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Drag Queens in Cinema and Television:

The Influence of Mainstream Media on a Subversive Artform



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Index:

Introduction.....	5
CHAPTER 1: Drag and queer theory.....	9
The history of queer theory and LGBT history and activism.....	10
Queer representation in Film and Television.....	12
Definition of camp and different views of the term.....	16
Definition of drag.....	19
The heteronormativity of queer culture.....	23
Using the subversive nature of drag to cover conservative values.....	24
The financial gain of queer film and television and marketing strategies.....	28
The social position of drag queens in the gay male culture.....	30
CHAPTER 2: Reality TV as genre.....	34
Subgenres.....	39
Reality television as social experiments.....	40
Narrative structure of <i>America's Next Top Model</i> and <i>Project Runway</i>.....	41
CHAPTER 3: Analysis of <i>RuPaul's Drag Race</i>.....	46
The Art of Drag.....	49
Drag queens: Political subversive or female impersonators?.....	50
Referencing drag culture.....	51
Drag queen or transgender woman?	57
Family issues.....	60
Professor RuPaul: Gay history lessons.....	61

Which drag styles make the cut?	63
Cultural appropriation and the new generation.....	66
Reality as parody.....	69
Sexuality and Gender.....	70
Playing with gender and with words.....	78
Closing remarks.....	80
 CITATIONS.....	 82

Introduction

The art of drag queens is something that has always fascinated me in one way or another, and this fascination has grown stronger as I have become more informed about the queer community and queer theory. In many ways I feel that the art of drag is difficult to translate to screen, either TV or film, as traditional storytelling often prefers either characters that aren't so complex, or their complexity is well-known to modern society. A drag queen is someone most people don't have in their daily life, and so portraying one on screen requires a bit more context and back-story, not only for the fictional character but also for the audience, about the art of drag and the history of the queer community. This master's thesis aims to look at how drag queens are being portrayed in the reality-show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo, 2009). To put this into a broader context, I will see how drag queens and other LGBTQI-identified (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex) characters have been portrayed and represented in cinematic history and how things are in this day and age, in both cinema and television. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is an *America's Next Top Model*-like show that features drag queens in a competition to become the "Next Drag Superstar". The founder and host of the show, RuPaul Charles (born 1960), is arguably the most famous drag queen in the Western World, and certainly in North America, thus being a very influential person to dictate what drag is to an audience unfamiliar with the art and terms connected with it. As the popularity of the show grows, the question of what drag is seems more and more prudent, as well as the fact that a new generation is making it their own.



RuPaul Charles in and out of drag.

RuPaul's Drag Race has become a hit in the US, and is now featured on Netflix. Europe also seems to be embracing the show and both Germany and Great Britain are currently rumored to have German and British version of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in development. The growing popularity and drag entering into the media mainstream, although being an art that used to be subversive, is what prompts the research questions of this thesis: What does the subversive art of drag gain and what does it lose as it enters mainstream media? How is *RuPaul's Drag Race* forming the public opinion on drag? Does it counter or succumb to earlier depictions of drag queens on screen?

Drag is an art form that used to be subversive. The growing popularity of drag, along with its increased position in mainstream media, thus prompts the research questions of this thesis. But as *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the biggest show on drag queens, and as the show is focused on North American performers and draw from North American and western popular culture, it seems fit to limit my research to this part of the world. While there have been talks about the TV-concept

being established in other parts of the world, Europe especially, this is yet to come to fruition. As of now, the American version of the show is a big hit in most of Europe, and parts of Asia and Africa, and so the influence of the show can be categorized as worldwide. In terms of theoretic material, one might argue that a deeper dive into the academic world of gender studies and gender identity is prudent. I will focus on queer theory, drawing in particular on the approaches of Vito Russo, Richard Dyer and Elisabeth Whitney. Furthermore, since this is a thesis in film studies and the material to be analyzed is a reality television show, I will also draw on theories from the film and media fields, more precisely on approaches focusing on reality shows, such as Patrick Keating and Richard M. Huff.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I will give a brief rendition of the history of queer people in North America, then define the terms drag and camp, as well as paint a picture of how queer characters have been portrayed in films and television. My findings will focus on the degree of misrepresentation of queer people in general and drag queens in particular, and what this means for the common understanding of drag as an art form and life style.

In the second chapter, I will have a closer look at reality-TV as a genre. I start out by an attempt to define reality-TV as a genre. In this chapter I also explore the structure and narrative of the competitive reality shows *America's Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003) and *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004), and how *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses already established tropes from these shows to make his own more relatable to a mainstream audience.

The third chapter of the thesis consists of an analysis of my main media text, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Here I investigate how it fits in with reality-TV as a genre, and how, through parody and satire,

the show becomes somewhat the essence of drag itself – with parody and satire being such a large part of drag culture and expression. What I hope to show is that *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which in some ways is a parody of TV-shows like *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*, uses the familiar format of these TV-shows to normalize a lifestyle and artistic expression that most people have little experience with and some people have certain prejudices against. In the analysis part of my thesis I'd like to break down the way *RuPaul's Drag Race* portrays the art of drag, female and male drag beauty, straight female and male gay sexuality – and how drag performances blend these two – the use of parody within the reality genre, and how the show is positioned in the ways of drag being either a subversive art form or perpetuating the heteronormative values and tropes.

Chapter 1: Drag and queer theory

The academic writings and research concerning drag is indisputably tied to queer theory, and gender studies. Therefore I find it sensible to involve a brief look at the history of queer theory as well as the history of queer and LGBT-rights activism and struggles, and how this has been portrayed on film.

I choose to involve the history to contextualize the current situation drag queens find themselves in, and how it has shaped the theory about it. Queer and drag history is also something that pops up frequently in my main media text, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. RuPaul Charles, being a man of 56 as I write this, has experienced quite a lot that has been important to queer and LGBT-rights. He understands the importance of knowing your background and appreciating the ones who fought for the rights the LGBTIQ-community is currently enjoying. Since the contestants on the show range in ages from in their early twenties to early forties, there is a varied and uneven knowledge about the history, or “herstory” as RuPaul likes to call it, a term borrowed from feminism in the 1970s (Mills, 1992). I find that RuPaul’s choice to put a deliberate emphasis on this throughout the show and the different seasons is a tool not only to educate the younger contestants, but also to use the show as a platform to bring awareness about queer history and rights to a mainstream audience. This is a way to reach out to people who have never heard about the Stonewall Riots, the activist Harvey Milk or the drag performer Lipsyncha, and reveal to the audience that this isn’t *just* a light hearted reality show, and that drag queens aren’t just all fun and games; there is struggle and suffering in their past and present that should not be

forgotten. I realize, as RuPaul does, that some context needs to be given for the message to really hit home.

Later in this chapter I will define two terms that are very important for this thesis, camp and drag. The two terms are important to understand the art and history of drag, as they define the art in many ways. Both are complex and have been debated in academia for decades, and I have no desire to come up with one solid definition of the two terms, yet I would like to paint a picture of the academic and theoretical landscape concerning these expressions, and then argue for the one I choose to relate to in my analysis. Especially my discussion of drag, and whether it is politically subversive or perpetuating and reinforcing traditional values and stereotypes, will be essential to my further discussion in my analyses of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

The history of queer theory and LGBT history and activism

I've chosen to focus on the history of queer people in North America. Seeing as my main media text is an American production, and that the show's host(ess) RuPaul often refers to the history and struggles of LGBT people in the US, it seems appropriate to limit my focus to this part of the world. I use the term queer as an umbrella term for LGBTIQ-peoples and the subgroups and culture that come along with that (Jagose, 1996).

The terms "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality", is thought not have been devised until the late 1800's, and was not used in Western society before the middle of the 20th century (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004: p.2). It was created to make a category and describe people who were involved in

“deviant” and “abnormal” sexual behavior. As the theories continued to evolve, they became more preoccupied with gender identity. For instance, it was believed that a homosexual man was in fact a woman trapped in a man’s body, and vice versa for a homosexual woman. This is interesting in terms of today’s society’s views on drag queens, and reawakens the old notion that homosexual men are actually just women trying to negotiate their identity in a man’s body. As other theories and studies, as well as my analysis of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, will prove, this is rarely the case. Drag queens usually are men who want to have a female persona on stage, but are perfectly happy to be men off stage. Contemporary theories divide between sexual preference and gender identity. The first refereeing to which gender one is attracted to, the other to what gender the person identifies as. The two are not necessarily connected (ibid: p.3).

For the most part in the 20th century, you were well advised to keep your feet planted in the proverbial closet if you were a homosexual man. It was considered a sin in both the eyes of the church as well as the eyes of the law. It was illegal; you could be imprisoned or declared mentally ill and be sent to an institution. This was more a danger to men than to women, who were thought not to have a sexual drive like men. The thought of women having urges and sexual needs, and acting them out on another woman, none the less, was not conceived probable, or if so, not a threat to the sanctity of heteronormativity and her impeding heterosexual union.

Even though queer people were forced to hide, they still formed groups and communities, especially in urban areas. Yet it was not until the 1960’s that homosexuality’s place in the civil rights movement was a burning issue. Along with people of color and women, activists demanded equal rights in terms of the law as well as fair treatment and respect in the eyes of society. The Stonewall riots were a pivotal point for this struggle. The Stonewall Inn was

a gay nightclub in New York that was being constantly harassed and raided by the police. One night in 1969, the patrons had had enough. They rioted against the police, and this sparked a giant flame in the LGBT community that led to years of pride parades, protests, and fierce activism. The Stonewall Riots is an event RuPaul often talks about on his show, and reminding viewers and contestants that it was a drag queen, Marsha P. Johnson, who was in the forefront of the protest, and that she has paved the way for gay people to enjoy their freedom of expression and protection from the law to live their lives in peace. “Queer theory posits that sexuality is a vast and complex terrain that encompasses not just personal orientation and/or behavior, but also the social, cultural, and historical factors that define and create the conditions for such orientations and behaviors.” (ibid: p.1). So the field of queer theory is vast, and not for me in this thesis to explore further, but rather use as a framework and to have some definitions to analyze the material with.

Queer representation in Film and Television

From the very beginning of film, there have been traces of a queer presence. Vito Russo’s “The Celluloid Closet – homosexuality in the movies” is perhaps the most extensive work on that subject. He has collected and analyzed material from the very beginning of film to the early 1980s (the book was published in 1981). He has uncovered interesting facts about the way LGBT people have been portrayed on film. Early on there was usually the character of the *sissy* or the *butch* that we now can recognize and identify as queer. The *sissy* was often a weak and effeminate male, and the *butch* a stern and masculine woman, both with little to no sexuality, and presented as very one-dimensional. This character remains a stereotypical character to this day, and has proven its longevity despite the changing views in society. The main argument in

Russo's book is that queer people are usually either portrayed as a comic relief or as a sinister character in films. They are either someone not be taken seriously, or someone perverted or deviant, and evil. Either way, the queer people in cinema have a long tradition of being treated as a sidekick or someone whose humanity and integrity is often not included in the character. By making queer characters with complexity and authenticity, one might invoke in audiences something that the more conservative viewers have a big problem with: It's outside of the norm, the opposite of heteronormativity. Whatever threatens the status quo and is unfamiliar is seen as a direct threat to the heterosexual union and the established gender stereotypes that so many cling to. "Heterosexual society has a vested interest in keeping homosexual relationships untenable and mystical because, made real, they are seen as a threat to family living" (Russo, 1981: p.42). Exactly how they are a threat is unclear, but one could argue that human beings and modern society has a need for certain rules within the community for them to feel safe, heteronormativity and the idea of the core family unit being one of them. A homosexual lifestyle often does not include three children and a Volvo, also because the constrictions of society make it difficult for them to obtain this. If you are not allowed to legally get married or adopt children, having a traditional family life is a challenge. That being said, the gay scene is often a space for subversive and political and societal rebellion, part because these things are denied them and part because not everyone wants that kind of life. So in film and television, it is easier to either vilify or infantilize the queer element in the story or character, as not to disrupt the conception of what a decent, "normal" person is like. While art mirrors society and vice versa, the treatment of gay characters has changed very little as the views of society has dramatically improved towards a fairer treatment of this group. The gay character one has seen in film and television the last 20 years have been simplistic at best, and offensive at worst. A TV-show like *Will & Grace*, showing a gay man and his straight female best friend and both their lives and romantic

encounters, and the fact that beloved comedian Ellen DeGeneres came out of the closet, might have opened some doors to a more varied representation of queer lives and characters. However, when we are talking about the mainstream media, the big production companies and television networks, having a queer character with some depth and nuance is still considered too niche or a risk, in fear of losing more conservative audience members. "...effeminate men could imitate homosexuality while remaining essentially asexual and without threatening the status quo." (Russo, 1981: p.36). While remaining asexual or only focusing their flirty energy towards someone who is not receptive, the gay character poses little to no threat to the heteronormative society. It seems that most of the fear springs from what queer people do in the bedroom, as if it has any effect on the world around them. Remove the desire from the character, and he or she becomes a caricature of himself or herself that is mostly used as comic relief or as a villain. We find this trend mostly in Hollywood feature film and in narrative scripted TV-shows. There seems to be a bit more leeway in reality television, though. Being cheaper to produce, the plethora of subjects for reality shows are vast, and include perhaps a wider range of people, queers people among them. This is certainly true in the case of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as mostly all of the participants in the show are queer in one way or another: Gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual. Initially the show was made for gay people, by gay people, but as the audience has grown, so has the number of straight viewers. This is still a show mostly for those who are at least interested in queer culture, but the fact that a big streaming site like Netflix has bought it and are showing it means it has a broader audience than perhaps initially anticipated.

We have though, in recent years, seen an increase of stronger, queer characters in Hollywood film, and usually, it seems like a ticket to the Oscar's. Matthew McConaughey, while not queer, plays a man infected with HIV in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013, Vallée) and actor Jared Leto played

a transgender woman also infected with HIV, portrayals for which they both received an Oscar. The fact that nuanced, powerful, queer stories are being told, is a positive step towards normalizing the kind of issues that the queer community faces, the aftermath of the HIV and AIDS epidemic in North America being one of them, but the issue remains of whether the stories are told in a way that is representative enough? One of the issues being discussed is for instance why there are so few, if any, transgender actors cast to play transgender roles. In big productions, one of the few to have done so is the hit TV-show *Orange is the new Black* (Kohan, 2013) which has both many lesbian characters and a transgender woman played by Laverne Cox, herself a transgender woman. Cisgender people play the majority of transgender roles, male or female. In the same fashion, heterosexuals play many of the iconic gay characters. Tom Hanks plays a man dying of AIDS in *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), Sean Penn played the famous out politician Harvey Milk in *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008), and, more recently, Cate Blanchett and Mara Rooney play lesbian lovers in the 1950s in *Carol* (Haynes, 2015). All are films that received tremendous acclaim from audiences and critics alike, and all received one or more Academy Awards. While vastly more multifaceted and having a lot of emotional depth and complexity, the stories are all tragic in one way or another. Tom Hanks character dies of AIDS; Sean Penn's character gets assassinated due to his political activism, which is a true story; and Cate Blanchett's character must give up her life and children to be who she is and love the one she loves. It seems that gay characters and stories are accepted and acclaimed when there is an element of scandal or tragedy to it. The point Vito Russo was trying to make, as well am I, is that there is a need for gay characters on screen where they are portrayed living their lives and not being fetishized or made into a sob story. It is possible to tell a story in film and television that includes an LGBT-storyline that is recognizable and emotionally relatable to anyone, whether they are straight or gay. The third season of the Norwegian hit series *Skam (Shame)* (Andem, 2013) is a prime example of how

this is completely achievable. While one could argue that the traditional and conservative communities in the US are far more extreme than that in Norway, which is considered a very progressive and tolerant country, it is hopefully something that can change some of the bigger production companies' minds about the ability to reach a broad audience with a queer story or character. The rights to the show have been bought to make an American version, so what kind of approach they have will be interesting to see.

Definition of camp and different views of the term

While it is difficult to fully agree on a single definition of camp, it has some points that most theories either attribute or at least mention. "It has been called a sensibility, a taste, and an aesthetic, and it shares similarities with literary devices such as parody, irony, and satire." (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004: p.119). According to Moe Meyer in "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp", Susan Sontag sees camp as having two sides: naïve camp, which refers to a kind of cultural production that is perceived as so bad that it is ridicules, and pure camp, which is a play on the former and is conscious of its use of camp as a tool (Meyer, 1994). One of the notable piece of work written on the subject of camp is Esther Newton's "Mother Camp" from 1972. For the author's analysis, their theories about camp might be a bit outdated, but even so, it makes for a good comparison of how the view of drag and camp might have been altered by the drag fad in the 1990's as well as the success of *RuPauls Drag Race*. Newton claims that drag and camp "are the most represented and widely used symbol of homosexuality in the English speaking world" (Newton, 1972: p.100), and this claim I think still holds up to this day. For her it seems that drag and camp are inseparable. As I will discuss later in this thesis, I agree with Newton in that

respect, and see camp as a large part of the drag performance and legacy. Camp, for me, is undoubtedly tied to homosexual culture, even if it is not meant to have that effect or the people involved in the cultural act are not themselves homosexual. I most agree with Richard Dyer's definition of camp as "...a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialisation, theatricalisation and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable" (Dyer, 1986: p.176). He is referencing gay men's love for Judy Garland as an example, and Garland, being one of the biggest gay icons, is a well-established person that is part of a drag queens repertoire. Dressing up as Judy Garland, especially as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), is a staple character to impersonate for a drag queen, mainly because she is so beloved by the gay community and has lots of campy quality.



Judy Garland as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*

In "Camp and the Gay Sensibility", Jack Babuscio finds the term camp to be somewhat vague and wishes to explore films, stars and directors to seek out and establish a connection

between camp and gayness. He defines camp as follows: “The term camp describes those elements in a person, situation, or activity which express, or are created by, a gay sensibility” (Babuscio, 1993: p.122) He points out that a person or actor may not himself or herself be gay, but that camp lies in the eye of the beholder and becomes camp when read and interpreted as such by a gay sensibility. He finds camp's features to be fourfold:

1. Camp/irony – this is the contrast between the object/subject, and setting and context. Examples are masculine/feminine, like Greta Garbo's androgynous qualities. Others are youth/old age, sacred/profane, spirit/flesh and high/low status.
2. Camp/aestheticism – “the art of camp relies (...) largely upon arrangement, timing and tone” (ibid: p.123). The aesthetic is frequently exaggerated and stylized.
3. Camp/theatricality – this focuses on the “role” and how outward appearances are superficial and a matter of style.
4. Camp/humor – “humor constitutes the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining positive entry” (ibid: p.127)

Moe Meyer feels, as discussed in “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp”, that in light of certain activist organizations use of camp as a political and critical tool, the term should be revised. He sees camp as political and solely queer. Therefore other things that have previously been classified as camp will lose their status in accordance to his definition. “Camp can be read as a critique of ideology though a parody that is always already appropriated.” (Meyer, 1994: p.148) Using camp as a tool to comment on the establishment is often used by drag queens, and is at least upheld as both queer and political, as Meyer is urging us to see camp as.

Camp also has a strong foothold in the economic world, in terms of determining identity through aesthetics and products.

“Camp is a mechanism by which consumers express their identities and tastes through the recirculation of popular styles and idioms, appropriating older styles as they have become available for new meanings. Camp thus serves as an important register of the intersections of consumer cultures and sexual cultures and provides further evidence between capitalism and gay identity” (Whitney, 2006: p.40)

Whitney’s view of camp complies very well with how drag queens utilize camp in their persona and performance; the recirculation of styles from other eras and icons such as Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli and Cher to name a few, are staple looks and parodies for drag queens. The way a queen chooses to present herself, and which style and era she favors says a lot about the personal taste of the performer, thus blending in the performer and the persona. The drag queen becomes an extension of the man behind the make-up and the man is usually gay, well versed in pop culture and is prepared to spend money on the certain look or feel of his performance.

Definition of drag

Drag queens may be confused with someone who identifies as transgender or transsexual, but they are vastly different. A “transgender” woman is someone who is biologically born a man, but feels they have been born in the wrong body and gender, thus striving to live their lives as woman either through gender reconstructive surgery, clothing and make up or other ways: Each has a

different way of expression their gender dysphoria. Gender Dysphoria is a term used to describe when a person feels out of place in his or her own body. “Transsexual” men are happy to be the gender they are assigned at birth, yet prefer to sometimes dress up in women’s clothing and wear makeup. This is part of their private and normal life, and is not meant for anyone other than themselves (Carroll. mm, 2002: p.131-139). Drag Queens are, usually, cis-gendered men (cis-gendered meaning being born in a male body and identifying as male), but uses female clothing and aesthetic to create a public persona. Drag Queens are performers, and do not wish to wear women’s clothing when they are off stage and not working. The drag persona is usually an extension of their own personality, but there is a line drawn between the two. While there are variations within each group, I consider this to be the main differences between transgender, transsexual and drag queens.

Drag has many features and signifiers that characterize the term, but does not necessarily define it. The stereotypical view of a drag queen is a man dressed as a woman who wears a lot of heavy make-up, she has big hair, and wears outfits with lots of panache in form of feathers, colors, patterns, sequins and sparkle. The onstage performance is usually a cocktail, no pun intended, of stand-up comedy, lip synching and dancing to popular songs, and a variety of celebrity impersonations. Some even make their living out of only impersonating a particular celebrity. The gay icon Cher is a popular choice. While this is an outline of what I would call classic drag, there is a myriad of styles within the genre of drag; runway queens who like up to date fashion, beauty pageant queens who compete in gay Miss USA-type contests, avant-garde queens who want their look and performance to be a bit wild and artistic, comedy queens who are basically stand up comedians who also do drag, dancers, vaudeville queens, burlesque queens, gender benders who want to confuse people about which gender they actually are,

bearded queens and many other things that I haven't even heard of. For the more traditional queens, and especially those who play more on the understanding of conventional female beauty and sex appeal, it is common to *tuck*. Tucking refers the act of concealing the male penis, often with the help of some strong ducked-tape, with the intention of creating the illusion of a female vagina. Or at least hide one of the more obvious signs of the male gender, the penis. For some people the goal is to look the most like a beautiful woman, a term called *fishy*. The term is said to have different origins, depending on who you talk to, but some think it comes from a fish gliding through the reefs so you can't quite make out what it is, man or woman, who knows. Others have a more crude explanation, saying it comes from the odor of the female genitalia. The term is a compliment among queens, especially those who tend to lean towards the female illusion-aspect of drag, and also a nod to the subversive and sexual humor of drag. Other performers strive to do the very opposite and use their dual gender play as the main focus of their act and appearance. Mathu Andersen is a good example of a drag queen that is playing with gender in his representation. He is a renowned makeup artist, and has worked as such on *America's Next Top Model* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. For *RuPaul's Drag Race* he has also been director of the music videos with the finale contestants, and is now credited as creative producer of the show. He is someone who plays with makeup and male facial hair, and representing a more avant-garde side of drag, while still being very glamorous.

In her chapter "One of the gals who's one of the guys: Men, masculinity and drag performance in North America" Fiona Moore defines drag as "...men dressing in female clothing for the purpose of performance" (Moore, 2005: p.103) and then expands it to "...exaggerated cross-dress performance by men". This definition can include many styles of drag, and it is necessary to have a broad definition since there is such a plethora of approaches to the art. I would, however, put

emphasis on the importance of drag as a political tool, whether the drag queen in question realizes their subversive and political power or not. "...drag as a form of gender crossing, a part of sexual politics, or an act of misogyny" (ibid). Drag in itself is transgressive, even in its most innocent form. She later adds that drag by definition does not exclusively mean only gay men who dress as women, but can also include straight men doing drag, her example being *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975), as well as women being drag kings (dressing up and performing as men). However, for the most part it seems to be an expression of gender and performance that is closely tied to the male gay community in the Western world. I would add that, even though this is something I agree with, there are also straight or lesbian cis-gender women who are performing as drag queens: women as men as women, so to say. This suggests to me that even though drag originally has been defined by the transgression between genders, it has developed to a style of performance that can be used by whomever wishes to do so. Do the straight women who do drag at clubs face criticism? Undoubtedly, seeing as drag has been a cultural aspect of the queer community "belonging" to gay men. In terms of *RuPaul's Drag Race* it is interesting how the rules of the show and the comments of the contestants and judges shape the viewer's perception and understanding of drag, as well as the dos and don'ts. To my knowledge there is gay male drag, straight male drag, transgender drag, female lesbian drag, and straight female drag. One of the drag queens with the most and longest commercial success is Dame Edna, who is portrayed by a straight man, Barry Humphries. I even know of a cis-gendered, heterosexual woman who considered having a sex change for the sole purpose of becoming a gay man in order to count as a "real" drag queen (*Exposed*, 2013, Beth B.). So in reality, as all things, the term drag queen is far more diverse than perhaps expected.

The heteronormativity of queer culture

This part of the chapter focuses on the discussion of whether drag is perpetuating normative and traditional stereotypes or being subversive and political and making a statement about the fluidity and performative quality of gender. The articles included look at this question by analyzing some well-known and successful films with characters in drag.

One can claim that traditional Hollywood cinema has had two main audience groups that are faithful to it, women and gay men. There is something about Hollywood films and romances and drama that fit into the larger than life fantasy that both women and gay men could be argued to have. Perhaps being historically on the low end of the societal food chain for such a long time prompts a desire for a break from reality, and a little escape into cinema is too enticing not to indulge in? In “How Homo can Hollywood be? Remaking Queer Authenticity from *Too Wong Foo, thanks for everything! Julie Newmar to Brokeback Mountain*”, Alex Evans looks at how queer culture clings to the Hollywood film and feels in a way that it should be theirs while also not approving of the way they are represented in them. “Hollywood *feels* like it should be ours, and hence, Hollywood becomes carried with gay subculture like something of a subcultural phantom limb.” (Evans, 2009: p.51) As we have explored earlier in this chapter, despite the gay communities love for classic Hollywood cinema, they have not a good record of depicting gay and lesbian characters in a favorable or realistic way. Therefore it seems strange that an industry that is in some ways mistreating, and certainly misrepresenting the queer community should get so much love from them. Gay men and drag queens alike draw from great women from classical Hollywood cinema as icons to uphold and idolize, as well as make fun off or give homage to.

This is easier when the person has had some difficult times or is on the edge of the Hollywood system in some way. As Richard Dyer talks about in “Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society”, Judy Garland is a gay icon precisely because she has also been mistreated by Hollywood and the audiences. She was deemed not beautiful enough, not thin enough, was put on diets and had many turns with alcoholism and pill addiction. But she would always come back, and that is part of the appeal for the gay community, because she represents someone who made it even though the obstacles were against her and was vulnerable for the world to see (Dyer, 1986). Hollywood and gay men seem to have a strange and at times harmful co-dependent relationship, each holding on to each other without fully understanding each other. For a straight audience, it seems that when straight identifying characters turn gay, it is seen as brave and groundbreaking, the prime example perhaps being *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005). The film, being one of the more contemporary examples of queer love on film, was very well received by both queer and straight audiences, as well as critics and award shows. Yet it is a film that has very little camp in it. This goes back to my point in the section on queer representation in Hollywood cinema, that for a gay love to be celebrated in a film, it has to have a certain degree of heterosexuality, and preferably suffering, in it.

Using the subversive nature of drag to cover conservative values

Nicola Evans poses the question of whether the use of a man in a dress is enough to deflect from some very traditional and heteronormative views on society. In the article “Games of hide and seek: Race, gender and drag in *The Crying Game* and *The Birdcage*” (1998), Evans looks at two well-know films using drag queens, *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992) and *The Birdcage* (Nichols,

1996). Is drag the new blackface? Have drag queens become symbols of a type of person one can use as a prop or a tool to convey something more sinister, without regard for the authenticity and humanity of those who practice the art? "... under the cover of drag's new transgressive status, some very old-fashioned notions about race and gender are being smuggled back into popular culture..."(Evans, 1998: p.199) This way of using drag queens on film and television supports an old view of homosexuality, that a gay man is a woman trapped in a man's body, making drag a way of visualizing sexual preference. Later Evans reads drag, by way of Butler and Garber, rather than "...it is heterosexuality rather than homosexuality that is revealed in the drag act" (Evans, 1998: p.201), as when feeling the need to visually "other" the homosexual person, rather than having them look like anyone else, you create a category that isn't necessarily applicable to the real world. "Drag in contemporary Hollywood Cinema gives us a touch of innovation (cross dressing) in order to sell us some very bland forms of sexism and racism" (Evans, 1998: p.214). By using drag as the subversive element, we look for answers; yet fail to see them due to their banality. We expect something deeper because of the pretext of drag, and do not realize that we are being fed traditional and unprogressive values. Evans quotes Roland Barthes: "A little confessed evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil" (ibid). Evans uses examples from *The Birdcage* where drag queen Starina, aka Albert (played by Nathan Lane), embodies the values of a Barbara Bush-type of woman, so much that his performance as his gay lovers' mother completely convinces and enthralls the ultra-conservative senator Keeley (played by the grumpy Gene Hackman). It is the gender that is the performance, not the opinions and the values, as Albert fully stands for everything he says. His traditional views on women being homemakers and gays not being allowed in the military are not views one would expect from a person in the gay community, but this is what is supposed to create the comic effect. These would be

controversial statements for anyone else in the queer and progressive community, but since it's a man in a dress, he can say pretty much what he wants, and get away with it.

In *The Crying Game* the drag queen and transsexual Dil is portrayed as an emotionally unstable woman who gets either pushed around by men or rescued by them: “[D]rag in contemporary film is used as a means to revive a narrative of genteel femininity and womanhood that may no longer be credible as a truth about women, but may continue to have power as a story, a concept of women that audiences are eager to indulge and for which, perhaps, they still nostalgically yearn.” (Evans, 1998: p.203) In light of these two examples, we can see that drag can be used as a tool to perpetuate a traditional, and arguably harmful and misogynistic view on women as frail, submissive and someone who lets themselves be exploited. For me this is due to the nature of commercial Hollywood cinema, rather than the art of drag, as I have remarked earlier in this Master’s thesis, that the classical cinematic narrative often does not wish for the characters to be too complex.



Nathan Lane as Albert/Starina in *The Birdcage*.

To further support this view, Mary Kirk offers a perspective in “Kind of Drag”, where drag in Hollywood films are *both/and*, meaning that they are successful in certain aspects of being subversive and challenging the gender stereotypes, but fail miserably at other aspects. Using *The Bird Cage* (Nichols, 1996) and *Too Wong Foo, Thanks for everything! Julie Newmar* (Kidron, 1995) she shows that while there are elements of drag used to show subversion, it is ultimately cloaked in the shadow of very conservative and right wing traditions and values, women being demure and submissive being one of them.

To have a genuine representation of a drag queen requires a lot of leeway in terms of being both familiar and comfortable with gender fluidity, as a drag queen embodies both male and female attributes and can switch between the two as well as possess them simultaneously. Using drag queens as characters in cinema usually means that the drag queen fulfills the function of either male or female character, and creates a space where man as woman is even weaker than woman as woman. Why would a man choose to don feminine garbs and diminish the power he, even as a gay man, has in our patriarchal world? For instance in *Too Wong Foo, Thanks for everything! Julie Newmar*, the drag queens are in drag for most of the film, and even out of drag, they still remain somewhat in their drag persona. My first issue with that film is that no drag queen would ever get in full drag, and then drive through the scorching hot desert in a Convertible. Wigs would be flying and mascara running. It would be uncomfortable, unnecessary and a waste of makeup and time. It does have an important purpose in the film, both visually and for the story, as the queens need to fix their car and are stranded in a small town where everyone thinks they are actually women due to them still being in drag. The physical and logistical realities of drag are quite different, and here it would be best to hear straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak,

and will be discussed further in my analysis chapter when we take a closer look at *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its contestants.

The financial gain of queer film and television and marketing strategies

In “Capitalizing on Camp: Greed and the Queer Marketplace” (2006), Elisabeth Whitney claims that even though Western culture is being “queered” and capitalist economics are trying to take advantage of this, it might create a false sense of civil liberties. The mere exposure of queer characters and material is not the same as a broader representation or a higher awareness or acceptance. “That recognition and subsequent assimilation usually leads to a loss of subversive power and the recognition that once a cultural phenomenon is recognized by the mainstream as subversive, it may lose this same subversive power by default, and through assimilation.”

(Whitney, 2006: p.37) This is a statement, which I will be returning to in my analysis chapter, as I find that it perfectly sums up my concern about drag seen in the eyes of mass media and popular mass consumption through the increasingly popular TV-show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Can drag, when in the mainstream and when capitalized on, keep its edge? Is the queer community kidding themselves by thinking that the fact that an increase in queer shows and the popularization of queer culture a sign of further acceptance and social change? “Queer identity is acceptable as a product, as a performance that offers partial entry into the world of an “other”, as long as this performance remains under the unpredictable jurisdiction of heteronormativity” (ibid: p.38). Are straight audiences buying their way into the queer world as part of an effort to seem more progressive? One could argue that one follows the other, and that an increase in queer culture will lead to a broader sense of acceptance and security as it becomes more normalized. “...what

seems to be LGBT liberation is no more than smart companies realizing a new target audience” (ibid: p.41). While Whitney’s statements might tend to be a tad pessimistic, it is worth considering, as the majority of people who are not on board this fast moving train of social change are not heard. Have the mass media created a false sense of security for the queer community? Recent events like the shooting of the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando on June 12th 2016, or the recent US election of the ultra-conservative Donald Trump suggests that the US is a country divided in important political issues, LGBT-rights being one of them. Does a show like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* help or hinder the desired effect of increased exposure to queer culture? The desired effect being an increasingly progressive and understanding society with equal rights for all. This show alone does not have this kind of power, but is a big part of the queer media content in the western world these days.

The fact that RuPaul is the self-proclaimed alma mater of drag queens is also not completely unproblematic. “...like any successful market trend, the commodities that are being created or sold to LGBT communities are simultaneously constructing consumer identities in these communities.” (ibid: p.42). The running gag in the show is that RuPaul is always shamelessly plugging and advertising his new products based around his drag persona. He is selling albums, make up, shoes and, most importantly, his own brand and standing in the drag community, and thus to a large degree dictating to a big audience what drag is supposed to be like. As I will discuss further in my analysis chapter, this is problematic in as much as the show through casting and the type of challenges the contestants are given, excludes a big number of drag styles, particularly the ones who aren’t as glossy and marketable. This is where the essence of drag as many, myself included, would say, is buffed out and reduced to style rather than message. “...the mainstreaming of camp taste in contemporary culture may help articulate a queer subjectivity and

coalition politics, but it may also serve to obscure real differences and to reduce gay politics to a discourse of style.” (Whitney, 2006: p.43) With RuPaul’s extensive focus on marketability, both of himself and the contestants on the show, he is creating the space for which discussions of queer life and issues at times are muted in favor for what is perceived as fun and light hearted. Often the times in the show where some important conversations take place, it is found in the additional episode called *Untucked*, which is a shorter, behind-the-scenes-type of episode. Here, we see the contestants backstage to reflect on the week’s challenge and the critiques they have received from the judge’s panel. Often this space is more laid back and opens up for honest, less posed conversations between the queens, and important issues are discussed like people’s personal life, family life, HIV-status and other things that are important for a queer, and straight audience to participate in and gain knowledge about. However, unless you are a big fan of the show, seeing *Untucked* does not usually happen. For instance on Netflix, only the main episodes are available, and so to see *Untucked* you have to work a bit to find it. Therefore many miss out on the more important discussions facilitated by the show, and end up seeing the glossier, more marketable version.

The social position of drag queens in the gay male culture

While the concept of “drag” and “camp” seems so obviously tied with homosexuality, it is interesting that most drag queens experience a stigmatization and alienation from the male gay community. A study from the gay district in Florida aims to shed some light on this predicament. “The interaction of Drag Queens and Gay Men in Public and Private Spaces” (Berkowitz et al, 2007) is a case study involving interviews with eighteen Drag Queens as well as extensive on-site

observation at dance clubs, gay bars and other establishments that feature drag as performance. Although their findings turned out to be more complex than initially expected, there was a consensus concerning a few aspects of how drag queens were perceived by the larger mainstream gay community. “Drag Queens comprise a community that is not only labeled as deviant as the mainstream society, but is also separated from the stigmatized groups of non-cross-dressing gay men and heterosexual transvestites.” (Berkowitz et al, 2007: p.13).

As the article also points out, it seems odd that a group such as homosexual men who have themselves been subject to discrimination and stigmatization would transfer this to a sub group in their own community. Some gay men see drag queens as perpetuating what they consider negative stereotypes about gay men, such as excessive feminine appearance, body language and behavior. In order to appear more “normal”, they wish to make a point to distance themselves from men who do drag. The researchers looked at the physical and verbal interaction between the gay male audience and the drag performers, and found some interesting distinctions in behavior in terms of spatial context. They divided the venues and seriousness of the acts into three main parts: the amateur clubs, the dance clubs and the professional drag shows. The amateur clubs revealed a very close and interactive situation between drag queens and gay patrons, but it was interaction that was interpreted by the observer as vulgar and demeaning for the performers. “The performance and audience’s interactions were similar to those of an exotic dance club with women dancers entertaining straight men.” (ibid: p.21).

The dance clubs had a different set up, as the drag performers were dancing on tall platforms above the crowd, and so had very little direct interaction. Here both performers and guests did not seem to be very interested in each other, and mainly sticking to their own group.

At the professional drag show there was a more formal tone, and it was clear that this was a performance and a show going on. When the audiences were tipping the performers, which is an established part of drag culture, "...they seemed to be tokens of respect and appreciation" (ibid: p.23) rather than the associations one got to strip clubs in the amateur clubs where they would tuck the bills in their pants or skirts, or make them bite the money to earn it. It seemed that the more professional your drag persona and performance was, the more respect and appreciation you got from the audience. Being in drag and on stage is one thing, but the men also experienced that drag limited them in other areas of their lives even out of drag. Many complained that it was very difficult for them to get a lover or romantic partner, for once they realized that they did drag, they would no longer take them seriously, and would be uninterested. One performer stated, "they think of me as a freak, a slut or a queen" (ibid: p.27). Several said that it seemed difficult for men to separate the person from the character they were on stage.

As the article also states, all this research was done in a part of Florida that had a strong gay scene, and acted as a sort of "safe haven for gays and drag queens alike" (ibid: p.28), and therefore might not be completely representative for all drag queens. Yet as I will argue later in this thesis, this exact issue is a recurrent topic in all seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. While the eighteen drag queens in the study all varied in age, ethnicity and education, the contestants in *RuPaul's Drag Race* are from many different places in the states, creating a larger degree of geographical representation.

I find these finds very interesting and reflect on the duality of belonging and ostracizing gay men who are drag queens have to deal with. On one hand, as we see in this study and that comments from the contestants of *RuPaul's Drag Race* support, there are very few men who want to have a

romantic relationship with someone who is a drag queen for a living. Some even feel like drag queens are hindering the gay community becoming more accepted in society because they are so flamboyant and excessive, and many gay people just want to be perceived as ordinary, everyday people. The problem here lays in the fact that not even the gay community is able to separate between the performer and the person. Yet, as discussed earlier in this chapter, when someone other than a gay man wishes to partake in the art of drag queens, like a straight or lesbian woman, they are met with hostility from the male gay community. So it seems that the role of a drag queen is a complex one, as the gay community both holds them close to their heart, but still has them at arms length simultaneously. They are loved and despised, heckled and adored. Being a drag queen is no easy task, and those who do it for a living, as the contestants in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, are doing it because they love it, and are an extension of their own personalities and artistic expressions.

Chapter 2: Reality TV as a genre

Reality TV is a relatively new genre within television, yet has roots in older, more established genres, such as documentary films. One could even argue that the very first films ever shown were a sign of what would come 100 years later. It was quite common to stage real people in contrived situations and just let them react to what was happening around them or film everyday life of factory workers or busy streets (Fetveit, 2002: p. 14). Albeit a very different way of viewing these scenarios, watching ordinary people on screen has been around for years. One of the main characteristics, and perhaps the most interesting one to discuss academically, is the concept of “real” in the genre. While I will not go in depth on this discussion, it is an important aspect of the very nature of reality television as a genre. The term “reality TV” seems to promise that something that is at least partly real is what we are seeing, and has many links and similarities to documentary filmmaking. While we may not be aware of all that is happening behind the scenes, “much of our engagement with such texts paradoxically hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains “fictional” elements” (Murray and Ouellette, 2009: p.7).

Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs offers John Corners following definition of the genre:

“[R]eality television is best viewed as part of television’s ‘post-documentary context’, a contradictory cultural environment where viewers, participants and producers are less invested in absolute truth and representational ethics, and more interested in the space that exists between

reality and fiction, in which new levels of representational play and reflexivity are visualized” (Wood and Skeggs, 2011: p. 6).

That reality television is somewhat scripted, and that producers are heavily involved with the narrative is the worst kept secret in show business. Yet somehow, audiences accept all the obvious construction of events, and feast on this half-truth that they are being fed. Audiences are not stupid; they know what’s going on. That is part of the contract between creator and spectator. We pretend it’s real, we all know it’s not, and we expect drama, fighting and conspiring. Over time, the reality show’s narrative and editing have become more sophisticated, and we as an audience have grown with the genre, expecting and accepting certain things. Corner’s definition fits well with this, as it seems that what is actually “true events” is not as important as how entertaining the show is.

Ouellette and Murray define reality TV as “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real.” (2009: p.3). With the massive appeal to TV audiences, reality television is a genre that has quickly developed its own set of style, pacing and expectations. The earliest example in North America could arguably be *An American Family* from 1973. We followed the Loud family in their daily lives, with little to no interference in situations and conflicts. The show would prove dramatic enough without interference, as the marriage ended and the son came out as a homosexual on camera. One can see references to the “cinema verite” movement within documentaries, where the idea is to be a fly on the wall, simply observing and not directing (ibid: p.4). This is a difficult, if not impossible, task because there is directing in every decision the filmmaker makes. And the subject of the film/TV show is always aware of the

presence of a watchful eye; the camera. One could argue that the modern reality wave started with MTV's *The Real World* from 1992 (Huff, 2006: p.11). The show introduced formal tools such as the confessional booth, and putting conflicting personalities in an apartment together and watching the drama unfold. The show was one of the first to create an artificial, contrived world where non-actors were the participants, and there was no script, per se. These kinds of shows also have a much lower budget, and can be shot in a smaller time frame, which makes the profit even greater if the show is a hit, but not as much of a risk for television network if the show were to flop. This has proved to be a successful model for other reality TV shows such as *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000) and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000).

Survivor (CBS, 2000) was the show to really catapulted the reality wave into motion in the early 2000's, adding the contest aspect to the show, and has since been duplicated and imitated countless times (Huff, 2006: p. 11). While the genre gained widespread popularity in the early 2000's, the wave died down a bit in 2005, and we saw the shift from network to cable television and shows catered to more niche audiences (Huff, 2006: p. 28). This could be true for *RuPaul's Drag Race* as well: it aired on Logo TV, a cable network with LGBT themed shows. It has since grown and is now showing on other channels as well, and is available on the popular online streaming site Netflix. One could argue that the shift from network to cable enabled the show to actually be produced and gain a following that made it possible to move to another network.

When a show doesn't have the luxury of having a script and actors portraying characters, finding the right participants becomes crucial to the show's success. Casting therefore becomes highly significant in the preproduction of a show. There are certain personality types that seem to be present in most of such casts; someone who has had a lot of hardships in life and therefore is very

aggressive and protective, someone who is the mediator, someone who is exposed to a different aspect of life by appearing on the show, the villain, the sweetheart, etc. (Huff, 2006: p.34). The cast needs diversity to fuel conflict as well as form unexpected friendships. The process of casting can involve questions to figure out what kind of energy the person would bring to the table if selected. For *Survivor* (CBS, 2000) one of the questions being asked in the application was “What would be the craziest, wildest thing you would do for a million dollars?” (Huff, 2006: p.35). I imagine that other shows have similar questions they ask in preliminary rounds, just to weed out those who have too boring answers, as well as those with too outrageous answers. Each show has a desire for different levels of conflict, and makes an attempt to cast accordingly. But when it comes down to shooting, they can’t control the actions of the contestants, and that’s why proper research and preparation is crucial to reality television. How casting plays a large part in more ways than one in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* will be further discussed in the analysis chapter.

One of the reasons reality television gets a bad rap, and is often labeled as trash-TV, could be its constructed, and at times excessive, drama. The producers and editors often blow up minor disputes and make it look like it’s a big fight. Editing plays a big part in how this is constructed. Reality TV draws from both documentary and fictional episodic serial shows. They have a very playful montage, and create a complex narrative through the use of flashbacks, flash-forwards, spliced in interviews and multiple vantage points. All these elements are meant to have the spectator try and guess what comes next. They create a situation where there could be multiple outcomes, often hinted before commercial break, and the viewer has time to ponder and guess what will happen. More often than not, the big drama one expected isn’t as big of a deal as it is laid up to be, but with the use of music, crosscutting, and commentary, they create an added dramatic effect, amplifying the actual conflict (Keating, 2013).

As a producer of a television show, regardless of genre, you want your viewers to be loyal, meaning that they not only keep watching in spite of commercial breaks, but also over the season, and perhaps coming seasons. When creating a fictional TV-show, it is possible to have this in mind when writing the script. You have to manage both the desire for new information with the need for redundant background information. It has to be subtle, so that the faithful viewers of the show are not bored or irritated with being bombarded with recaps and information they know very well already, and so that new viewers can be filled in enough so they can follow the story without too many questions. By starting an episode with a brief recap, a “previously on” montage, it helps viewers come up to speed, and keep the increasingly complex narrative developing (Huff, 2006).

All these issues apply to reality TV as well, the difference being that you don't have a script that dictates the characters and their behavior, making it more challenging to create a narrative that holds on to the spectators loyalty. Another issue you have with reality TV is that usually, the cast changes every season, and contestants are voted off the show or told to leave due to an unsatisfactory performance in a challenge. So the contestant that have the most fans among the viewers, or the one who creates the most drama and action, could leave the show, thus risking the loss of an extensive part of the viewership. This is where producers step in, and suggest that certain people should be given a second chance and be reintroduced as contestants in the show. This is never publicly admitted, and certainly not on the show itself, but is a known fact. It is vital to the shows survival that it has entertaining participants, and it makes it easier to hang on to viewers for longer (Huff, 2006). This fact also makes it increasingly important to have interesting and dynamic people on the judges' panel or as hosts.

Subgenres

Since the beginning, reality television has exploded in terms of viewership and format. There are so many types of reality shows; there can be shows about anything imaginable. There are however, categories one could place them in. Murray and Ouellette (2009, p.5) divides them into the following subgenres:

- The Game Doc: a show where there are challenges and competitions to partake in, as well as the main goal of the show is who wins the grand prize at the end. (*Survivor, Project Runway, America's Next Top Model*)
- The dating program: often one man or woman with several suitors where the main object of the show is to get married/find a life partner. (*The Bachelor, Joe Millionaire*)
- The makeover program: from drab to fab, learning how to dress, behave and just be better at life. (*Queer Eye For The Straight Guy, What Not To Wear*)
- The docu-soap: so-called real events happening within a group of friends, family or colleagues and the drama that unfolds when life takes them different places. (*The Real World, Laguna Beach*)
- Talent contests: open calls of auditions are held, with the goal to select the most talented person within the given area. (*American Idol, Dancing With The Stars*)
- Court shows: real people with real conflict appear in front of a judge to help them make a decision about who is right and wrong. (*Judge Judy, Court TV*)
- Reality sitcoms: similar to docu-soaps in that they document people's everyday lives, but casting and editing is done with the thought of it being a funny, humorous show. (*The Simple Life, The Osbourne's*)

- Celebrity variations: often has-been celebrities in the cast who try and get a second chance at fame through various versions of established shows. (*Surreal Life, Celebrity Boxing*)
- Charity programs: families and people who are down on their luck and often have had tragedy in their lives get a new house or car. These shows are often tear jerkers. (*Extreme Makeover; Home Addition, Pimp My Ride*)
- Lifestyle games: experts teach people with life style problems how to manage better. For instance how to lose weight or raise your kids. (*Supernanny, The Biggest Loser*)
- Micro surveillance and amateur investigations: For instance checking someone's room without them being there, and based on what they find, decide if they want to go on a date. (*Room Raiders*)
- Spoofs and satire: A play on established tropes within the genre are used to make fun of and parody the genre. Sometimes all of the contestants are in on the joke, sometimes only a few. (*The Assistant, The Joe Schmo Show*)

Reality television as social experiments

Arild Fetveit compares shows like *Big Brother* to that of nature shows. There is also an added contrived situation for the photographers to get the best footage in the wild, why not use this technique on human beings (Fetveit, 2002, p.20)? He separates between reality television and experimental television. Reality television can be described as depicting actual events unfolding, such as *Cops*, things that would have happened regardless of the presence of the camera. Experimental television on the other hand, is more of a sociological experiment, where you have

an extensive casting process and the setting bordering on a social laboratory (ibid). What the two have in common is the pleasure the spectator has to be a voyeur.

This part of the chapter explores the structure and narrative of the competitive reality shows *America's Next Top Model* (2003) and *Project Runway* (2004). Later I will look at how *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009) is in some ways a parody of these shows and their structure, in other ways uses it to normalize a lifestyle and artistic expression that most people might not be familiar with and have certain prejudices against. By looking at the structure and narrative of *America's Next Top Model*, as well as the judges' roles in the show, especially head judge and creator and producer of the show, Tyra Banks, we can see how *RuPaul's Drag Race* plays with genre conventions and media perception. They poke similar fun at *Project Runway*, and almost copying the role of mentor that Tim Gunn has. The twist with *RuPaul's Drag Race* is that RuPaul Charles embodies both these roles, both benevolent mentor while out of drag, and critical judge in drag. This is a unique situation that is rarely seen in other reality shows, and can be more flawlessly executed by the fact that RuPaul is a drag queen with both a male and female persona.

Narrative structure of *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*

The first episode of *America's Next Top Model* aired on the 20th of May, 2003 and is currently in its 22nd season. It is shown on an international scale. Up to 170 countries have shown the show on TV. It has sold the concept to many countries that make their own version of it, while keeping the overall style and structure of the original. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is mainly based on the

structure of this show, and I therefore find it prudent briefly to break down a typical episode of *America's Next Top Model*. The structure of an average episode is made up by a mini-challenge, a main challenge, a judge's panel, and an elimination of one contestant. In addition to the more formal parts of the episode, there is also footage of the contestants interacting with each other as well as "confessing" their true feelings and opinions in a private room with a camera.

While *Project Runway* has a similar narrative structure as *Top Model*, it differs as most of the screen time is showing the contestants working on the garment they will present for the challenge. *Top Model* might offer more guidance and teaching the models something that they should incorporate in the main challenge, while in *Project Runway* and other reality contest shows, the participants are expected to already be skillful and be able to adapt to the challenges and curveballs being thrown at them. In either show, however, the point is to perform a task to a judge's panel's satisfaction.

While there have been quite a few studies about reality shows where either the audience or the contestants themselves eliminate participants each week, there has not been that much on shows where this task is decided by a judge's panel. Some very successful shows, however, are narratively constructed in this manner: *Top Model*, *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, to name a few. This is the model used by *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and so it seems fit to take a closer look at some of these shows. The judge's panels on all of the mentioned shows are constructed as having two or three regular judges, one being the main host of the show and the one with the most power, and two or three guest judges each week. The judges are usually people who are known in the industry of which each show is about, but not necessarily well known to the general public. With different guest judges each week, there are chances of having celebrity guest judges, which all the

mentioned shows do. Usually the guest judge is involved in the challenge of the week, and is an integrated part of the episode.

I would argue that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a hybrid of the game doc category and the satire category, using the subgenres devised by Murray and Ouellette (2009: p.5). While the structure and narrative of the show is very close to that of *Project Runway* or *America's Next Top Model*, there are elements in the show that I identify as satirical. There are clear references to other shows, either spoken or unspoken, and always a twist on things, either to make it more racy and sexualized or to make it more camp and funny. "The most sophisticated of this strand of faux reality programming fuse the boundaries of comedy, performance, and nonfiction in ways that potentially disrupts the convention of reality TV, as well as the conventions of gender and other identities." (Murray and Ouellette, 2009: p.5) Spoof reality shows like *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003) is the equivalent to *This is...Spinal Tap* (Reiner, 1984) in the "mockumentary" genre. Both show and film are camouflaged as a genre they are not, it's pretending to be reality/documentary, but is mocking the genre instead. The show was scripted and has a cast of professional actors, but was meant to look like it was a reality show, with people talking in confessional segments and breaking the fourth wall by looking into the camera. Other types of satirical shows can be that of *The Assistant* (2004, MTV) where comedian Andy Dick has to choose an assistant. The contestants are real, they think they're part of an actual, straight forward reality show, but Andy Dick is being an outrageous character, an exaggeration of himself, asking the contestants to do things his actual assistant would never do, to really play with the genre and also utterly confuse and ridicule the contestants. While *RuPaul's Drag Race* is neither fully scripted with actors pretending to be a real show, nor have only parts of the cast in the know about what's really going on, I would put it in that category nevertheless. Like the art of drag as discussed in the

Queer Theory chapter, having cultural references and making fun of well-known people are cornerstones in that field. This has a dual effect of respect and ridicule; they are using tropes that most people know and can relate to, yet mocking it, lovingly, and with a twinkle in their eye. This is shown best by the dual roles of RuPaul Charles, who serves as both mentor and head judge with two different personas, and will be further investigated in the analysis chapter.

While the term parody is prudent in the analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Patton and Snyder-Yuly offers a different view on this kind of reality format. By using the concept of carnival, mainly Mikhail Bakhtin's version, they explore how "...the judges provide a means of temporary power, where they would normally be marginalized or have less power in general society" (2012: p.364). They use *America's Next Top Model* as an example for analysis, but the same terms and discussion can be applied to *RuPaul's Drag Race* in my opinion. The reason they went with Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque is that they both challenge and reinforce hegemony all at once. "Carnival is an opportunity for voice: having voice, sharing voice, and using voice often in a humorous way so as not to stir up controversy or condemnation." (Patton and Snyder-Yuly, 2012: p.367). This is meant to have a releasing effect on society, and reality television can be a vessel for such an effect. Participants in reality TV might display behavior that would not be accepted in normal situations, and through reality we can both judge and enjoy their behavior from a safe distance. Especially those who are marginalized in society have a unique chance of gaining a voice that reaches very broadly, for good or bad. However, with the insurgence of technology and consumer culture, the carnivalesque has lost its transgressive nature, and become more "entertainment rather than to challenge societal hierarchies" (Patton and Snyder-Yuly, 2012: p.368). This points back to Whitney's theory that when something progressive enters the mainstream, it loses its edge (Whitney, 2006: p.37). This will be discussed further in the

analysis part of the thesis, in terms of how drag gains an audience but in turn perhaps sacrifices some aspects of the drag culture or political impact when being presented in *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

CHAPTER 3: Analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race*

In the 1990's RuPaul Charles ruled the catwalk and airwaves with his hit song "Supermodel". He was a talk show host, having famous and non-famous guests on. The highlight could be said to have been when the gay icon Cher was a guest. He also had roles in several films and television shows. After a while, the spotlight on RuPaul faded. Yet now, in the 2010's, his time seems to have come again. With the reality contest show *RuPaul's Drag Race* he has gotten millions of viewers worldwide and it has currently resulted in 8 seasons, and a few spin-offs, such as *Drag U* and *Drag my Dinner*, as well as two seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*. RuPaul's "girls" seem to be taking America and the world by storm. And the wind is directing the storm onto Europe: Germany and Great Britain is currently rumored to have German and British version of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in development. Why is this? Why now? This chapter aims to suggest an answer.

We've seen an insurgence of gay and queer lifestyles in heteronormative settings, thus having perhaps demystified, yet oversimplified the gay lifestyle and identity. Especially gay men are a big part of mainstream media narratives these days. It perhaps started with *Will & Grace*, and has evolved to *Modern Family* (Levitan and Lloyd, 2009), *The New Normal* (Murphy, 2012), *Girls* (Dunham, 2012), and other hit shows. Neil Patrick Harris is a rare example of an actor who is openly gay in his personal life and with the press, but is cast as a heterosexual womanizer. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was another show that established the current idea of the homosexual style maven, and showed us how gay men walk a tight rope between campy and vulgar, yet more knowledgeable about the correct style, etiquette and cuisine than their heterosexual counterparts. In addition, they are reduced to very one-dimensional characters, having little to no

depth and are perceived as a fun gay best friend type. “QEFTSG (Queer Eye For The Straight Guy) is nothing more than an acceptable and fluffy view of gay men, sort of like asexual butterflies.” (Whitney, 2006: p.44). So even though it was a hit show, whether or not it has done the gay community any favors in terms of how they are portrayed in the media, is questionable. Regardless, the number of shows with queer characters has increased in recent years.

RuPaul has been smart in his choice of vessel to reemerge to mainstream media, both in terms of timing and form. After the success of reality contest shows such as *America's next Top Model*, *Project Runway* and *The X-factor*, RuPaul and the show's producers over at Logo TV, have cleverly made a show using established tropes from the three before mentioned shows. The similarities of how the show is constructed is by no means a new thing; there is a plethora of reality contest shows that used the same formula, as discussed in the Reality TV chapter. However, where *RuPaul's Drag Race* goes more to the direction of meta-reality is in the parodies of these shows, and its hosts. Tyra Banks is an easy target and is without a doubt an inspiration to RuPaul's version of a host, mentor and judge. The joke is basically to always make the moment about them, even though they are not actually participants in the competition. They have already won, seeing as they hold all the power.

Like drag on the stage, this mimicking of established artists, TV-shows and their hosts is well in tradition of the classic drag mentality. The only difference being that RuPaul has managed to get it on the screen and in to American living rooms. They have managed to make a show that has the potential for a vast audience; people who like drag queens, people who enjoy cattiness and drama, people who like talent competitions, and just plain old comedy.

To break down the course of an episode: There are a number of contestants, this varies from season to season but is usually around ten. They represent a lot of different types of drag, yet most of them are glamour drag queens with heavy focus on looking “fierce”. Fierce is a term meaning fabulous and talented, and is used constantly in the show and between drag queens. There is a mini challenge, and the winner of this gets an advantage in the main challenge. Often the girls have to work in teams, and this spawns a lot of tension and drama. We mainly see the contestants in the workroom, preparing for challenges and being out, or half in, drag. We also see clips of interviews with each contestant, then completely out of drag. We only see the participants in full drag on stage and in the “Interior Illusions Lounge” where they wait as the judges deliberate this week’s performance and catwalk challenge. It also in this room that has the most arguments and drama, which can be viewed in a companion episode called *Untucked!* The name is referring to the fact that these men tuck and tape their genitals as to make them seem non existing and creating the illusion of a vagina, untucked therefore alludes that this is where they “let it all hang out”, in lack of a better phrase, and that we see what the contestants really think about each other, the judges and the challenges they just undertook. The judges panel consists of RuPaul, Santino Rice, designer and former contestant of *Project Runway*, and Michelle Visage, artist and RuPaul’s best friend. This changes a bit each season, but Visage and RuPaul always seem to be present. In addition there are one to three guest judges, including the likes of Kelly Osbourne, legendary dress designer Bob Mackie, singer LaToya Jackson and actress Debbie Reynolds, to name a few. This is very similar to the judge’s panels in *America’s Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*, the difference being that in those shows, the decision-making is made out to seem democratic, and that they all have to agree. In *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, RuPaul makes it perfectly clear that the judges only contribute with their opinions, but the choice is ultimately solely RuPaul’s. He emphasizes this by demanding silence when she has made a

decision. There is announced a winner, and the bottom two contestants have to “Lip-synch for their life”, engaging in a classical drag queen performance of performing and lip-synching the words to a popular song. Whoever does the best can stay; the other must leave the competition.

The Art of Drag

Bringing drag into a mainstream arena, such as television, is a challenge. My argument is that while you gain wider exposure for an art form not known to many outside that community, you have to sacrifice some of its authenticity and edge to make it palatable and relatable to a mainstream audience. This chapter will explore how the art of drag is portrayed in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and how some forms of drag are excluded from this important platform. As discussed earlier in the chapter on queer theory, drag is a multifaceted art form. There are different styles and expressions, and it cannot be described as one thing. In the U.S. drag is very regional and provincial, and has different styles in different places in the country. A drag queen from New York might have a very different look, body language and skill set than one from Atlanta. Even within the same local community there are considerable variations. Drag queens are first and foremost performers, and their performance differs greatly as with any other performer. Some do stand-up comedy, some do dance routines, others sing, but the bread and butter of drag performance is lip-synching. One could argue that mouthing the words to a well-known song while moving around on stage doesn’t require much talent, but it is here the artistry comes in. It takes a great deal of charm and showmanship to make that entertaining time after time. The best drag queens master this and keep the audience entertained and excited. Those who do not are booed off stage. The drag scene can be unforgiving and competitive, and there is little room for

people without some sort of talent. Talent is a key factor for making it all the way to the top on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

RuPaul's Drag Race is one of very few shows on television right now that features authentic drag queens. Since the show is fully devoted to this art form, it has immense power in dictating what drag is publicly viewed as. For many of the show's viewers, this is their first encounter with drag, and so their opinion of what drag is or should be will be formed by the decisions the show makes and the rhetoric of its participants. These decisions include casting, challenges and what the judges have to say about the contestants. The show also tries to involve a bit of gay history, which is commendable, but also very biased to the male gay side of historic events like the Stonewall Riots. As my analysis will show, there are several other types of drag that do not get a turn in the spotlight on this show, because they are looking for a certain type of drag queen.

Drag queens: Political subversive or female impersonators?

Herein lies the crux, there's a distinctive difference between the two: One challenges the heteronormative and one upholds and celebrates it. Within the context of the show, it seems that both drag queen and female impersonator are two worlds that go relatively hand in hand. They all put on make up to feminize their face, and have assigned female outfits or accessories, and most have wigs and padding to make a womanly shape for their body. The conflict starts when an artist goes veers too far into one of the opposing worlds. When a queen is only thinking about how she visually can resemble and act like a real woman, with little skill as a performer, they will receive criticism from the other queens. The same goes for when a queen is too conceptual and more of a

gender bender queen. What kind of queen you prefer is to each his own. For me, and for the kind of drag that I am writing about in this thesis, gender-bending queens are far more true to what I feel is real drag. In the show, however, these are the queens that get the most critiques from their fellow contestants. Often the gender bending queens have a thought behind their look, and have a broader understanding of the different types of drag. The female impersonators are usually more interested in legitimizing their style of drag as the right way to do it, and have little patience for an “unpolished” queen, as we will see examples of later in this chapter. This is an issue where casting and editing plays a big part as well. Most of the contestants throughout the seasons have been what I would classify has more towards the female impersonator side of drag. They all look polished and most of them quite beautiful, and there has never been a queen with full body hair or a natural beard. Once a contestant named Milk came on stage in drag and a goatee, but the other contestants didn’t get the look. A fellow contestant, and ultimate winner, comedian Bianca del Rio commented: ”Really, queen? I spent all fucking morning shaving mine off.” (Season 6, episode 2, 24:02 minutes). The judges, however, applauded taking a risk and the nerve to make a statement. Milk was nevertheless advised not to do such a look again, but was rather urged to show a more feminine and glamorous look.

Referencing drag culture

There’s an interesting balance between female beauty and drag: A queen is praised for being convincingly beautiful, yet criticized if there is suspicion of the person wanting to be transgendered, or having too much plastic surgery to look like a woman. Some girls think that undergoing plastic surgery is like cheating, being unfair to other contestants who have

perfected the art and skill of makeup and body transformation without the use of cosmetic surgery. On this show you get penalized and rewarded at the same time for being beautiful and "passable", as in someone might mistake you for an actual biological woman. In a similar way you get both rewarded and penalized if you are more avant-garde and draw from more obscure references. I want to have a closer look at some of the drag queens on the show that are representative of the more avant-garde side of drag.

One example of someone who draws from the avant-garde art scene is Mimi Imfurst from season 3. On the second *Untucked* episode of that season, the girls talk about what drag should be. They are in drag, sitting in the lounge waiting for their critiques from the judges and the definition of drag is brought up. Mimi says that she does not consider herself a female impersonator. Mariah Balenciaga says that a queen should always be polished, as in look the right way, look elegant and put together, but Mimi disagrees. She is a New York queen and says that it's difficult to be polished when you're sharing a tiny dressing room with ten other queens. She says she draws inspirations from someone like Leigh Bowery, who was a performance artist in the 1980s and 90s with crazy costumes. This is a reference RuPaul and the judges will get, but many of the other younger contestants had not even heard about. The other contestants then accuse Mimi of not being professional enough and not being skillful enough to put on "proper" drag make up. All the while, they are missing Mimi's point, which is that there has to be room for different styles of drag in a drag queen competition. She feels attacked after the conversation and that she is alone in her style. They bring up the critique Mimi got the last episode from the judges where they applauded her for being camp, but asked if she could bring glamour and beauty to the runway look. Shangela, another contestant, asks her if she took that to heart, seeing as she this episode went full Leigh Bowery and avant-garde. The other contestants all congratulate each other on

how good they look, as they have pretty much the same sense of aesthetics. Mimi says she strives for creativity, while the others strive for glamour and beauty. She is feeling left out due to the lack of appreciation for her style of drag.

Jinkx Monsoon, though ultimately the winner of season 4, was teased mercilessly for her old school drag and lack of glamorous looks by some other contestants and some judges. She would reference people like Little Edie, who was Jackie Kennedy's cousin and made famous by the documentary *Grey Gardens* (Measles, 1975), and Liza Minnelli, as well as an aesthetic more from the 1930s, 40s and 50s. This is part of a great drag tradition, but was not appreciated by most of the younger contestants who were not familiar with the films and styles Jinkx was channeling. Again it was the pageant queens, like Roxy Andrews, who were her biggest critics.



Jinkx Monsoon as Little Edie.

Season 4-queen and ultimate winner, Sharon Needles, was a queen with outrageous looks and very different view of drag than many of the other contestants. Her style was very inspired by Goth and ghouls. One of her catch phrases were “When in doubt, freak them out”, telling us that her sense of style was not very conventional. On the first challenge, the contestant’s runway look was to be inspired by post apocalypse, and Sharon came out looking like a zombie, having fake blood coming out of her mouth. She won the challenge. Since she did her style so well, most of the contestants learned to respect her, but she had an ongoing feud with another queen on the show, Phi Phi O’Hara from Texas whose style was more showgirl and conventional beauty. While they ultimately ended up in the finale together, they still kept disrespecting each other’s style of drag. They had many fights during the course of the season, but their most notorious spat was in episode 4 when the two went at each other’s throats in the workroom. While getting into drag, they started fighting and mainly insulting each other’s style of drag. Phi Phi compared Sharon’s outfits with cheap Halloween costumes, while Sharon called Phi Phi a tired old showgirl. Sharon pointed out that she considered herself the future of drag, while Phi Phi’s style was relevant 20 years ago. When people have personal differences, it’s very easy to attack each other’s sense of style and drag.



Sharon Needles in zombie-drag.

Another queen who had to face criticism for her drag is Milan from season 4. Milan was a queen from New York, with a musical theater background. There were a number of times during the season where she got comments from both the judges and the other contestants about her drag not being “draggy” enough. While being asked about the drag scene in New York, the other contestants find it problematic that Milan doesn’t identify as one type of drag: “I’m a floater, my style sort of bounces around. I don’t want to be pigeon hold as just a “drag queen”. I think it’s important for people to see that there’s an artist on the stage” (season 4, episode 6, 20:40 minutes). With Milan’s theatrical background, she aims to be a performer first and drag queen second. For many of the other girls, drag *is* the performance and finds it difficult to understand Milan’s style. When Milan tells the girls she likes to teeter totter in the boy world, Willam proclaims that “that only works if you’re super feminine”, implying that Milan is not (Season 4, episode 6, 02:47). In the series, the balance between the masculine and the feminine is very fine, as Milan discovers when she gets a harsh critique

from the judges after dressing up as the female artist and singer Janelle Monae. Trying to be true to Monae's style and paying homage to her, Milan puts on a suit, but is told that it's not tailored or feminine enough. She also gets criticized for being too flat chested.

Milk might be the one performer with the most outlandish looks throughout all the seasons of the show. As a contestant on season 6, her runway looks included a big Pinocchio nose, a beard, and faking pregnancy. Milk, being a tall and quite muscular, handsome man out of drag, represented a form of drag that was a bit more out there. Many of the prettier queens did not understand her drag at all, and felt she did not belong in the competition. Fellow competitor Darienne Lake said "When it comes to Milk's fashion: I don't get it. It's like we're playing major league baseball and she's playing checkers. We're not in the same game here." (Season 6, episode 5, 01:25 minutes) The judges appreciated Milk's crazy styles, but she was urged to give them a conventional drag glamour look, and the one time she did, she was eliminated.



Milk on stage with a facial hair.

These situations are all examples of a big divide in the debate of what drag is: On one side there are those who feel like that the closer you resemble a woman, the more successful your drag is. On the other side there are those who feel that the whole point of drag is the gender confusion that comes when you have elements from both or no genders in your drag. The lack of appreciation or recognition for cultural references happens a lot throughout seasons: Jinxx Monsoon as Little Edie in the Snatch Game, Sharon Needles' references to old horror films and Goth culture, contestant Gia Gunn not knowing what a Tony-award is. There are a few staple references that every queen "should" know, but many don't. This also applies to queens from Puerto Rico who have their own set of references that are rendered obsolete in this competition, because American audiences won't understand them. It seems though, that the contemporary cultural references trump the ones of the past. However, the queens who reference gay icons of the past successfully gain more respect and are viewed as more educated and cerebral. Younger queens who don't appreciate those references misunderstand them and feel they are way off and not doing "proper drag".

Drag queen or transgender woman?

While it might be problematic that the show has a monopoly of what is considered drag, it also allows real people to talk about their personal experience with drag as an art form and gender expression. Most of the contestants in each season talk about how they got into drag and how it affects their life. They get to address the issues that most drag queens face, such as whether or not they actually want to be women, how other gay men view them, how they are treated by people

on the streets or in clubs. These questions often come up in the episodes of each season when the challenge is to make over someone in drag who is outside of the drag world. Usually its very masculine men, because then the challenge of using makeup to make a face more feminine becomes even greater. These people, because they are often not part of the gay community, and certainly not that familiar with drag queens, creates a space where some of them ask questions that viewers who are less informed may have as well. In season 4 episode 10, the challenge was to make some very masculine men, who where all dads, into drag queens. The challenge was called D.I.L.F.s (Dads I'd Like to Frock). One of the dads said that being on the show opened his eyes:

“Coming here, I was expecting these guys to be overbearing, and when I talked to Chad and he said; I'm just a performer. I go to work, this is how I make my money, and I may be gay, but I like being a man. It really blew my mind, because I always thought that these guys were 100 % (always in drag). That blew my mind to learn that there's also an entertainment side to this.” (Season 4, episode 10, 12:00 minutes).

Another instance was in season 1, when the queens are given the challenge to make over some very masculine, tough women to become their “Drag Daughters”, which means that they should have a family resemblance and look like drag queens. Bebe Zahara's "drag-daughter" asks if she has ever been mistaken for a woman. Bebe says that it happens in the clubs all the time: “I do not live my life as a woman, it's not my lifestyle. I have just developed a character and that's the fine line people need to realize. [It is] such a misconception.” (Season 1, episode 5, 23:18 min). Bebe makes a point of saying that he does not want to be a woman, and that this is a common mistake people make when thinking about drag. I have found that this is true for most of

the contestants on the show, as well as drag queens I have met and talked to. Though many are feminine gay men, they are happy to be men: “I always tell people that drag artists are more men than women. Look at what a drag artist has to go through; you need to have a lot of courage, a lot of personality, a lot of guts to be able to go out there, because you’re going to get criticism from everybody.” Bebe Sahara (Season 1, episode 7, 37:12 min). There are a few examples in the course of the show where contestants have “come out” as transgender either on the show or after, but this is viewed as “cheating” because so much of drag is creating an illusion with makeup, undergarments and clothing, and to have cosmetic surgery and be on female hormones is then giving you an unfair advantage in the competition, because the judges usually favor and compliment those who are passable as beautiful women.

This also plays into a larger discussion about why gender is so rigid in its divide and categorization. Should it matter whether or not someone identifies as male or female? Or neither or both? As Judith Butler talks about in “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity”, the presentation of gender is always a social construction and therefore being a drag queen is theoretically not so different from the gender we all perform every day (Butler, 1990). One could even say that a drag performer is a truer representation of gender, because they highlight the constructed dichotomy between male and female aesthetic representation. By blurring the lines between the two, you also bring attention to what makes sense or not, from a heteronormative viewpoint. So a drag queen donning feminine garbs but sporting a full beard or body hair will disturb the given way of presenting male or female, but a drag queen trying to look as much as traditional woman as possible will be easier to accept as it doesn't challenge the ideas we have about gender roles, oddly enough. The trouble comes when it's neither nor, and either or. It seems like the kind of drag discombobulating gender roles aren't really represented as much

in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the kind of drag reinforcing gender stereotypes are more visible, even if they are somewhat problematized. As this show serves as the first encounter with drag for many, it might be a wise move to ease into the art and underworld of drag, yet it does seem to support my theory about the fact that the popularization of drag, while it gains a wider audience, loses some of its politics and subversiveness, which is for some, the very point of drag.

Family issues

Being different can often alienate you from friends or family, and being gay and a drag queen is sometimes too much for some family members. This is a recurring topic on the show. Many contestants tell heart-breaking stories about how they have been treated by their family after they have come out to them, and how difficult it is to have someone from what is supposed to be your support system rejects you for doing something you love. One example is Laganja Estranja from season 6. She's a young and insecure queen who overcompensates for her insecurities with over the top and at times obnoxious behavior. Some of her insecurities comes from the fact that the family that has always supported her are not understanding her choice to do drag and thinks she's making the wrong decisions in life. On an episode of *Untucked*, she breaks down and shares her story. "I think that drag scares them. I think that they're terrified that I'm going to be made into something that I'm not or that people won't love me because of this" (Season 6, *Untucked* episode 1, 18:00). One of the older and more seasoned queens, New York club kid Vivacious, weighs in on Laganja's situation; "I think every queen has been through that to some extent. It's kind of painful because you have an art that you know you're good at, and the core of your being, which is your family, does not approve of what you do. So it's hurtful." (Season

6, Untucked episode 1, 18:43). Even though there are many sad stories about loss of family support, the contestant's relationships with their families are as diverse as the contestants themselves. There is no common denominator when it comes to functional or dysfunctional families and can therefore not be considered a reason why someone would choose to do drag.

Professor RuPaul: Gay history lessons

Being one of the first shows about drag, the show does attempt to educate their viewers about drag terminology and history. RuPaul, being born in 1960, has been around for a while and has seen drag grow and change, as well as being part of the gay rights movement in North America. In the first few seasons, whenever there was a term that was relevant to drag culture, they would either have one of the contestants explain it or they have a box pop up on the screen with a definition of the term. This is a smart way to introduce new viewers to the terminology and slang of the drag community:

“Our contestants stands on the shoulders of those who came before them. Queens who had something special to share with the world, even when the world wasn't ready to receive it. Their history is our history. Don't forget it was a drag queen (Marsha P. Johnson) that threw the first brick that started the Stonewall Riots and ignited the gay liberation movement. That's right honey, if you're out proud and living the gay life, you have a drag queen to thank for it.” (Episode 7, season 1, 02:04 minutes).

Drag queens have at times been ostracized even by the gay community for being too out there and giving gay people a bad name. This show is an attempt to reach out not only to a straight, mainstream audience, but also gain more respect within the gay community. Drag queens often serve as important political figures within the gay community, the American drag queen Marsha P. Johnson being a good example, as in the quote by RuPaul. As discussed in the section concerning drag queens and their social positions in the male gay community in the Queer theory chapter, there is a fine line between admiration and ridicule for a drag queen and her audience, even within her community. One thing this show has had a huge impact on, is how cool drag is now. A younger generation has embraced the show, and the number of drag queens and gender-bending queer youths seem to have increased dramatically. Without having any official statistics on this, and my newsfeed being biased to my interests, I would still be comfortable claiming that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has not only brought drag into the mainstream and exposed it to a wider audience, but has perhaps also made it as cool to be a drag queen than it has ever been. Part of the coolness is also that it coincides with a generation that is less concerned about gender stereotypes. There are many young men who are make up artists, who have their own YouTube-channels where they show how to put on make up, without identifying as drag queens. They're just queer men wanting to wear make up. Although the step from make-up artist online to drag performer on stage is a big step, it seems to have opened up a gate for young people wanting to express their artistic side outside the constraints of gender tropes.

Which drag styles make the cut?

As we have seen in the examples discussed in this chapter, there are different views on what drag can be defined as. In the case of the cast members of *RuPaul's Drag Race* you have an added component in terms of diversity, through featuring different styles of drag. Drag is often very regional, and differs in how you do your make-up, the outfits you wear, the talent you possess, and the overall view of what drag is supposed to be. This is often a source of conflict on the show, where usually the pageant girls don't take the comedy queens and campy queens as seriously because they're not as "polished", meaning not as beautiful and glamorous.

Casting drag queens with different talents, style aesthetics and notions of what drag is all about, is most likely completely intentional, both to show that there are different styles and variations of drag as well as inducing conflicts between the contestants. The discussion of what drag is or is supposed to be is always an issue on each season. So even within what I would describe as a limited section of drag styles, there is fierce discussion among contestants of what defines drag. You don't necessarily find this in other reality competition shows; the perimeters of the craft in question are often quite set. The nature of drag creates a space for so many different performers, but all are under the same term. In *Project Runway*, for instance, even though you have different style aesthetics, there is no debate about what a designer actually is. There is no discussion about etymology, like we find with drag in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The same with chefs in *Top Chef*, or models in *America's Next Top Model*, or singers in the *Idol* franchise. There the competition is whether or not you are good at your craft, and you all have the same strength: Singing, or sewing or cooking. But with drag, people who have different skills are in the same competition. And the common denominator is very regional determined. No wonder debates flare

up. This could also be a good thing for viewers, helping them realize that since there is conflict within the cast, there might be even more categories of drag that are excluded from the show. However, if you are not located in a place that has a drag scene, or you do your own research, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is basically your manual for what drag is.

The infamous and late Divine, coworker with John Waters, would never be on this show, neither apply nor be accepted. Divine was a drag queen with no rules, and was completely perverse and provocative in her style and performances. This type of uncompromising drag, where there is no interest of being passable or conventionally beautiful, would not play well to a mainstream audience, and is not part of what seems to be the goal for the contestants who are being cast for the show. This excludes many interesting drag performers, especially those who play with gender in a more obvious way, like queens who have full beards and a sparkly evening gown. Especially the lack of San Francisco queens is worth mentioning, where this type of non-gender conforming drag is fairly common. San Francisco is in many ways the Gay Mecca of North America, and has many drag performers, yet of all the seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* there has only been one contestant from San Francisco, Honey Mahogany. With an old school reference to gay icon Diana Ross she at least had some knowledge of cultural history in her bag of tricks, but was also a very pretty queen, which might have worked well for her in the show. It did not, however, and she went home quite early in her season. Yet, I would not say that she is representative for the San Francisco drag scene, per se. In my discussions with Parker Tilghman, drag name Pansy, who started his career as a queen in San Francisco, he explains how there is a greater space for play with gender and beauty conventions in San Francisco. There you find performers who aren't so worried about looking like a member of the Kardashian family, but rather want the opposite. The Kardashians have their own reality

show, and can say to be the modern day epitome of celebrities being famous for being beautiful and rich, and have no other talent or skill set. In San Francisco there seems to be less focus on emulating the look we see on female celebrities and more on using drag to say something political or subversive. People have more body hair, beards and over the top make up or costumes. The look is more connected with the punk scene, as it aims to challenge the establishment. One legendary San Francisco queen is Peaches Christ who for decades now have embraced the kitsch and camp about drag and utilized it in various stage and film productions of pop culture spoofs and parodies. One of the recent ones have been stage adoptions of the 60's sci-fi film *Barbarella* (Vadim, 1968), redubbed *Bearbarella* playing a joke on the big and hairy men in the gay community referring to themselves as "bears". There seem to be a lot of queens from California, based in Los Angeles mostly, and Florida. Therefore the overall aesthetic appreciated stems from those regional styles: "I like being thin. I model myself after like, supermodels. (On padding) We're not like that in L.A. We don't pad, that's an East-Coast, Mid-West, Southern thing where they're pageant girls." (Morgan McMichaels Season 2, episode 10, 20:05 minutes). Morgan's statement is certainly loaded and suggesting that L.A. drag is cooler. Queens who are parts of pageants are usually a bit looked down upon on the show, and there are social clicks forming based on the style of drag you prefer. It's not strange that the style of drag often reflects the style of female beauty in the different regions. Even though the drag queens with less mainstream styles of drag are subject to criticism by other contestants as well as judges, sometimes their otherness proves to be their strength. As before mentioned, both Sharon Needles and Jinxx Monsoon, who had to deal with a lot of questions and criticism about their look and definition of drag, ended up taking home the crown and winning the title of America's Next Drag Super Star in their season. This could also be due to their ability to adapt and tweak their style of drag to something they knew the judges would appreciate more. So while there is room for drag

outside the mainstream, it must be able to adapt when given advice. The advice was usually to glam it up. It seems that the one deemed worthy of the title *America's next drag super star* is someone who isn't too old; who is conventionally pretty and glamorous and has a skill set that works well for an entertainer. While this is fine and dandy, the age and beauty requirements certainly exclude many established, iconic and successful drag queens as well as those who have a different style of drag that is not as mainstream.

In the show I see a very classic situation where the “pretty” drag queens pick on those who are different. One would think that grownups would be above this sort of behavior, but it seems to return every season. This is partly due to casting, but maybe also due to the insecurity many of the drag queens have about being on the spot and in the public eye. This is, as before mentioned, the biggest TV show about drag queens, and I understand that queens might be vary about how the public perceive them and their art and craft. Therefore one might go to bat for their particular style of drag to feel like it's being properly represented on the show.

Cultural appropriation and the new generation

“That recognition and subsequent assimilation usually leads to a loss of subversive power and the recognition that once a cultural phenomenon is recognized by the mainstream as subversive, it may lose this same subversive power by default, and through assimilation.” (Whitney, 2006: p.37)

For me, this quote is the essence of what I perceive as both the gain and loss of drag becoming more mainstream. Cultural assimilation is no new thing, as when one group starts using a different groups signifier, it risks losing its original meaning. Drag has, as discussed earlier, for the most part been closely tied with the male gay community and each region has had its style and set of rules. Now, as the show is not only national, but also international, the regional differences seem bigger, and the show has the power to deem which region will have the platform to show their drag. Here the choices have coincided with what region has the most accessible and marketable drag, as New York, Florida, Los Angeles and Seattle has been very well represented. Especially the drag scenes in Florida and Los Angeles tend to lean more towards an aesthetic that looks like traditional female beauty. The audience of the show are mostly a young generation in a world where being queer doesn't necessarily carry the stigma it did before, and they might feel freer to play around with gender representation. A new generation is bound to take a cultural signifier or tradition and alter it and re-appropriate to make it their own. The same can be implied about drag culture; by introducing a style and type of entertainment that used to be underground and anti-heteronormative and anti-establishment by its very essence on a glossy, more palatable plate by way of mainstream media and television to a younger generation, they might take drag and make it their own, and in the process change what drag means forever. This is bound to happen to everything, as each generation has the need to redefine and remake things to have it properly belong to them, but it is important to be aware of how it changes, and if there is still an underground crowd that will appreciate and validate the more traditional sides of drag.



The social significance of an outspoken drag queen is also not to be underestimated, even in our day. The Irish drag queen Panti Bliss is a prime example of this. Panti, or Rory O'Neil, was the face and champion of the campaign leading to gay marriage and equal rights in Ireland. The vote was by referendum, so it was the people of Ireland who overwhelmingly said yes to equal rights. The documentary *The Queen of Ireland* (Horgan, 2016) follows Panti as a performer and as a human being, and shows Panti's ability to use her drag persona as a political tool to be an activist for equal rights and HIV-awareness. Sometimes having a persona, an alter ego can allow you the freedom to say things you might not say as a private person, and create a platform and space to be more satirical in their message. Younger queens without knowledge of this important legacy might be more interested in the aesthetics of drag, and not the potential it has for political, subversive power. This is partly why I feel that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has a responsibility to educate the young queens about drag history, and while many of the challenges tend to lean towards conventional and heteronormative beauty and femininity, there has been challenges each

season that aims to educate and inform. One challenge in season 7 episode 9 was to recreate scenes from famous John Waters films, urging a younger generation to familiarize themselves with his iconic queer and most defiantly subversive films, alongside his muse, the drag queen Divine. Waters himself has even been a guest judge on the show.

Reality as parody

As mentioned previous in my chapter on reality television, *RuPaul's Drag Race* can be placed in the category as parody TV. The art of drag itself is often playing with expectations and established tropes. They mock and salute people and groups by impersonating them. The use of cultural references is a drag queen's bread and butter, so to speak. In this sense, the many play on words and references to other Reality shows fit perfectly in to the entertainment tradition of drag. Sometimes it's more subtle things like having a catchphrase similar to others. One example is Tim Gunn's catchphrase in *Project Runway* were he always says "Make it work". RuPaul's catchphrase, one of many, that is similar to this one is "Don't fuck it up"; a bit racier than Gunn's phrase, but holds the same meaning in a way. There are many other examples of this throughout the seasons, The Snatch Game being perhaps the most stabile one.



Episode 2 Season 2 *RuPaul's Drag Race Allstars*

The Snatch game is play on words and parody of the old game show *The Match Game*, a popular game show from the 1960s where you would match the answer of a question to that of a celebrity guest. Replacing the word Match with Snatch is yet another sexual pun, as snatch is slang for vagina. In *RuPaul's Drag Race* the Snatch Game has grown to be the highlight of each season, as it really tests the queens' ability to prove that they can alter their appearance to look, sound and act like a celebrity, and to be funny and quick on their feet. The winner of each season has usually done very well in The Snatch Game.

Sexuality and Gender

Arguably, one of the most interesting and controversial aspects of drag is the way they play with gender and sexuality. While some may insist on drag being, in its essence, the opportunity to dress up in a way that reflects both genders, there are a lot of younger people who rather just want to look as much as a Kardashian as they can. A Kardashian sister has also been a guest

judge twice on the show. This part of the analysis chapter looks at how *RuPaul's Drag Race* chooses to portray gender and sexuality through performances, casting and the challenges in the show.

As I have pointed out before, the gender identity of the contestants is usually pretty clear-cut: drag queen and female persona on stage, cis-gendered male in private and off stage. This seems to be the norm both on the show and in the research I have done. Still many of the queens have to explain their gender identity, especially to people who aren't part of the show or the community. Many people don't understand that you can want to be a woman on stage, and then just leave that behind in your personal life. That you have to be either or, and that being a bit of both is too confusing for people. There seems to be a fine line, and how you look as a man when you are out of drag is contributing to how you are perceived and to what extent people suspect that you actually want to be a woman.

Within the rhetoric of the show, there is a fine line the other side of the scale as well. If you are too feminine, if you are too much of a lady when out of drag, the other contestants quickly become skeptical and accuse the queen in question if they are really doing drag or just living a dream of becoming a woman. This is widely regarded as cheating, and not within the concept of drag. This again poses the question of what drag really is? Is a drag queen only allowed to be a gay man dressing up as a woman? There are waves of young women, straight and queer, being drag queens these days. They are called bio-queens or faux-queens, and are usually met with skepticism in the male gay community. An art that is closely tied to the history and identity of the male gay community is understandably a bit difficult to share with others, especially if you are

uncertain of the person and group's intention with it, but an art as complex, political, and now widespread as drag is these days, it seems they must accept change and diversity, or die out.



Tatianna out and in drag

Tatianna is a queen from the second season who is a good example of being both commended and penalized for being a natural beauty and convincingly female. Especially the other contestants say that she should go “be a girl” somewhere else. This is a drag competition and being pretty isn’t enough. It seems that being too pretty, or having a more conventional look acts as a hinder for Tatianna, who has been getting complements on the fact that she is “passable” as a woman outside of the competition. Tatianna constantly has to defend her style of drag, and claims that the other contestants are jealous of her natural beauty. While this may be true, it doesn’t take away from the fact that it is a drag competition, and in the end, just being pretty is not going to cut it. Another naturally beautiful contestant, Carmen Carrera, who after the show came out as transgender and is now a swimsuit model, was the one who got the judges to coin the phrase

“Stop relying on that body!”. The phrase would come up every season from then on to ask the “fishy” queens to step up their drag game.

Gia Gunn is another example of a queen whose biggest focus is to look like a pretty woman, so-called “fishy”. Her entrance in the show was in a little bathing suit, declaring herself as “fresh Talapia”, an Asian fish. A reference to the term “fishy” meaning that she looks like a real, beautiful woman. She is crude and vulgar and has no sense of history for other drag queens or other styles, as well as for older or heavier queens. For her, it seems, the more you look like a Kardashian sister, the better. This attitude does not serve her well in the competition, as she lacks the skill set to execute the different tasks requiring a range of talents that some of her fellow competitors have that might not be as “fishy” as her.

Being a contestant on this show and doing well means that you have to have a variety of talents. I would argue that it must be one of the most difficult reality contest shows to be a contestant on, as the challenges each episode varies so greatly. So far there have been challenges about singing, sewing, stand-up comedy, acting, modeling, make up skills, human-to human interactions, dancing, and in all these challenges, a large degree of originality and creativity is always rewarded. This is due to the nature of drag, as there is not one skill set that is exclusively tied to drag, but many. Lip-synching perhaps being the exception, as all drag queens are expected to excel in this kind of performance.

One of the episodes that bothered me the most of all the seasons I have seen, is episode 2 in the second season. The main challenge in this episode was to perform a burlesque routine at a bar, as well as sell cherry pies on the street to strangers. The emphasis was on the way the contestants

could be sexy and raunchy, and was completely leaning towards the stereotypical way prostitutes and strippers are dressed and behaving. The ones who were convincing as “hookers” were applauded and rewarded, while the ones who weren’t as comfortable with the challenge were criticized. I go back and forth with myself on this episode, as I feel I can interpret it in two ways. One is that the challenge itself, the feedback and the connotations to strippers and hookers is reinforcing a negative stereotype about female sexuality and is joking with an industry that is highly problematic and has many cases of human trafficking and abuse. It is playing on the commercialized perception of strippers and hookers, with complete disregard to the social implications by doing so.



The drag queens during the burlesque challenge.

On the other hand, drag is, for many, about opposing the system and the heteronormative, and perhaps imitating and parodying sex workers is a way of celebrating a group of people on the edge of society, a place where gay men and drag queens also find themselves at times. There is a kind of sisterhood, for a lack of a better term, between drag queens and sex workers, because they both portray such elaborate and exaggerated displays of femininity and female sexuality. And any person with two brain cells know that both displays are for show and is theatrics for an audience.

The episode is deeper than “hookers are cool”, but on face value it seems very superficial and a bit offensive and insensitive. My problem lies in a broader context where western society and media feel they have the right to ridicule a group of people who are actually usually struggling to make ends meet, to find respect in their community and with their families, and are feeling pressured to be something other than themselves to fulfill a man’s fantasy. Is it the show’s moral obligation to not reinforce this? Or is its inclusion of this group of people a way of teaming up with them, and showing support and understanding? Is this episode leaning towards heteronormativity, or is it a subversive use of drag as art form? Whether or not this was debated before the episode was planned and shot is perhaps doubtful, and one might be told that it’s just for fun and not to be taken so seriously. Nevertheless, as much as I appreciate the show and whatever subversive elements are to be found there, this episode has had me churning a bit. Using Nicola Evans article “Games of hide and seek: Race, gender and drag in *The Crying Game* and *The Birdcage*” to compare, it would seem that the episode could coincide with the theory that drag can be used as a vessel for traditional and patriarchic values under the false pretense that drag is, in and of itself, politically subversive and progressive.

Another episode that serves as an example where the lines between subversiveness and heteronormativity are blurred is in episode 12 in season three. The before mentioned Carmen Carrera was part of an incident that has had me think about the play with straight sexuality and gay sexuality. In season three, Raja, the future winner of that season, and Carmen are in the bottom two together and has to lip synch against each other. The loser will have to leave the competition and go home. Both queens are friends, and have formed a group they call The Heathers, referring to the beautiful, popular and mean girls in the cult classic *Heathers* (Lehman, 1989). They have stuck together and are the self-proclaimed beautiful, skinny and fashionable

queens of this season. They ostracize and disregard the heavier and less attractive contestants. However, now both “Heathers” are in the bottom two and have to compete against each other. The song comes on, and Raja starts removing her dress, revealing a sexy outfit underneath. This is a common trick for drag queens called a reveal, and is used to shake things up a bit and function as an element of surprise during a number. Carmen is quick to follow, and as she is already wearing what can only be described as a bikini, she removes the bottom half of her outfit, leaving her nether regions bare. What that looks like we, the viewers, can only imagine, as the producers blur out her crotch area. Knowing the style of Carmen Carrera, though, she most likely had tucked her penis to create the illusion of a vagina. The two queens end up on the floor in a highly sexualized act, playing on the straight male lesbian sex-fantasy. The judges and the other contestants love the display. One contestant, Alexis Matteo says, “This is just soft porn. It’s kind of hot”. Raja ends up staying on in the competition, and Carmen has to go home.



Carmen Carrera and Raja lip-synching on the main stage.

The way the two queens were playing up straight male fantasy, but both actually being gay men at the time, who dress up as straight women pretending to be play-gay, is difficult to wrap your head around. It’s gender *Inception*. Is that enough to make the act subversive? Isn’t men’s

fascination with “fake” lesbian sex sort of an insult to the queer community and the women who are actually lesbians? Their love is being fetishized and made in to something they probably can’t recognize. So if two men dress up as women, add to that convincingly beautiful and sexy women, and start to behave in a sexualized way for a show and a performance, where does that leave us? How is that different than two heterosexual women doing the same in a soft-core porn film or at a strip club? One thing that might be redeeming is that the contestants know their audience well, and it consists of gay men and straight women. They are aware that there are very few straight men watching this, and especially not for the reason of hopefully seeing some sexy girl-on-girl action. So in a way, even though that is the aesthetic they are drawing from, this is not for them. This is for the gay community. Another aspect, that most of the convincingly beautiful contestants are often asked about, is whether or not straight men hit on them at the club. This performance could also be a hint to that, that they can successfully fool a straight man into being attracted to them, and in that making them feel a bit homosexual when the queens true gender identity is revealed. Some queens view that as a small victory, both for convincing female presentation but also to be able to “turn” a straight man. The very beautiful Courtney Act from season 6 had the following to say about that issue:

“I have had intimate relations with gentlemen in drag and out of drag, and I find that being in drag gives me access, and I suppose me in particular because of my aesthetic, gives me access to a certain kind of man. Do you know how easy it is? Straight men are like shooting fish in a barrel. When a straight man meets a woman who thinks like a man, that’s a match made in heaven. I like to think of myself as a glamorous stepping stone across the pond to homosexuality.” (Season 6, episode 2, 17:57 minutes).

The confusion one can get between gay-straight, male-female play on sexuality is part of the subversive element of drag. An element, I would argue, that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has maintained even though it is more mainstream and familiar. Perhaps it is appropriating it in a modern and contemporary context that makes it more subversive than at first glance? My initial reaction to the behaviors of the contestants were that of feeling like they were just mimicking other shows and other women on television, but when you have such a wide variety of personalities and drag expressions, shouldn't there be room for this as well? Some drag queens do tend to focus on the female illusionist-side of drag, and isn't that exactly what the two previous examples from the show are? The interpretation of how sexuality is portrayed in the show is a slippery slope, and can often be interpreted the way you'd like. On one hand, the over-sexualization of the drag queens while in drag, and the applauding of the ones who are convincingly beautiful women, is arguably upholding negative stereotypes about female sexuality in the Western world. On the other hand, the art of drag has always had space for crude, sexual content in its artistry, and who is to say that this isn't satire or a comment about the world today and the way women are supposed to behave?

Playing with gender and with words

RuPaul's Drag Race is the king and/or queen of puns. There seems to be a whole team of the production solely dedicated to finding puns in every situation of the contest. Some of the puns are meant to have RuPaul's name incorporated, as in Rusical instead of Musical, Rupalogize instead of apologize and so on, reinforcing the comical over-the-top persona that hostess RuPaul embodies in the show. But other than that, the show is peppered with sexual innuendo and, at times, crude jokes about gender, transsexuals, transgendered people, sexual acts

and genitalia. This is all tongue in cheek and meant to be entertaining, but it has a huge factor in how gender and sexuality is portrayed and understood. If you can't be at least a bit sexy and raunchy, you're on the wrong show. After all, what RuPaul says he is looking for in a winner is Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent, which spell C.U.N.T. when you put it together. The show is riddled with jokes like that, and makes a high level of understanding for both the English language as well as gay and pop culture a plus if you are to understand all of them.

Some have pointed out that the use of references to drag queens, transsexuals and transgender people are contributing to the general confusion about the important and personal distinctions between the terms. Sure, parts of each term can be said to have visible aesthetic similarities, that being a man dressing as a woman, and might illicit the same response from the world outside. But for a transgender person, someone who genuinely feels like they have been born in the wrong body and would like more than anything to be a woman, body as well as soul, being compared to a drag queen is not ideal. Does a show about drag queens have that kind of social responsibilities? Are they supposed to educate the public on the correct terms and words to use for the different groups within the queer community? If you look at the art of drag, and how queens usually act, I would say a big, fat no. Drag queens are supposed to make fun of things like that and are expected to be outrages and politically incorrect. So keeping in that tradition, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is right on the money with its disregard for correct terminology. The joke is more important. Then again, when you have a show as popular as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, with its ever-growing audience base, way beyond the queer community, isn't it also a suitable platform to have some conversations about the challenges the community faces? The show has already changed some of its rhetoric: what was in earlier seasons called "shemail" (a message to the

contestants, playing on the word “shemale”) has now been removed as it was deemed to offensive.

Closing remarks

Just as drag is two things at the same time, both entertainment and political, both gender reassuring and gender confusing, the same might be said about *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Based on my quest to determine whether the increased popularity of the show would keep the subversiveness of drag or reduce it to style and catch phrases, one could say that the show does both. While there are many styles of drag excluded from the show, it still has enough information to create a conversation about what drag is each season, and for audiences at home, should they be more interested, it might spark the desire to search for themselves in the vast history of drag queens performance. The show offers a platform for drag queens that is unprecedented, and is creating a space where actual drag queens can talk about their actual experiences. Not only concerning their approach to drag, but also how they live their lives as out gay men in different regions of the US. While biased to certain types of drag styles, it is a vast improvement from how drag queens have been portrayed in film and television earlier. One can hope that narrative film and television will learn and take note on the complexity and vulnerability that exists in drag performers, and not mainly be used as comic element deprived of depth. As shown in this thesis, drag portrayed on *RuPaul's Drag Race* is as multifaceted as the number of its competitors, and even more. Drag being an ever growing art form, especially due to this show, it is interesting what the future generations will make of drag, and how gender play comes into its, perhaps redefined, definition. Now that young, straight women are doing drag as well, not as drag kings,

but as drag queens, the very role of drag has to be revised and perhaps elevated to a form of performance art, rather than solely being an aesthetic expression belonging to the male gay community.

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Television series:

America's Next Top Model (2003)
American Idol (2002)
An American Family (1973)
Big Brother (2000)
Celebrity Boxing (2002)
Court TV (1991)
Dancing With The Stars (2005)
Drag my Dinner (Logo)
Drag U (Logo)
Extreme Makeover; Home Addition
(2003)
Girls (2012)
Joe Millionaire (2003)
Judge Judy (1996)
Keeping up with the Kardashians (2007)
Laguna Beach (2004)
Modern Family (2009)
Orange is the new Black (2013)
Pimp My Ride (2004)
Project Runway (2004)
Queer Eye For The Straight Guy (2003)
Room Raiders (2004)
RuPaul's Drag Race (2009).
Skam (Shame) (2013)
Supernanny (2004)
Surreal Life (2003)
Survivor (2000)
The Assistant (2004)
The Bachelor (2002)
The Biggest Loser (2004)
The Joe Schmo Show (2003)
The Match Game (1962)
The New Normal (2012)
The Office (2001-2003)
The Osbourne's (2002)
The Real World (1992)
The Simple Life (2003)
The X-factor (2004)
Top Chef (2006)
What Not To Wear (2003)
Will & Grace (1998)

Films:

Barbarella (Vadim, 1968)
Brokeback Mountain (Lee, 2005)
Carol (Haynes, 2015)
Dallas Buyers Club (2013, Vallée)
Exposed (Beth B., 2013)
Grey Gardens (Measles, 1975)
Heathers (Lehman, 1989)
Milk (Van Sant, 2008)
Philadelphia (Demme, 1993)
Rocky Horror Picture Show (Sharman, 1975)
The Birdcage (Nichols, 1996)
The Crying Game (Jordan, 1992)
The Queen of Ireland (Horgan, 2016)
The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, 1939)
This is...Spinal Tap (Reiner, 1984)
Too Wong Foo, Thanks for everything! Julie Newmar (Kidron, 1995)