

Key Words: Post-Gender, Rebellion, Sex

Student Name: Jack Winbow

P Number: 1902554

Programme of Study: Photojournalism and Documentary Photography

Lecturer: Paul Duerinckx

Word Count: 2,462

To bring a short context to this piece of writing, the aim of this essay is to combine three key words along with visual guides and theorists to research. The three key words in question are *Post-gender*, *Rebellion* and *Sex* which will guide me into a question for my eventual independent research project. With reference to written publication and online sources to aid my research as well as focus on queer culture, I aim to ask a question that positions me to challenge myself when beginning my dissertation.

## **Post-Gender**

“Whilst an art student today may boast that they are ‘post-gender’, obliged by generational identity-politics to have some self-proclaimed distinction...” (Dannatt, 2016, pg.7)

The notion of post-gender is a new one, described as a political movement that opposes the constrictive biases of the gender binary, its place within this world isn't always welcome. As described by Dannatt, it seems that post-genderism is seen more as a flashy label that validates a person's 'wokeness' rather than a term that is respected amongst peers. Questions arise of its legitimacy within the English language, how many people know of the term, how many people use the term and is the term widely accepted? From the citation above it seems that the latter question is answered. As an expression of identity, there seems to be no pejorative use however, does the term need to be created? It seems that post-gender and androgyny are synonyms of each other, both exploring the grey area in between male and female and sometimes creating its own placement. One may describe themselves as androgynous or post-gender to more accurately describe their identity and to create a safe space in a cis-centric society. One of the most recognisable aspects of post-gender dressing and presenting is drag. An art form commonly misconceived as a female impersonation practice, drag challenges the gender norms of our forced binary and plays with the ideas of male, female and other. This image of a famous drag queen 'Gotmik' has several meanings and contexts. “A galaxy of signifiers” (Barthes, 1997). Beginning with the black and white costume design and make-up, Gotmik challenges the binary of gender while being encased in the binary of black and white. This juxtapositional irony stirs controversy within the cisgendered world by challenging stereotypes of not only gender but also



Image by Albert Sanchez

the perception of drag and its cultural impact. As a person Gotmik is fascinating, gender assigned female at birth, Gotmik realised they were actually male resulting in a gradual transition. However they did not want to give up their passion of drag performance, opting to continue their profession despite being pigeon holed as a 'Bioqueen' , someone who is female and partakes in drag. This blatant transphobic prejudice that Gotmik faced only fuelled them in their exploration of drag. "Equally terms like 'transvestite' or 'transgender' should never be applied to such free spirits... their very presence on the page challenging the assumptions of those categories" (Dannatt, 2016, pg.7). Gotmik's drag artistry

in its very nature is post-gender, challenging not only the cis-gender mainstream but also those within the queer community that still posses and act on their own internal homophobia. With padding to create a 'female' body shape, long feline nails and feminine dressing Gotmik subsides to the expectation of drag yet their lack of breast plate, bald head and unconventional make-up challenges the norms of drag. This contrasting of old and new forms of drag elevated through the skills of Gotmik introduces a higher form of drag. Something that fits in with the post-gender expression.

The question now arises, is post-gender a personal identity or rather a term that can be used to describe art ? Why can it not be both ? As an artist Gotmik seems to present traits of a post-gender nature however when personally identifying, he identifies as male. An example of someone who seems to wholly embody the notion of post-gender is Bimini Bon Boulash who also plays with the idea of gender and gender roles within our society. Identifying as non-binary, Boulash does not conform to any gender and neither does their drag. Preferring to place themselves in the grey area of 'other' they are also a pioneer within the drag scene. Preferring to not use any of the expected paraphernalia of drag such as hip pads and only the occasional use of a breast plate, Boulash utilises the natural aspects of their body to carry out their art. Focusing on the editorial

aspects of drag, they push their art form into the mainstream. Featured in publications such as Vogue, Dazed and I-D magazine Boulash voices their art and beliefs in the same places they were inspired by when they were growing up. It seems that post-gender expression is a real term and movement that influential people are taking apart in whether that be knowingly or unknowingly. As a term it can evidently be used when describing both a persons identity or ideology as well as an artistic term to describe a major moment, like post-modernism. The prospect of post-gender art forms is exciting and somewhat liberating, with pioneers



Image by Thanos Poulimenos

such as Bimini Bon Boulash and Gotmik the movement doesn't warn any issues in infiltrating the mainstream.

## **REBELLION**

"We want to see all gay people have a chance at equal rights, as straight people in America. We believe in picking up a gun, and starting a revolution if necessary." (Rodriguez, 2020)

Ideologically, the concept of rebellion and revolution have been a pivotal part of queer culture. Without it the lives of millions of queer people would be even harder and more violent than it already is. In the face of the cisgender heterosexual mainstream, queer culture is rebellious in many ways, whether that be challenging the binary of gender, subverting fashion expectation, queer slang or protesting. Queerness is fundamentally rebellious. A key icon within the queer subculture is Marsha P Johnson, a role model to all queer people, Johnson was living in New York and partook in the act of drag. However, her drag style was very different to that of Gotmik and Boulash opting rather for a more feminine and delicate drag aesthetic. Johnson has been named along with other queer icons (Zazu Nova and Jackie Hormona) as the vanguards of the Stonewall riots. Taking place in 1969, a popular New York gay bar was raided by police in an ongoing institutional effort to erase queer people which was met with retaliation and rioting. This event

began the 'Gay revolution' which aimed to allow queer people to have rights in the country that marginalised them. In the image, Johnson (photographed on the left) is the very personification of queer rebellion. Protesting down the busy roads of New York city, Johnson and her peers put themselves in life threatening circumstances to create and protect the rights of queer people. Adorned in her traditional drag aesthetic, she clutches her bag in a pose synonymous with fragility and delicacy yet her act is rather the opposite. Demonstrating the



Image by Leonard Fink

immense power she holds through her own relationship with femininity and queerness, it seems that the way she dresses only intensifies her fight for the cause. Johnson is an inspiration to all queer people, as one of the trailblazers at the Stonewall riots she is the very embodiment of queer rebellion; not only rebelling the states authoritarian approach to queer lives but also in her subversion of gendered dressing imposed by the cis mainstream. In almost every way Johnson refused to submit to the heteronormative standards of the world.

Another key example of rebellion within queer culture is the creation and use of Polari. A slang language created by gay men in the UK during the 50s and 60s which intended to allow gay men to speak to each other without fear of prosecution, Polari was used to ensure safety.

Before the decriminalisation of gay relationships and gay people in 1967, Polari was a vital tool in a gay mans toolkit. "a kind of code, which enabled one gay man to identify another, allowed them to express themselves publicly without fear of arrest" (Richardson, 2005). The language is characterised by its heavy lexical base that focuses on the description of a person, whether or not they live alone and if they know other gay people in the area. Its simple syntax and similar lexical variation to the english language allowed other queer people to learn the language quickly, which was vital if you wanted to partake in gay culture without being ostracised. Its simplicity was its biggest defence against the language being decoded, with concrete nouns in the English language such as 'face' translated to 'ecaf' or 'eek' in Polari, sometimes just the simple backwards spelling was enough to conceal the language. The flipping of the spelling of 'face' with

its identical definition speaks volumes. As an obvious metaphor for the time, this new spelling creates a different identity, one that people don't hear often. With the idea of 'face' and its' connotations and 'signifiers' (Barthes, 1997) to greater meaning, this subversion hints towards the mental state of queer people at the time. The creation of Polari was made in protection of one's self but also in rebellion of the establishment, without it many queer people would have been imprisoned just for existing. As a necessary and vital part of queer culture in the 50s and 60s, the innate sense of rebellion in queer culture aided the prevention of queer erasure in the U.K.

## SEX

Sex and sexuality are large parts of queer culture, much like most cultures almost everything we do or say has a link to sex. In the final portion of this essay, the focus will be drawn to a collection



Art work by Sofia Maldonado

of graffiti artworks created by Sofia Maldonado which centre around the idea of hyper-sexualisation of celebrities. Featuring exaggerated depictions of body, face and dressing this artwork provokes connotations of identity, fashionista and provocateur. With its linear pops of vibrant colour, themes of expression are also communicated through the imagery. This artwork, a caricature of Rihanna, is one of many re-creations of famous pop divas that Maldonado has painted. She raises conversations around how we place celebrities on a pedestal with elevated expectations. This level of celebration however, is not the same standard for our peers. Made in retaliation of a previous mural which depicted an 'average' woman expressing her sexuality, which was met with overwhelming backlash by her local community and council, Maldonado aimed to display this double standard in her new work. "celebrities in our culture are allowed

to transgress societal expectations whereas 'everyday' women... are denied" (McLendon, 2011, pg.56). While the original was accused of reinforcing the negative stereotypes around the hyper-sexualisation of women of colour, this new collection that featured celebrities was acclaimed. On the contrary, Maldonado depicted Rihanna and others in similar poses to the original, "through

their provocative and revealing fashions, could elicit the same types of negative reactions as the 42nd Street mural” ((McLendon, 2011, pg.56). The double standard is clear, the very idea of ‘celebrity’ is to put them on a sort of pedestal, nevertheless this raised standard when expressing sexuality is negatively impacting the perception of women. Furthermore, this leads into questions surrounding how celebrities can be viewed as commodities rather than people. Would this be a possible explanation for their hyper-sexualisation within the media without substantial backlash ? With well known sayings such as “sex sells” circulating everyday media intake, this double standard is again reinforced when we see celebrities vaunted for expressing their sexuality yet queer lives as well as sex workers are shunned into the background. With many influences within the music industry, in particularly the genres of Pop and Hip-Hop, dressing along with dancing and set design originate from sex workers and queer culture. Almost synonymous with each other, sex workers and queer people have used their relationship with sex and sexuality to either find work or discover ones self. With huge influences in the genre of Disco. “disco music was one of the most popular musical forms around. It had flourished in the black American gay bars and nightclubs” (Fewings, 2019). Queer people had revolutionised the night club scene. Despite their undeniable impact on pop culture, the respect and celebration for these people is not at the same level as the celebrities that imitate them. This damaging double standard that society holds for celebrities is not only damaging for women, queer people and sex workers but also for the commodification and objectification of female celebrities, especially celebrities that are women of colour.

Overall, with the exploration of my three key words ;*Post-gender, Rebellion and Sex* the journey of this essay is almost complete. A strong relationship between these words can be found especially when placing them within the context of queerness. When contextualised within the queer atmosphere, these words carry heavy and intriguing themes of liberation. At this moment, the main working question is ‘How has the integration of queer influence into the mainstream impacted popular culture when discussing themes of sex and gender?’ With this question many sub questions have also risen, “How has the notion of ‘post-gender’ affected the art form of drag?’ , ‘What does drag represent within the contemporary discourse of queer culture? and ‘Does the innate sense of rebellion found within queer lives alter relationships with the establishment?’. Furthermore with new words of interest that have stemmed from my original key

words such as sexuality, androgyny, revolution, celebrity, hyper-sexualisation, drag, objectification, commodity and riot will all be considered when producing and exploring my chosen question for my independent research project.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Barthes, R.(1997). Elements of Semiology. London, Atlantic Books.

England, J. (2016). Turn and Face the Strange. London, Black Dog Publishing.

Fewings, T (2019) How Gay Pop Music Shaped the World as we Know it. Museum of Youth Culture. Available at [https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/how-gay-pop-music-shaped-the-world-as-we-know-it-museum-of-youth-culture/\\_wKyxVurOzUOLQ?hl=en](https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/how-gay-pop-music-shaped-the-world-as-we-know-it-museum-of-youth-culture/_wKyxVurOzUOLQ?hl=en) (Accessed 4th May)

McLendon, M. (2011). Beyond Bling Voices of Hip-Hop in Art. London, Scala Publishers.

Richardson, C. (2005). What brings you trolling back then? The Guardian. January 17th. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jan/17/gayrights.comment> (Accessed 3rd May 2021)

Rodriguez, B. (2020). Unforgettable Quotes by Marsha P. Johnson. Marie Claire. June 3rd. Available at <https://www.marieclaire.com/politics/a32745825/marsha-p-johnson-quotes/> (Accessed 6th May)