells tickets."

To push this point to the extreme, Wilder's film may thus not be ideologically too different from Gualtiero Jacopetti's sensationalist "shockumentary" *Mondo Cane 2* (1964), whose ad campaign promised its bourgeois ticket-holders a tame peek into "the sexual ritual of British transvestites!"

Yet, when one surveys contemporary, mainstream, openly gay fare such as Eduoard Molinaro's *La Cage Aux Folles* (1978) or Stephan Elliot's popular *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), it seems that the same campy, ticket-selling titillation can operate even when drag is framed within an "out," pro-gay context.

While we may be dismayed that the superficial aspects of drag are too easily mainstreamed for a straight audience, we should not forget that the majority of real-life transvestites are in fact heterosexual, and it is therefore possible that within the conventions of the old transvestite plot, mainstream drag films may offer covert and not necessarily homophobic pleasures to heterosexual audiences, even if politicized queer audiences may find such films stereotypical, tame, or simply uninteresting.

Issues of Queer Desire

Furthermore, because the standardized, apparently conservative transvestite plot is unlikely to come under much censorship, a few pre-queer drag films have managed to raise issues of queer desire even if their formulaic plots eventually demand a safe return to heterosexuality.

Here, we may think of Ernst Lubitsch's then-daring *I Don't Want to be a Man!* (1919), or the bisexual confusions generated by a cross-dressed Katharine Hepburn in George Cukor's *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935) and Renate Muller in Reinhold Schunzel's *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933), whose Berlin "decadence" the Nazis would soon extinguish.

On the other hand, queer postmodernism has appropriated iconic images of drag so wantonly that we tend to forget where they actually originate. For example, the indelible image of Marlene Dietrich performing cabaret in a man's top hat and tails has become retroactively synonymous with queer gender-bending, yet we should not conveniently forget that Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930) was, after all, a film about heterosexual masochism.

Gender and Sexual Polarities

Today, drag has become so commonplace in both straight and queer culture that it has become unwise--if not also impossible and simply tiresome--to pick out "good" drag from the "bad," to identify pro-queer and homophobic representations of drag according to a positive/negative grading scale as black-and-white as the female/male polarity that drag is supposed to confuse.

Still, when it comes to a mainstream film like Sydney Pollack's *Tootsie* (1982), the jury seems split along lines of sexuality--whereas the "straight establishment" heaped it with awards, it would not be difficult to criticize the film for perpetuating stereotypical definitions of what are essentially "male" and "female" characteristics.

In one sense, this criticism of the *Tootsie*, or, if you prefer, *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) scenario, which supposes

that a heterosexual male can become a better heterosexual by discovering his "inner" femininity, is certainly valid. But, while such films are easy to pick on, to insist that all transvestism must be ultimately queer is equally myopic.

Sexual transformations do not always follow from revelations of gender; and, because we cannot delegitimize the identities of heterosexual transvestites, it is not unthinkable that certain acts of drag are indeed only about the heterosexual surfaces of gender and not the queer depths of sexuality.

Similarly, audiences disagree on whether or not the transvestism of Neil Jordan's over-hyped *The Crying Game* (1993), which hinges on the revelation of a transvestite's penis, was an elaborate narrative metaphor for the unstable nature of sexual and national identity, or was basically a homophobic gimmick hiding beneath the trendy clothes of a middlebrow art film.

Still, the acute sensitivity to clichés or homophobias possibly underlying drag is understandable considering the silly, pseudo-Freudian history of evil transvestites in acclaimed films such as Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1980) and Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), films which place their fashionable transvestisms within a sophomoric understanding of Freud.

Avant-garde Cinema and Cult Films

Before the advent of today's openly queer cinema, the avant-garde cinema, and later the cult film, had offered select, marginal audiences less veiled and more clearly sexualized visions of drag, where cross-dressing was more often an active lifestyle than a passive pathology.

From Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (1953), which offered an autobiographical account of the director's addiction to angora sweaters, to Jack Smith's once-banned underground classic *Flaming Creatures* (1963), from the endless parade of narcissistic drag queens that issued from Andy Warhol's "factory" to professional transvestite Divine becoming a new definition of radical chic in John Waters' *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), and especially *Female Trouble* (1974), transvestism became synonymous not merely with camp but with a celebration of deviance and political marginality in themselves.

Meanwhile, semi-commercial cult films such as Richard Benner's *Outrageous!* (1977) gradually pushed sympathetic (and gay) transvestite characters into a mainstream cinema that would in the 1980s embrace Hector Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), writer Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), and Blake Edwards' *Victor/Victoria*, a campy remake of Reinhold Schunzel's celebrated 1933 classic.

But with the belated success of Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), the mainstreaming of the transvestite cult film also brought with it a fallacious sense of democracy: the transvestite's nascent queerness was no longer a political statement automatically opposed to the mainstream, but now a user-friendly game of surfaces the middle-class could temporarily engage before returning to "normal."

European Cinema

When we consider transvestite films internationally, however, we get quite a different picture from what North American cinema has, or has not, offered us.

European cinema has always, of course, presented the same farcical stereotypes as Hollywood--slapstick cross-dressing has always been a staple of lowbrow comedy nearly everywhere. However, mainstream European films such as Claude Miller's *The Best Way* (1976) and Marco Risi's *Forever Mary* (1989) show that transvestism as a legitimate, if still troubled, representation of alternative desire was more allowable in European cultures whose homophobias were not quite as codified as those of Hollywood.

Elsewhere, in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's absurdist satire *Satan's Brew* (1976), we see that transvestism

ultimately seems a far less neurotic practice than the mundane sadomasochisms we endure on a daily basis.

The image of the transvestite has also been used as a metaphorical figure in political films. Most radically, the infamous, coprophagic banquet scene of Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) offers the virginal young male transvestite as a perverse image of purity literally "smeared" by fascist power structures.

Complementarily, Rosa von Praunheim's fascinating semi-documentary *I Am My Own Woman* (1992) preserves the testimony of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a defiant, real-life, but hardly pure, transvestite survivor of Nazi terror.

Asian Cinema

In Asian cinema, we encounter national and historical tropes of theatrical transvestism entirely removed from Western gender binarism.

While Linda Hunt's male reporter in Peter Weir's *Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) is a rare example of Western gender-disguise not necessitated by a plot, this transvestism for its own sake is a staple of the operatic Hong Kong martial arts films and occasionally pornographic Japanese *anime*.

Yet, if we consider the political oppressions of the *kathoey*s of Thai cinema and the ostracized, "third-gender" *hijras* of Indian cinema, we see again that, depending on the social context, sexual emancipation does not always easily follow from the confusion of gender identity.

Queer Cinema

The queer American cinema of recent years has provided us with independent films whose transvestisms seem tailor-made for both queer audiences and queer analysis: Jennie Livingston's drag documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990); Maggie Greenwald's female-to-male transvestite Western *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993); and Kimberly Peirce's sensational *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), based on the true story of the murder of female cross-dresser Brandon Teena (real name Teena Brandon), also the subject of Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir's documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998).

Likewise, European films such as Bettina Wilhelm's *All of Me* (1991) and Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* (1999) have both humanized the transvestite and re-humanized the camp sensibility, long gone stale, that enfolds her/him.

Recent Mainstream Films

Among recent mainstream films, however, perhaps the most exceptional is Alain Berliner's *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), which might be called a drag film for children. Because it is the story of a prepubescent (seven-year old) boy convinced he is a girl, cross-dressing occurs in the absence of the fully-formed sexuality that would accompany an older, pubescent, psychically self-aware character.

Thus, while many commercial drag films tend to emphasize the surfaces of drag, pretending to be about sexuality when in fact they are concerned, at most, with the male-female duality of gender, *Ma Vie en Rose* is perhaps the one film that manages to skirt the "gender versus sexuality" issue altogether. In this film, drag is not about surfaces diverting our attention away from sexualities that may or may not exist; here, gender identity can exist only in terms of surfaces.

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About the Author

Andrew Grossman is the editor of *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade*, the first full-length anthology of writing about gay, lesbian, and transgender Asian films. His writings on film and queer issues have also appeared in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, *Scope: The Film Journal of the University of Nottingham*, *Senses of the Cinema*, *American Book Review*, and elsewhere.