



Subverting the Gendered Bodies in Female Trouble (John Waters) and Liquid Sky (Slava Tsukerman)

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Subverting the Gendered Bodies in *Female Trouble* (John Waters)
and *Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman)



Mémoire de Master MEEF parcours anglais présenté par **Benjamin Cattin**.

Sous la direction d'**Adrienne Boutang** (UFR SLHS, INSPE de Franche-Comté).

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Introduction

Grounded within ourselves as soon as we begin to apprehend our living environment, the concept of gender is hard to challenge. The American show *Rupaul's Drag Race*, a drag queen competition, confronted me to the fluidity of gender and more precisely to its fragility: as perfectly displayed in the art of drag, gender can be deconstructed and reconstructed by playing with codes that have become gendered over time. The possibility to destroy gender to create another one regardless on one's identity strongly puts under question its legitimacy to rule modern society. I thus realized gender depends on a construction within society that is deeply established in the collective unconscious which removes all credibility to the compulsive behavior of matching a biological sex to its attributed gender. This concept of construction is instinctively reminiscent of the art of cinema which also creates a visual image, manipulating the audience according to what is shown or hidden. When creating a movie, a director would therefore choose the gender of his characters in the same way he chooses his settings: the visual choices will make the spectators' perception. Societal codes about what is feminine or masculine form a stereotypical distinction between men and women which can be broken by blending these conventions together and playing with them. Cinema's unlimited visual possibilities unlock its high potential for subversion. The verb 'to suvert' comes from Old French *subvertir* "to overthrow, to destroy" or directly from Latin *subvertere* "to turn upside down, to overturn, to overthrow"¹: subversion goes against what it is applied to whether by destroying it or reversing it. Subversion troubles established standards. Queer sensibility goes hand in hand with the basic concept of subversion because it involves a rupture with normative sexual conceptions and gender identities. Queer cinema is therefore always subversive in some way.

To explore the cinematic subversive, I chose the two queer American movies *Female Trouble* by John Waters and *Liquid Sky* by Slava Tsukerman because in spite of their strong differences, they are deeply intertwined. In these movies, one single actress (respectively Anne Carlisle and the drag queen Divine) plays two different characters of opposite gender: Divine plays Dawn and Earl; Carlisle plays Margaret and Jimmy. This possibility to play both genders in turns puts forward the distinction between sex and gender. Moreover, in both movies, these alter-ego characters interact in a significant sex scene, leading to the unrealistic vision of two

¹ From *Etymonline*, <https://etymonline.com/>

people actually sharing the same body having sexual intercourse. The line “fuck yourself” which Margaret tells Jimmy and Earl tells Dawn is interpreted literally in those scenes and the movies’ playfulness in regard to gender becomes evident. However, the two movies take very different narrative and stylistic approaches. In *Female Trouble*, Dawn Davenport’s chaotic development from her youth to her death is a pretense for Waters to feature shocking images. Dawn’s life portrayal involves her motherhood, her marriage, her pursuit of criminality and her extreme exhibitionism: *Female Trouble* states that crime is beauty. *Liquid Sky* is a science-fiction movie: aliens have come on Earth to feed upon the substance created during orgasms. The androgynous fashion model Margaret lives in the apartment right next to the spot where the small alien spaceship has landed: she will provoke several orgasms which will cause death through the alien intervention.

Before further exploring the two movies, it is essential to put them into context by giving a brief history of queer American cinema and social development. Queer exposure was almost non-existent until the late 60s in cinema both because of its social repression and cinema censorship². The Stonewall Riots in 1969 marked the beginning of the gay liberation movements and marked a rupture in society and thus in cinema. Pre-Stonewall queer cinema was avant-garde “underground” cinema and mainly experimental: Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol are the most famous figures for experimental underground cinema. Their movies were rarely narrative: they relied on aesthetics and modernist experimentation. But queer cinema was very confidential. It was closeted, waiting for the right time to be released. Hollywood portrayal of queerness was very cliché and never upfront: the figure of the “sissy”³, a highly mannered man whose homosexuality is evident even though it is never made explicit, represented the only queer presence in mainstream cinema. John Waters was a pioneer for the New Queer cinema that developed along the beginning of the gay liberation movement and he was a major influence for its development. He released *Female Trouble* in 1972, only three years after the riots, featuring this growing social and sexual liberation in his film. The 80s was a sexually ambiguous time. Androgyny became the new fashion trend, especially with the rise of David Bowie who really made androgynous aesthetics popular. The 80s is marked by the beginning of the AIDS crisis: a wave of fear and death spread all over the country. This crisis came with great homophobia because AIDS was more present in the queer community. Drugs became even more dangerous because of the potential propagation of AIDS through needles.

² The Hays Code established a strong cinema censorship from 1934 to 1964.

³ *The Celluloid Closet*, Dir. Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman. 1995.

The fear of sex and drugs that went with this period brought a moderate return of good moral standards. Due to the feminist advances of the 70s, the women's liberation movement's fight for equality was deemed over and women were considered "post-feminist"⁴: the woman's liberation movement was answered by a backlash in the 80s. *Liquid Sky* was filmed in 1982, at the very beginning of the AIDS crisis, when nobody understood what was happening: it was a transitioning period to a darker future which *Liquid Sky* foreshadowed.

The two movies go against gender standards by subverting them in turns through excess or deprivation. In this essay, I will compare both subversive approaches within the movies, analyzing their effects to eventually put drag against androgyny.

I will first and foremost set a brief theoretically explanation of the social construction of gender, taking Judith Butler's groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* as a basis, and the potential devices that can lead to its subversion. Then, I will explore the subversion through excess and its limits, mostly in regard to *Female Trouble* and its use of drag. And finally, my last part will be dedicated to the subversion through deprivation in *Liquid Sky* and its inherent androgyny.

⁴ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Crown Publishing Group, 1991, p.104.

I) (De)constructing gender

1. Gender is artificial

1.1. The social construction of gender

In the nineties, Judith Butler courageously tackled the standards within society and put them under deep questioning. She published *Gender Trouble* in 1990 which would rapidly be considered a founding book about gender and a reference to queer studies. *Gender Trouble* explores the distinction between sex and gender, the cultural construction of gender and its performativity.

The distinction between sex and gender is a very abstract topic for a broad proportion of the population nowadays and even more so when the book came out. These two notions tend to be called synonymous. The words themselves testify of this long established cultural belief as sex comes from Latin *sexus* “a sex, state of being either male or female, gender” and gender comes from Old French *gendre, genre* “kind, species; character; gender” but also from Latin *genus* “race, kind, species, (male or female) sex”: etymologically speaking, sex and gender are put together as two variations of the same notion. However, they are diametrically opposed: defining traits of one particular gender are very commonly found in a person who does not have its “matching sex”. This negates the pattern of associating one to the other. Transgender experiences also proved that the gender you identify with does not always “match” your biological sex. Butler uses a clever analogy to render the opposition between these two words easily understandable: “sex is to nature or ‘the raw’ as gender is to culture or ‘the cooked’”⁵. Sex is a notion that relates to biology matters. You have it at birth independently of your will and it will remain unchanged without medical procedures involving a sex change: in that sense, sex is “the raw” because it is the base that you have to develop around as a human being growing up. Gender, on the other hand, is completely absent at birth. It is built along with your self-awareness and conscience of existence. Gender is “the cooked” as it develops progressively from experience. Butler’s statement echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quote “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”⁶ which puts gender as a process. Gender is indeed a process of assimilation based upon what is expected of you depending on what genitals you have.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1999, p.47.

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe II, l'expérience vécue*, Paris : Gallimard, 1949, p.13. Translated from French: « on ne naît pas femme: on le devient ».

Interacting with your environment, you progressively understand what traditionally separates a man from a woman in people's minds. This perception of gender may not fit your instinctive desire of living but if you do not feature the "right" gender, there will always be a reminder among society about it being inappropriate: challenging those conventions puts into question your belonging to society. No man could walk down the street in high heels without getting frowned upon. This puts forward what Butler calls gender performativity.

As theorized by Butler, "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed"⁷. Gender is not a part of someone's original identity but a performance that passes as such. It eventually participates in creating one's identity based on the cultural pattern that unconsciously rules social behaviors. What you are and what you do tend to blend since your actions are supposed to reflect your inner self: gender performativity states that "doing" becomes synonymous with "being". Your biological sex summons behaviors that you are supposed to follow to stay coherent with your social accepted self. For example, a woman is "allowed" to wear dresses and makeup when a man is not. A girl with short hair will have to compensate this masculine feature by putting enough femininity indicators elsewhere so that it will read as female overall. The way you present yourself should indicate what genitals you have and that goes along with the visual hints you give through performing gender. All the previous statements are only valid in the case of purely conventional patterns. The reiteration of gender standards imposes them as truthful statements that we do not even question most of the time because they become so instinctive. Gender expectations change over time as trends that are first deemed subversive and provoking get more and more common once the shock has passed. When Marlene Dietrich wore trousers and tuxedos in the 30s, it was subversive because it was a great disruption of habits in female clothing. However, as time passed and women wore trousers more and more often, the association between femininity and trousers got slowly created in people's minds. The provoking value of an action always disappears if people get accustomed to this action on a daily basis. Provocation eventually leads to social acceptance through the reiteration of the action and gender criteria are modified. New performative behaviors create new gender associations.

Social expectations create a binary way of approaching gender. However, this approach is too simplistic to fit everyone. Non-binary people do not feel comfortable having to register

⁷ Judith Butler, *op.cit.*, p.33.

themselves in one of the two categories available. Genderfluid people identify alternatively to both genders and switch from one to the other according to what they feel on the moment: this approach to gender is still binary but it is ever-changing and impermanent. Outside of gender identification, it is also possible to refuse to take social expectations into consideration deliberately. We may switch from one gender to the other as if they were costumes to wear and remove whenever we want to. Being conscious of the artificiality of gender allows to take perspective upon its place in society and undermines its legitimacy: gender is a disguise that has become compulsory through social pressure.

1.2. The masquerade

The masquerade is a pre-Butler concept that evokes the social construction of gender. Joan Riviere, a British psychoanalyst, disclosed it in her essay *Womanliness as Masquerade*, published in 1929. A few of her statements seem dated nowadays: they bring out a very simplistic view upon homosexuality and they also seem to perpetuate Freud's very questionable theory about the fact that women's ultimate ambition is possessing a penis. However, the concept of the masquerade which Riviere unfolds is still relevant today. According to her, women would hide under a mask of femininity and this is the masquerade. She writes:

“Womanliness [...] could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it-much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the masquerade. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference ; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”⁸

Riviere mentions both the artificiality of gender and the social expectations that comes with it. A biologically born female is not supposed to feature masculinity just like a biologically born male is not supposed to feature femininity. To avoid being “caught” with inappropriate features, a woman would enhance her femininity to hide her masculinity. This mask allows her to perform the male gender without undermining her female self: a surfeit of femininity gives room for male features that are discreet in comparison. Womanliness and the masquerade are

⁸ Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade” in Donna Bassin (ed.) *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements* (pp. 127-138), Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999, p.131.

two versions of the same idea. The masquerade is said unconsciously disingenuous but if we take into account Butler's work, the "genuine femininity" that Riviere writes about is also unconsciously disingenuous because it is artificial. Both masquerade and "genuine femininity" act as masks creating a visual identity for the ones watching. To summarize the argument in Montrelay's words: "the woman uses her own body as a disguise."⁹ A modernized version of the masquerade would include men into the masquerade process as they also use their body as a disguise in an opposite pattern, the surfeit of masculinity hiding unwanted femininity.

2. Devices for the subversion of gender

2.1. Cross-dressing and drag

Cross-dressing is "the wearing of clothes designed for the opposite sex"¹⁰. The first half of this compound word "cross" signals a shift, a movement that intersects a barrier and goes over it. Dressing standards are transferred from one gender to the other: gender performativity occurs in a reversed pattern in the sense that femininity markers are displayed on a biological male or vice-versa. This reversal goes against social standards of dressing for obvious reasons. It is capital to oppose cross-dressers to transgender people. Transgender issues touch on social identity and gender identification: the gender you identify with does not "match" your genitals. There is no shift for someone who is transgender if not a shift from refusal to self-acceptance. Cross-dressing is not as personal. It is deliberately playing with gender or simply refusing social expectations by embracing clothes that were originally made for the opposite gender. The motivations behind cross-dressing can be provocation but it can also be very innocent: wearing female clothes when you are a man does not necessarily mean that you aim for subversion. Actually, cross-dressing does not have to be motivated by any means. It can be a freeing way of wearing clothes that you want to wear regardless of the gender they are intended to. Yet, cross-dressing is still subversive even if it is not meant to be as it goes against the standards of gender.

The art of cross-dressing is drag. To first describe it in a plain and superficial way, drag is "stereotypically gendered clothing or costume worn by someone of the opposite sex"¹¹ or "entertainment in which performers dressed as members of the opposite sex caricature gender

⁹ Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator", *Screen*, 23 (3-4), pp.74-88, September 1982, p.82.

¹⁰ From *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

¹¹ From *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

stereotypes through the use of often outrageous costumes and exaggerated mannerisms”¹². Drag takes gender stereotypes as a basis for a full transformation into the opposite gender: it goes with clothes, jewelry, makeup, wigs but also a different way of walking, speaking, moving... The traditional purpose for a drag queen is passing for a woman or “being fishy” to put it in drag slang. Drag is in major part composed of female impersonators but drag can also be used to impersonate the male gender: drag kings use the male attire to perform the male gender. However, male impersonation has not gained much exposure probably because it is not deemed as subversive: female impersonation leads to perform the “weaker gender” according to social norms. In the 60s, drag queens would start competing in beauty pageants that imitated regular female beauty pageants¹³. Drag balls began in the 20s but really flourished in the 70s with the creation of the House of Labelle in Harlem¹⁴: New York City’s ballroom scene blossomed and became influent. Drag performers would dress up according to different categories inherent to the female gender and they had to perform it the best way to win. The ballroom scene was a big influence in the 80s: it especially brought the dance style called voguing which was even more popularized through Madonna’s song “Vogue”.

These definitions of what a drag queen is seem a little rigid nowadays since drag developed so much in a short amount of time. Drag gained exposure and popularity with the big global success of *Rupaul’s Drag Race* (whose first episode was launched in 2009) and drag got an unprecedented popularity that was quite unexpected. Many drag performers who did not fit the traditional definition of drag have gained exposure. Numerous transgender people showed that you could impersonate the gender you already identify with on a personal scale: the transgender drag queen Gia Gunn says “I am not a man that dresses up as a woman, I’m a woman that participates in the art of drag”¹⁵. Other drag queens do not aim at passing for a woman at all. The drag show *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula* undermines this purpose of passing for a woman: the tag line of the show is “the search for the world’s next drag supermonster”¹⁶ and most contestants perform a glamorized version of a monster, using female codes and shifting them to make them monstrous. The concept of “alternative drag” has been created to refer to unconventional drag performances. Many drag queens do not like being labeled as such

¹² From Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

¹³ *The Queen*, Dir. Frank Simon. 1968.

¹⁴ *Paris Is Burning*, Dir. Jennie Livingston. 1990.

¹⁵ *Rupaul’s Drag Race: All Stars*, Season 4 Episode 1, created by RuPaul. World of Wonder Productions, Logo, 2012-2016, VH1, 2018-.

¹⁶ *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula*, created by The Boulet Brothers. Boulet Brothers Productions, Ash+Bone Cinema, 2016-.

and merely want to be called “performers” in a more general way. Hollow Eve, a biological female and former contestant on *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula’s*, presents herself as “a post-binary drag socialist with a penchant for anarchy”¹⁷: she uses drag artistry to make feminist statements through shocking performances and to express her hate for any kind of conformity. Drag has become so many things at once and defining it nowadays is complicated. Rupaul’s motto “We were all born naked and the rest is drag”¹⁸ puts drag on the same level as regular gender performativity. The difference is that drag’s gender performativity is obvious when regular performativity remains unconscious for most people. Once you free yourself from the social construction of gender, everything is a disguise.

To sum up, drag performs performativity, amplifying social codes to make them obvious. Drag is dressing up for entertainment, usually playing with genders and using over the top aesthetics. Drag may aim for gender realism and it may also parts from it in variable degree. Drag can be used and interpreted in countless ways to make political statements or just to have a good time.

Cross-dressing in cinema has been greatly used for comic relief in the history of Hollywood cinema:

“nothing in the theatrical experience seems to guarantee a laugh like a man in a frock. In turn-of-century America, in fact, many vaudevillians did not consider their act complete unless they brought the house down with a drag routine complete with frilly skirts and flouncy ringlets. Female impersonation retained its stature as reliable comic relief with the invention of the ‘flickers’ in the early 20th century, maintaining this status through the silent era all the way to the present.”¹⁹

Cross-dressing was considered ludicrous and especially female impersonation since the sight of a woman dressing as a man like Katharine Hepburn or Greta Garbo was another occasion for admiration and desire. Female impersonation as comic relief made it a reliable source of humour. However, it was eventually used in provocation and cross-dressing in cinema became a potential way of making a political statement. Cross-dressing is not always made obvious

¹⁷ *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula* Season 3 Episode 1, created by The Boulet Brothers. Boulet Brothers Productions, Ash+Bone Cinema, 2016-.

¹⁸ *Rupaul’s Drag Race*, created by RuPaul. World of Wonder Productions, Logo, 2009-2016, VH1, 2017-.

¹⁹ Jean-Louis Ginibre, *Ladies Or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-dressing in the Movies*, Filipacchi Publishing, 2005, p.8.

because it does not always come with a scene of gender transformation. Cross-dressing can therefore also lead to confusion and questioning in cinema.

2.2. Androgyny

Androgyny comes from Greek *andros*, genitive of *anêr* "male" and *gynê* "woman"²⁰: androgyny literally brings both genders together, unifying them to create one single entity. Both genders are equally important to androgyny. In logic to the compulsive behavior of associating sex to gender, the dominant gender that is perceived socially is supposed to reveal your sex. But in the case of androgyny, there is no dominant gender stepping over the other anymore: both genders are balanced into one single body. It thus leads to the most telling definition of the androgynous which is "of indeterminate sex"²¹. Androgyny hinders the typical sex sorting that occurs among society, leading to confusion. One single look at someone is usually enough to register him/her as male or female but an androgynous person leaves doubt: the gender signals are mixed up and a deeper investigation is needed to decide which gender is the best fit. Both genders are perceived but one "has" to be chosen as the dominant one because it is a defining factor as to how someone is apprehended: the potential impossibility to perceive a dominant gender puts confusion as an inherent notion to androgyny.

Other definitions of androgyny bring out the indecisiveness in how to define it at all: androgyny is said to be "the quality or state of being neither specifically feminine or masculine ; the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics"²² and "Combining male and female features ; the absence of socially reinforced differences of behaviour supposedly characteristic of either gender."²³ These definitions are unprecise because they overlook a little the notion of balance which is key to the androgynous but they interestingly feature the complexity of androgyny by giving two ways of understanding it. First, it can be the combination of male and females features and the two genders are added up together, creating a surfeit of gender. On the contrary, androgyny can also be the absence of gender: from this point of view, instead of being added up, genders cancel one another. In other words, androgyny is either both genders at once or no gender at all. In both cases, androgyny is set between genders and one does not prevail in an obvious way.

²⁰ From *Etymonline*, <https://www.etymonline.com/>

²¹ From *Lexico*, <https://lexico.com/>

²² From *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

²³ From *Oxford Reference*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/>

Androgyny often results in trouble as to how to interpret it. Combining genders put up a smokescreen between the subject and the onlookers. However, the co-dependence of genders does not lead them to merge and “interpreting androgyny as the merging of the male and female into some kind of unisex limbo is misleading”²⁴. Androgyny involves a tight-knit connection that seems like a merging only from a distance. Masculine features do not become gender neutral when they are surrounded by feminine ones. The gender juxtaposition of the androgynous changes the overall perception.

2.3. Camp

Created by Susan Sontag, camp is an abstract notion that is not easy to apprehend as it is quite instinctive. You can think that something is camp without being able to explain why and your justification would be close to “it just is”. However, there are a few defining features that are always present when it comes to it. Camp is reminiscent of gender as it relies on artificiality. The less natural it is, the more likely it is to be camp. Camp is exuberant, embracing exaggeration and flamboyant performance: “it is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not”²⁵; but it also embraces the strongly attenuated: “Camp is the triumph of the epicene style”²⁶. Therefore, drag and androgyny are both prone to a camp sensibility.

Camp is sophisticated but not only: to be pure camp, there must be something wrong or at least not right. Camp counteracts the very notion of good taste, embracing kitsch and the “too much”: in a camp perspective, there is a good taste of bad taste. Something bad may remain purely bad but it may also become great especially because of its awfulness. Camp is attached to committed theatricality and ludicrous seriousness when it comes to something that is not too good. Camp has to be a successful failure or a failed success. John Waters, the king of (good) bad taste, is a major figure for camp aesthetics. To give an example of camp, I will therefore use a screenshot of *Female Trouble*.

²⁴ Maithreyi Krishnaraj, “Androgyny: An Alternative to Gender Polarity?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 (16/17), WS9-WS14, Apr. 20-27, 1996, p.5.

²⁵ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” in *Partisan Review*, 31 (4), 515–530. Fall 1964, p.518.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.519.



I Donna Dasher's phallic dress

Donna Dasher's outfit is very glamorous: the fur makes it elegant and the combination of pink and white is very feminine. However, the shape of the dress draws interestingly the shape of a phallus and testicles, the hat being the foreskin. This outfit is humorous but it is presented very seriously: no allusion is made to its ambivalence even non-verbally. Nobody laughs at it or even stares at it in amusement. This clothing is supposedly bad taste but it works well because it is presented in a way that is so elegant. The shape of the fur makes it "off" and quite ludicrous. This outfit showcases playfulness that is presented in pure elegance: it is a great example of camp.

II) Subverting through excess

1. The exhibited bodies

1.1. Embracing the grotesque body

In *Female Trouble*, the focus is put on the characters' bodies and the excess that can be summoned through them. The main character Dawn Davenport is played by Divine, an overweight drag queen. Having an overweight actress as a lead member of the cast was in itself astonishing in the 70s because it was a great departure from the traditional skinny movie star,

conformed to the beauty standards of the time. Divine did not fit those visual standards not only because she was overweight, but also because she was a drag queen and her body structure was manly. John Waters played upon those standards but did not even try to fit them: as he says, Divine's character was designed "equal parts [Jayne] Mansfield and Clarabell the Clown."²⁷ The famous actress from the 50s Jayne Mansfield embodies the concept of the masquerade as her character was based on the stereotype of pure femininity pushed to the extreme: she is an hourglass-shaped platinum blonde with prominent breasts, she has a surreal bird-like laugh, her voice is high-pitched and her characters are usually midway between stupidity and gullibility. She is often compared to Marilyn Monroe who was herself the most influent sex-symbol in the 50s. Mansfield's image is a caricature of desire, the most extreme version of female sensuality. Divine's figure is even more extreme because monstrosity and clownish features are mixed to it: excess was added to an already over-excessive body. Divine is a caricature of a caricature. Her makeup and proportions are enhanced: her head was shaved by half so it made more room for eye makeup²⁸. The ideal feminine figure becomes nightmarish. Edith Massey, another member of the cast, was also chosen for her peculiar and overweight body²⁹. The first time we see the character of Ida, she is naked and watches her reflection in the mirror: she moans while feeling her breasts. The pleasure she seems to get out of both touching and looking at her flesh



2 Divine is equal parts Jayne Mansfield and Clarabell the clown

²⁷ *Divine Trash*, Dir. Steve Yeager. 1998.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

features the director's own pleasure in filming it. *Female Trouble* shows great fascination for the flesh and the movie costumes are used to put it forward.

The outfits that were created for the movie were meant to feature the actors' protruding flesh. Just after the passage where she touches her breasts, Aunt Ida is shown wearing a "black leather peekaboo S&M outfit" and she is still moaning, touching her body and hair. The camera moves upwards up close to Ida, showing her body from bottom to top. She shows herself to her son, asking "Do you like it?" and responds to his praise by saying "I just feel more comfortable", moaning in the middle of the sentence. The flesh is not only featured through the camera movements, the characters themselves show off their bodies. Dawn works as a go-go dancer and wears a bikini, shaking her body onstage to the pleasure of her audience. Dawn and Ida's outfits show a great amount of flesh, whether it is because the outfits are see-through (Dawn's wedding dress for example) or because the fabric is cut out to show it (Dawn's skirt has windows on the sides and shows her legs). Those with a big morphology wear overtight clothes which show a great amount of bare skin and flesh pouring out of them. As for the thinner actors, they wear more casual and normal-fitting clothes. Dawn and Ida's bodies and body shapes are made evident: fat is often onscreen and when it is offscreen, the garments are usually tight enough to suggest it.

Prominent flesh meets the outside and is no longer repressed: flesh literally breaks free from the clothes that imprison it. This brings out the concept of the grotesque body which was theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin:

"[T]he grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose."³⁰

Points of contact are established between the inside of the body and its outside. Apertures and convexities are greatly emphasized in Dawn and Ida. Dawn's screaming and laughing leave her mouth to be open a lot, her breasts are as big as they could get and her curved belly peers through the fabric. There is a scene where Ida is rolling on the floor: her mouth is wide

³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.26 (trans. Hélène Iswolsky).



7 Aunt Ida's outfit (1/2)



6 Aunt Ida's outfit (2/2)



5 Ida's grotesque body



4 Dawn's grotesque body



3 Ida touching her flesh

open and the camera is placed in a way that the mouth is put right between her breasts, compressed by her bodysuit. Her body is both open and constricted, establishing points of contacts with the outside and the repressed flesh is craving to be released. *Female Trouble* embraces flesh that has been constantly repressed in cinema and that is waiting to come out.

The grotesque body has been recognized “as a concept evoking monstrosity, irrational confusion, absurdity, and a deformed heterogeneity”³¹. Monster comes from Latin *monstrare* “to demonstrate” and *monere* “to warn”³²; a monster involves a demonstrative appearance that is different enough to be pointed at in fear. Difference is always spotted over resemblance. In Waters’s movie *Pink Flamingos*, there is a scene where Divine walks down the street and people stare at her in shock, all turning on her as she crosses their paths: she even caused a car accident³³. These reactions were real and Waters’ camera was hidden: he knew that she would cause strong reactions simply by walking because she was created in this purpose. Waters says “I wanted her to be the Godzilla of drag queens, I wanted other drag queens to run in tears”³⁴: he created a monster to be featured in his cinema. He searched physical difference and deformities to cause strong reactions: the bodies are no longer hidden. They are on the contrary pushed to the edge so that they would monopolize attention.

1.2. The freaks and the carnivalesque

The fascination for the flesh goes along the characters’ extreme actions throughout the film. The bodies in *Female Trouble* are pushed to their limits through looks but also through action. The characters undergo as well as feature a great deal of excess. Most of the dialogues are heavily charged with emotion: characters often scream and when they do not, they express strong emotions such as disgust, excitement, anger, complaint, sadness... The bodies are manipulated to convey a constant outpouring of emotional excess that reflects upon their actions: Ida frantically rolls on the floor, Donna faints in excitement, and each character either laughs very loudly, cries or has a fit at some point. Dawn’s excessive behavior stands out the most. As soon as she gets praise for her looks and gets photographed by the Dashers, she starts having ecstatic episodes where she shows off her body with grand and rapid gestures. Waters

³¹ Sara Cohen Shabot, “The Grotesque Body: Fleshing Out the Subject”, in Silke Horstkotte, Esther Peeren (eds.), *The Shock of the Other*, (pp. 55-67). Brill, Rodopi, 2007, p.57.

³² From *Etymonline*, <https://www.etymonline.com/>

³³ Christine Gledhill, *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, University of Illinois Press, 2020, p.209.

³⁴ *Divine Trash*, Dir. Steve Yeager. 1998.

told Divine that they had to be “exhibitionist frenzy”³⁵. Those frenzy episodes cause a great rush of pleasure to Dawn, even reaching orgasm when she injects herself with “liquid eye-liner” before the act. The movie is also very concerned with bodily fluids: spit, blood, vomit, sweat, amniotic fluid... come out of the bodies more often than expected. The potential of the grotesque bodies is used fully to show excruciating excess, constantly absorbing and releasing. These events create an overflowing amount of bodily transgression.

The bodily transgression involves a strong use of the gross-out, creating repellent and disgusting images. John Waters earned the titles “the Pope of Trash” and “the Prince of Puke”³⁶ because he succeeded in showing what nobody had dared to show before. R.H. Gardner from *The Sun* rightfully writes:

“John Waters specialises in works of an unbelievable gross and offensive nature. No contemporary filmmaker has presented the human race in so disgusting a light. Waters’ characters are not simply hideous, they affront the soul. They exude the aroma of outside toilets. They achieve a grotesqueness for which the adjective ‘repulsive’ leaves something to be desired”³⁷



8 Dawn's exhibitionist frenzy

³⁵ John Waters, *Female Trouble*, DVD, 2006, Metropolitan Video.

³⁶ Matt Connolly, *Underground Exploiter: John Waters and the Development of a Directorial Brand, 1964-1981*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018, p.6.

³⁷ Xavier Mendik, Steven Jay Schneider, “A Tasteless Art: Waters, Kaufman and the Pursuit of ‘Pure’ Gross-out” in Xavier Mendik, Steven Jay Schneider (eds.), *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon* (pp. 204-221), New York and London: Columbia University Press, 2002, p.215.

The horrendous behaviors featured in *Female Trouble* could make the viewers uncomfortable because they celebrate filth and disgust, two notions that traditionally go against the pleasure of looking. However, everything is so extreme that no identification is possible and the viewers apprehend the movie as a terrifying never-ending bodily spectacle. Abnormality is showcased as a source of great fascination: the world of *Female Trouble* is a carnival where freaks perform their strangeness. The word “freaks” encompasses human beings who feature physical abnormalities: their bodies are greatly different visually or have extraordinary abilities. Freaks are human beings that are too different to be socially accepted as such. However, their differences are also what makes them special in the eyes of the ones who reject them. Therefore, freaks reach acceptance when they show off their differences in freak shows. Their physical abnormalities provoke amazement as long as they remain looked at for entertainment’s sake: human beings tend to look at freaks as if they were animals and freaks respond to this by performing their frightening image. In the movie *Freaks* by Tod Browning, the freaks are terrifying when they intend to be terrifying. When they are gathered together, they share a joyful camaraderie and great warmth because they escape the morbid human curiosity for the abnormal and they allow themselves not to perform their distorted inner selves for the onlooker’s satisfaction. *Female Trouble* meets the description of a freak show.

For in a freak show, the world is flipped upside down and pleasure is found by looking at traditionally unpleasurable things: abnormalities that are used to be repressed are now spectacular sources of wonder, as long as they remain spectacle only. The grotesque bodies and excessive bodily performances form a freaky spectacle to be watched in stupefaction. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, “the carnivalesque is expressed in three forms: ritual spectacle, comic verbal compositions, and various forms of ‘billingsgate’, that is, obscene and abusive language.”³⁸ This description of the carnivalesque is a quintessential portrayal of Waters’s movie which reaches obscenity through speech and actions, creating a spectacle. The camp aesthetics of the movie, featuring in almost every scene “off” aesthetics but that are taken very seriously onscreen reinforce this impression that we are watching a spectacle, camp becoming another peculiarity to be stared at. Camp is “a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers”³⁹: its exuberance demands attention, ostensibly putting itself as the center of attention. Dawn is aware that her horrendous behavior is what makes her special and that her life is a never-ending show. She states it clearly when she says “My life is a show! Why is it so

³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *op.cit.*, p.5.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *op.cit.*, p.522.

hard for people to understand”: she wishes people would apprehend her as a spectacle because this is how she shines the most. Dawn’s one woman show near the end puts her as a freak that is exhibited like a beast in a zoo: a man screams at the entrance of the building “Step right up ladies and gentlemen! Come right this way! Meet the most beautiful woman alive!”, explicitly touching on people’s curiosity for body exhibitionism inherent to a freak show. To the great pleasure of the audience, Dawn bounces on a trampoline. The audience’s applause increases her exhibitionist frenzy and the pleasure she takes out of it. Then, she rips a phone book,



10 the sign to the freak show



9 the freak performing

featuring her superwoman strength, she rolls on the floor she sucks fish and rubs them onto her body in a baby crib. People cheer loudly at this sight: they enjoy Dawn's spectacle like they would enjoy a zoo spectacle. We do not know if the spectators believe that she is "the most beautiful woman in the world" as announced but as viewers, this lack of information is filled with our own thoughts: Dawn being put as beautiful is taken as a bad joke destined to mock her. Dawn's behavior and appearance is pushed even further than its extreme is supposed to be and no empathy is possible. This lack of possible identification creates her freak identity and *Female Trouble* takes the form of a freak show right until the end with Dawn's electrocution as her final spectacle.

2. Excess to create an alternate version of reality

Female Trouble's over-excess puts her as an experience far from life as we know it. For the viewers, "excess provides a freedom from constraint, an opportunity to approach a film with a fresh and slightly defamiliarized perspective"⁴⁰. Nothing in this movie is meant to be believable or realistic. John Waters plays with extremes, mixing shock statements and clichés that are pushed so far that they are not mere clichés anymore but an over-exaggeration of reality: in *Female Trouble*, reality is in turn amplified and reversed.

Dawn is worshipped for her beauty all along the movie to the great amazement of the viewers since Divine's appearance in the movie is far from the traditional codes of beauty. New codes of beauty are created, destroying the thread of society that one has to follow to be accepted. The Dashers audition girls who would like to enter the private salon, reserved for "ravishing beauties only". The receptionist tells them "this Dawn Davenport, she seems especially cheap, you'll like her", connecting ravishing beauty to cheapness in a casual statement that does not surprise the Dashers. When they indeed meet the girls, Donna immediately screams in disgust "Oh my God, look at that one, she's just putrid!" and points to an average-looking girl instead of pointing to Dawn who is more prone to cause this kind of rejection. Reality is flipped around. The Dashers choose Dawn as their new model when she is the opposite of conventional beauty. When Dawn gets disfigured by acid, it is good news and it makes her even more beautiful. Aunt Ida forces her son to be queer, introducing him to boys in the hope he leaves his wife: she says "I worry that you work in an office, have children, celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of heterosexuals is a sick and boring life!". When

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy" in *Screen*, 36 (4), 371–393, Winter 1995, p.391.

Dawn gets raped on a dirty mattress in the woods, the scene takes the form of a casual and enjoyable sexual moment: it started like a rape, Earl forcing her out of the car and throwing her on the ground, but it became a regular consented sexual act. Later on, while they are having sex, Gator uses needle-nose pliers as a sex toy for Dawn and she loves it. But when Gator puts a carrot in her mouth which is more sexually connoted than needle-nose pliers, she gets really upset and asks for a divorce. Finally, Dawn's motherhood is everything it should not be: she begs her daughter to stay out of her way ("Can't you just sit there and look out into the air?") and threatens to hit her with a car rail, she tells her that school is useless, she states that she does "not look too good for [her] age" and explains many times that she has been diagnosed retarded by the doctor. Many times in the movie, reality is reversed.

But aside from those moments featuring a reality flipped around, there also moments showing exaggerated clichés. The "right" behaviors, the reactions that you are expected to have if you are morally conformed to society as we know it, do not seem appropriate in the movie as they are pushed over the edge. The jury laughs when Dawn says she is "a top model in the country": given Dawn's crazy appearance at this moment of the film, this statement is indeed hard to take seriously. However, the jury members laugh very loudly all at once, completely inhibited and uncaring about the fact that it is not something morally correct to laugh at. Many secondary characters are mere clichés amplified to the maximum of their capacity: the perfect student who wants "to get an education" and reports bad behaviors, the mean teacher humiliating his pupils, the cruel prison guards who mock the prisoners, the alcoholic pervert who is also an over-manly rapist, the rebellious daughter who would do anything to annoy her mother... The portrayal of three queer hairdressers completes this gallery of clichés: Dribbles acts crazy and wishes he were a little girl; Wink dances ostensibly and drinks while cutting his customer's hair, he loves the smell of hair-products and gives a lot of compliments; Butterfly is overly sexual and overly feminine, he wears a wig that looks like the female customers' hairstyles. Those characters are almost all one-dimensional as they have one precise stereotyped profile they stick to throughout the movie. Dawn's motherhood that counteracts the idea of a good mother meets a moment of genuine kindness when she says "it's hard being a loving mother". But the reason why she is saying it is because she had just tied Taffy to her bed as a punishment and she is surprised that her loving attempt to raise her child thanks to such punishments fails. This desire for good parenting which goes through forcing herself to punish her child seems indecent because the punishment she uses is too extreme for a child. Even traditionally moral actions become indecent because they are pushed too far.

This surfeit of excess, whether it is through the amplification of reality or its reversal, causes confusion and it is hard to know when the movie switches from one to the other. As viewers, we are drowned in exaggeration without any landmark to hold on to and we are put into deep confusion. We have to spot if what we see is amplified reality or reversed reality. In both cases, the movie does not show anything that can be expected. The two patterns act like semicircles that would be drawn starting from the same starting point (which would be reality as we know it): they depart from one another in two opposite directions to finally meet again as they move further and further. In that sense, both extremes merge into one unique set of excess and it is no longer possible to dissociate them. The society Waters created is set far away from our own even if they resemble one another at first glance. Almost nothing in this movie is morally correct if we analyze it with our regular sense of reason. But our regular sense of reason does not seem appropriate to apply to a society that distant from us. Therefore, the movie seems in retrospect less immoral than it is amoral: by constantly distancing itself from the usual moral sense, it seems unconcerned with it. Watching this movie is a defamiliarized experience and in result, a new alternate reality is created. We witness in awe a twisted world which almost acts as a dystopia.

A striking parallel is interesting to be drawn here between *Female Trouble* and *Liquid Sky* because of their portrayal of a distorted reality through excess. *Liquid Sky* is a metaphorical representation of the society of the time as seen by the director. Right off the beginning, it feels like the movie is a window on society from an objective point of view: it begins with the arrival of the aliens and ends with their departure. We witness New Yorkers' lives from a foreign point of view, the "alien eye", watching them live with fascination. Knowing that Tsukerman is an immigrant from Russia reinforces this impression that we are watching a whole new civilization with amazement: he shot *Liquid Sky* only five years after he arrived in New York with his wife. The movie was motivated by a documentary purpose. Tsukerman and his crew made a lot of researches on New York's club scene, its trends and its people's lifestyle. His desire was to create a metaphor out of that, "a fable plot which would include all the myths of the time: Sex, drugs, rock'n'roll, aliens from outer space."⁴¹ Therefore, he and his wife Nina Kerova based the characters on real persons they encountered and used their lives as a basis for the character developments. These persons were even offered to play the characters that were inspired by them. Tsukerman says about Anne playing both Margaret and Jimmy: "I knew that Anne would

⁴¹ Colleen Kelsey, "A Brief History of Neon Cult Film Liquid Sky", April 16, 2018. *Interview Magazine* (last accessed: 14/05/2020) URL: <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/brief-history-neon-soaked-cult-film-liquid-sky>

play both parts [...] because that's a part of Anne's personality. When she was a little girl, her mother would dress her as a boy, and called her 'Jimmy.'"⁴² And when Anne Carlisle accepted to star in the film, she also moved to live with Tsukerman and his wife and co-wrote the script with Kerova. Anne Carlisle's life was a great source of inspiration during the writing process: Tsukerman recalls "There were moments where we were touching some really touchy subjects, but she never said no, she was always ready—it was not only an artistic project, but a self-analysis as well."⁴³ Therefore, as crazy as the science fiction part of it is (aliens came on Earth to feed on orgasms), the events depicted in the movie serve as a genuine portrayal of Carlisle's own personal life whose emotions contributed greatly to the story development.

If we were to recount the plot by forcing realism into it, a whole new perspective upon the movie appears. Margaret did everything she could to fit in where she thought she fitted as an outcast (that is to say the New York City underground scene) and she became a living caricature along the way:

"she [...] was molded (or 'taught', as she says contemptuously) to fit the norm. Not only did she become like everyone else in the scene – she took drugs, took a lesbian lover, featured an androgynous look, became a 'mean bitch' – she actually became the symbol of the lifestyle, the model Midnight Magazine wanted on its cover. She became an Edie Segwick figure, bored and drugged out of her mind, surrounded by an uncaring, pretentious art crowd [...] which she knows will drop her as soon as her star fades."⁴⁴

Her whole life is a performance destined to be accepted: she fakes her persona in the hope of reaching social acceptance. Her performance features her desire to be accepted. Margaret's dancing is eerie and resembles a mating dance: she stretches her arms as if they were wings, she leans forward and spins round. When we see her dancing, she is always making eye contact with a man, trying to seduce him. Margaret uses her body to make people notice her: she has mastered her ability to attract visual attention, putting herself as visible in the purpose of eventually being accepted. And this is what she had failed to do before she came to New York City: she used to live in Connecticut but her life didn't fulfilled her, hence her moving to New York City. Margaret has a constant need to leave and start over in the hope of eventually finding

⁴² Oscar Goff, "BUFF20 Interview: 'Liquid Sky' director Slava Tsukerman", Mar. 21, 2018. Boston Hassle (last accessed: 14/05/2020) URL: <https://bostonhassle.com/buff20-interview-liquid-sky-director-slava-tsukerman/>

⁴³ Colleen Kelsey, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴ Danny Peary, *Cult Midnight Movies: Discover the 37 Best Weird, Sleazy, Sexy, and Crazy Good Cinema Classics*, Workman Publishing, 2014, page unknown.

her people. When Adrian talks about moving to Berlin, Margaret asks, full of hope “You think it’ll be different there?” and she holds on to this prospect. And when her trip to Berlin is no longer possible with Adrian’s death, she finds new hope of starting over somewhere else by joining the aliens’ spaceship.

To sum up, the story of *Liquid Sky* recounts a quest for identity and a search for belonging: this is a familiar story that calls for a realist identification. But this story is only underlying within all the science-fiction craziness around it: this is an over the top version of reality because the actual events are defamiliarized. The metaphor inside the movie is to be decrypted. A science fiction movie can usually tell many things on real society as it can be interpreted as a “wrapping made of technology, future, machines and spaceflights”⁴⁵. Tsukerman’s movie itself is disguised with the excess that comes with the codes of science-fiction and the viewers have to look beyond them to catch a glimpse of society as they know it.

This pattern of hiding reality under excess brings *Female Trouble* and *Liquid Sky* together: both movies create a distorted version that has been amplified in different ways, creating distance between the films and the viewers.

3. Towards marginalization

John Waters’ early filmmaking was made as subversive as it could get. He distanced himself from standards and “everything took place on the fringe, disconnected from mainstream popular culture both by choice and by exclusion.”⁴⁶ The social background in which he started his career as a director did not allow him to bloom as his genuine queer self. The queer community’s path towards pride was only beginning with the Stonewall Riots in 1969. John Waters imposed himself and his cinema even before this. A peculiar coincidence made him release his very first full-length feature film *Mondo Trasho* in March of 1969, only three months before the riots in June. He unapologetically overlooked social standards as he was not welcome according to them anyway: he reversed this pattern of repressing queerness by refusing mainstream standards on his own. He did not only refuse to mold himself on a pre-conceived society that did not have room for him to begin with: he did not even try to. John Waters did whatever he wanted to do even though he was aware it was not going to be well-received. In fact, he sought

⁴⁵ Michel Chion, *Les Films de science-fiction*. 13/11/2008. Cahiers du cinéma : Editions de l’étoile, p.88.

Translated from French : « un « habillage » à base de technologie, de futur, de machines et de vol dans l’espace »

⁴⁶ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, Duke University Press, 2013, p.41.

marginalization. The more he was disapproved of by a mainstream audience, the more he was satisfied. He featured a great amount of shocking images only for their shock value and his films were “more likely to be *endured* than *enjoyed*”⁴⁷. He started embracing bad taste, or rather the good taste of bad taste, embracing fully his campy vision.

He used Divine as his muse and wrote many roles for her to be played. Waters says: “My films are about people who take what society thinks is a disadvantage, exaggerating their supposed defects, and then turning them into a winning style”⁴⁸. He based his cinema upon the cinematic drag as drag was highly marginalized and he showcased it for the world to see. Drag was considered so poorly partly because “To choose to appear as ‘female’ when one is ‘male’ is always constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy of ridicule”⁴⁹: a drag queen, by impersonating the female gender, accepts to lose her privilege of being a male. Drag is in itself a process of marginalization by deliberately embodying the disadvantaged gender. However, John Waters was even marginalized among the drag scene. He made fun of the usual drag queens’ pageantry of the time and stuck-up attitude: “they wanted to be Miss America and they wanted to be Donald Trump, basically, that were their values. And they hated Divine”⁵⁰. Divine’s drag was far away from traditional drag back then because it was way too clownish and not elegant and she was despised by other drag queens. Hence, John Waters and his crew were marginalized even within one of the most marginalized community of the time: they fought both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Waters created his own production company which was also his own small community: it was called Dreamland and its people were the Dreamlanders,

John Waters and the Dreamlanders formed their own “circus”⁵¹ as Waters put it: they placed themselves as freaks, distancing themselves from the suburban bourgeois part of Baltimore and performing their strangeness through shocking cinema. John Waters’ cinema matches the definition of paracinema which Jeff Sconce created. Paracinema is a “counter-cinema”⁵² and “cinematic ‘trash’”⁵³: paracinema is totally embodied by Waters’ work. However, Sconce opposes camp to paracinema: “Camp was an aesthetic of ironic colonization

⁴⁷ Xavier Mendik, Steven Jay Schneider, *op.cit.*, p.211.

⁴⁸ Emanuel Levy, *Gay Directors, Gay Films?: Pedro Almodovar, Terence Davies, Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant, John Waters*, Columbia University Press, 2015, p.269.

⁴⁹ Bell Hooks, “Is Paris Burning”, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (pp.145-156), Boston: South End Press, 2015, p.146.

⁵⁰ *Divine Trash*, Dir. Steve Yeager. 1998.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Jeff Sconce, *op.cit.*, p.385.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.372.

and cohabitation. Paracinema, on the other hand, is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation.”⁵⁴ In the eyes of paracinema lovers, camp is not hard-core enough to oppose the mainstream audience and it lacks the first-degree aggressivity of paracinema. *Liquid Sky* would not match paracinema for example but it can be taken as camp. In this movie, “style is clearly intended as provocation”⁵⁵ and the visual choices on a formal scale are as important as Margaret’s choices in style: they are thought out to be provoking. But its aesthetics and general identity do not counter “quality cinema” enough to be paracinema. Nevertheless, both concepts do not seem to be incompatible in Waters’ cinema as both are to be found. Both camp and paracinema definitions apply to *Female Trouble*, the more playful camp side of the movie giving way for Waters’s more confrontational position through style and his portrayal of filth. He embraced “the idea of style as a form of refusal, the elevation of crime into art”⁵⁶ and took this statement from Genet as a starting point for the writing of his movie. His desire for marginality brought his use of excess to distance himself from everything else. But Waters and Divine have now gained a very strong good reputation in mainstream culture because of their over-use of shock and excess: their desire to reach the margins is what made them popular on a global scale. This paradox conveys the impression that the subversion through excess does not turn out as subversive as it seems at first sight.

4. The limits of excess

Playing with excess provides a high potential for subversion. However, the actual subversion that *Female Trouble* creates does not seem to match the degree of subversion that is expected from such an amount of excess. The social standards remain unchallenged by this surfeit and the norms may on the contrary even be reinforced. The female gender comes within society with codes that match with it and those codes have to be recreated for someone to pass for female. Drag queens recreate the female gender but the codes that they use to give a full gender illusion reach for more than just average femininity: drag uses the stereotypical image of the female as a basis. Femininity was alienated by beauty standards which constitute the typically feminine:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.374.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁵⁶ Janet Bergstrom, “Androids and Androgyny”, *Camera Obscura* (1986) 5 (3 (15)): 36-65, 1986, p.18.

“Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with the traditional lore of cosmetics. [...] Faces became abstract portraits: sharply observed and meticulously executed studies in alienation.”⁵⁷

Beauty standards do not necessarily have to be followed to pass for a woman. However, these standards constitute the ideal image of a woman and this is what classic drag aims for. Drag does not free itself from gender standards. Its gender transposition calls for the image of “the hyper Western concept of the perfect female form”⁵⁸ that lies in everyone’s unconscious. Drag depends on this concept of the ideally feminine to recreate the female gender: in other words, a drag queen is bound to perpetuate the codes that are attached to it. Divine’s look is not classic drag because it is too extreme and monstrous to create a genuine female impersonation, but its basis still lies within the female beauty standards: even though monstrosity is attached to her persona, the familiar image of a woman can easily be found. Instinctively, when we look at Divine, we have in mind that she is a woman. It may be clear that it is a biological man playing a woman or that it is a horrifying and monstrous version of a woman but if someone had to gender Divine, it would be impossible not to say that she is female. She does not pass for a woman but she is female anyway. The reason for her monstrosity is rightly justified by the fact that her image is deviant in comparison to the typically feminine.

This stereotypical image acts as a point of reference and shifting from it requires to have it in mind to begin with. Divine’s clothing and makeup, her hairstyle, her walk and overall performance meet the description of an “off” ideally feminine figure. Bell Hooks brings race issues into the matter in her essay “Is Paris Burning?”. She questions drag aesthetics as seen in Jennie Livingston’s movie *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary featuring the ball culture of the 80s in New-York City and the African-American community involved in it. She puts drag as:

“a racialized fictional construction of the ‘feminine’ that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender, that is to say when the idealized notion of the female/feminine is really a sexist idealization of white womanhood”⁵⁹

Hooks strikingly observes that African-American drag queens as seen in the documentary do not only perform gender: they perform whiteness as well. This may no longer be true nowadays but the mere fact that it was back then unveils that there is indeed a ruling female image, the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁵⁸ *The Queens*, Dir. Adrienne Gruben. 2019.

⁵⁹ Bell Hooks, *op.cit.*, p.147.

image of the ideally feminine. The ideal image in the 80s being a white woman, even non-white drag queens tried to reach it through performance. Taking race issues into consideration, the existence of an ideal female image for drag to recreate becomes evident. This image is collectively reinforced by drag's attempt to match it or part from it, still taking it as a point of reference to be compared to. It is very rare for a drag queen not to wear high heels for example, even when she features alternative or monstrous drag: the monstrous relying on difference, there has to be a few hints to show what the image of reference is and the monstrous is apprehended depending on how much it shifts from it. Drag usually involves an unimaginable use of makeup, jewelry and accessories: a drag queen is likely to be more womanly than a woman. Therefore, drag queens reinforce female standards even more than traditional female performance. Playing upon a stereotypical image helps taking perspective upon it but it also reminds the ones watching that it exists. Therefore, drag does not only recreate gender: it reinforces the stereotypically female. Impersonating a woman also passes through a re-enactment of gender polarities. In *Female Trouble*, Dawn is the one who is emotionally involved in her romantic relationship and she is the one getting: Dawn is stereotypically conformed to her female self.

Drag unconsciously asserts gender standards without questioning their existence. Nevertheless, drag only plays with gender which implies that it is not to be taken seriously. This lack of seriousness is double-edged. On one hand, playing with gender helps removing credibility from it as its artificiality is ostensibly showcased. Drag puts gender as a fun performance instead of a crucial part of identity: gender is made less legitimate and its fluidity is more apparent. But on the other hand, as political as drag is by essence, its playfulness puts it at a distance to the people watching: drag is entertainment and its political value is often silenced. It is an enjoyable experience to witness but its flamboyance prevents others to take it as a personal statement that applies to everyone. And oddly, being aware of gender fluidity and its artificiality do not always reflect upon people's minds: the understanding that gender can be transposed does not always come with a questioning about our own gender identity. The excess of drag makes it hard to raise awareness on a personal scale because no identification is possible: it is the starting point of a deeper process that needs to occur away from any form of defamiliarized and distant entertainment. In other words, there has to be a genuine trigger to challenge gender standards and the lack of seriousness of drag struggles to cause it.

Excess creates distance and leads to a defamiliarized experience. *Female Trouble* is not believable and it was not meant to be. Waters does not try to change people's minds but mocks

society as it is instead. He actually has no intention of reaching a mainstream audience: the intended viewers are the ones already aware of gender issues. John Waters addresses the ones who already agree with him and ignores the rest. His movies' political potential seems therefore accidental because Waters does not seem to care enough about the ones rejecting him to try to change their minds: he intends to shock them instead.

Drag in cinema is likely to be taken lightly: "too often, [...] cinematic drag is reduced to a mere joke, a harmless tease that tacitly reassures us that people can change their clothes but not their sexual identities"⁶⁰. Waters's early films are not "harmless" but they can be considered "jokes". They are not to be taken seriously: Waters' offhand attitude seems to scream 'Who cares?' He already has taken his perspective upon social standards and he plays upon the fact that most people still haven't, shocking them on purpose. But at the same time, his high desire for subversions removes any seriousness from his movies which do not seem so subversive anymore in consequence.

Waters' comments apply within the frame but remain distant from reality: the viewers reassure themselves that it is only a movie on the pretense that it is too excessive. Waters based *Female Trouble* upon the controversial statement "crime is beauty", inspired by Genet. This statement takes its root upon the fact that a criminal gets fame for his deeds: the more atrocious the crimes are, the more famous the criminal gets. Criminality in this sense has positive connotations and seems to be an understanding path to pursue. Dawn is extremely proud of getting death penalty because this is "the biggest award [she] could get in [her] field"⁶¹: she rejoices about the idea of having her photos in the newspapers the day after her execution. Dawn tells about her joy with watery eyes directed to the ceiling as if she was about to experience a divine transfiguration. Once she is set on the chair waiting to be electrified, she gives a big speech preparing herself for her "final curtain close". The movie denounces how twisted human fascination for criminality can be, unveiling a dark truth within society that is not always evident. But because of the tone of the movie and its constant defamiliarized approach, the ending is easily taken as another joke and this twisted statement is lost in the rest. To put into perspective *Female Trouble*'s capacity to make its viewers think, it is interesting to compare it to *Sunset Boulevard* which also features fame's darkness. In this movie, Norma Desmond has been destroyed by fame and struggles to perceive reality as it is in the end because of it. Norma and Dawn feature the same craziness that goes through an over-attachment to fame and an

⁶⁰ Claude J. Summer, *The Queer Encyclopedia of Film and Television*, 2005, Cleis Press, p.271.

⁶¹ *Divine Trash*, Dir. Steve Yeager. 1998.

altered perception of reality. But when Norma goes down the staircase in the final scene, denying that her career is over and asking about her new role as an actress, it is devastating to watch. Norma's craziness has strong impact upon the viewers because the rest of the movie is down to earth: human identification is possible and the movie is thus taken seriously. Norma's fate is deeply moving but Dawn's delusional death causes laughter. *Female Trouble's* accumulation of excess brings distance and any political statement is lost in excess.

Subversion becomes comic relief and passes through an emotional disconnect. There is no trouble in laughing at anything because the movie is not taken seriously enough to apply what we see to our own lives. The transgression is clearly spotted by the viewers but it stays within the frame of filmmaking. To sum up, "the act of transgression draws attention to the norm and might reinforce it"⁶² because it becomes a source of comedy. Subversion through excess acts as a defamiliarized smokescreen and "the effect might be that of a 'safety valve', a means of letting off steam without really challenging the norm"⁶³. Instead of challenging standards, excess provides a high cathartic experience.



11 Dawn's final curtain close

⁶² Geoff King, "Transgression and Regression", *Film Comedy*, Wallflower Press, 2002, p.68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.67.

III) Subverting through deprivation

1. The human disconnects

1.1. The refusal of physical contact

When Waters enhances his characters' emotions and reactions, Tsukerman inhibits his characters' actions so that they pass for barely human. Dance scenes in a nightclub are supposedly very dynamic and energetic scenes. In *Liquid Sky*'s nightclub, people are frantically moving their hips back and forth or jumping on the dancefloor without touching each other. They seem to have their own space attributed on the set and nobody steps onto someone else's spot. They all repeat the same robotic movements on a loop. Contacts are avoided as much as possible. Margaret often wears gloves and tights: she can touch and let herself getting touched without engaging into skin-to-skin contact as her whole body is covered. Fabric is often put between Margaret and the ones sexually interested in her. She goes through five sexual intercours throughout the movie and she is naked in none of them. When Adrian forces her into having sex, she wears a long skirt and Margaret wears tights: Adrian reaches orgasm by rubbing herself on Margaret through both fabrics. Genuine contacts are constantly repressed. When skin-to-skin contacts do happen, they are unwelcome and strategies are created to counteract them. Paul meets Margaret just after she got a shower: she doesn't have makeup on and she only wears a loose dress with thin straps. In other words, her skin is accessible and she is vulnerable. Paul approaches his hand towards her shoulders and she quickly takes the towel wrapped around her head to cover her bare skin. Paul attempts to touch her many times all along the movie and Margaret always takes his hand away, asking him to leave when he does. When Owen puts his cheek on her back, she says "you have no right to do that, I am not your possession". Bare skin represents her vulnerability and when someone touches it, it becomes an aggression. Physical disconnects do not only occur between the characters but also between the characters and the viewers: the characters disappear in turns from the screen when the aliens kill them. They are removed from the screen before our very eyes and the movie ends when almost all its characters have vanished, Margaret being teleported to the spacecraft. Therefore, the refusal for physical contact eventually comes with mere physical disappearances: the bodies are first deprived from contacts, which undermines their existence through the absence of touching, to finally be destroyed.



12 Margaret covers her shoulders

Nudity is avoided and it is the same for sexuality which is either repressed or unenjoyable. One of the first scenes of the movie features Adrian's performance named "Me and My Rhythm Box", a song about female masturbation: sexuality is already deprived of flesh contact. Jimmy's mother seduces the scientist in her apartment, giving sexual innuendos and explicitly initiating the sexual act which the scientist constantly postpones. Sexual intercourses are never spontaneous: they are used as ways of asserting one's power over the other. Vincent and Paul rape Margaret to prove that they have control over her and to assert their manliness. Margaret's frigidity and lack of mutual response while facing their advances challenge their masculinity, and even more so when she mocks them and tells them "Why don't you go home to your mama?" or "you can't get it up anyway". Sexuality goes through provocative statements and actions: sex is never a good time but a fight to be won. First, Margaret is abused sexually. But once she finds out she can kill people by giving them orgasms, she starts using her body as a destructive weapon. The only times when she deliberately undresses or initiates the sexual intercourse, she knows for sure it is lethal. Paul and Vincent die ignoring that Margaret set them up to their deadly fate. Physical contacts, when they do happen, are impregnated with ulterior motives and as Margaret's recurring line "this pussy has teeth" suggests, contacts are hostile. Sexual hostility is even more intense because of the main storyline: reaching orgasm means death.

Both disconnects (physical and sexual) are combined into the use of drugs as sexual replacement. The hormone secreted by the brain during orgasm is the same as LSD molecules and they seem to be interchangeable: “sexuality is rechanneled in various non-standard ways, including the substitution of drugs for sexual activity”⁶⁴. Sex is used as bait for Jimmy to get access to drugs in Margaret’s apartment, pretending to be interested in her because she can provide them. On the contrary, Vincent gives drugs to Margaret in the hope of making her obedient and docile as he takes advantage of her body. Sex and drugs are co-dependent and they lead to one another. When either of them fails to provide strong emotion, the subject has to switch from one to the other. Paul sexually assaults Margaret after he finds out drugs are no good for him. And the opposite can also be found in the movie with Margaret: she injects herself with heroin in the end because she can’t have an orgasm through sex. The heroin charge she takes acts as an autoerotic experience and it is the closest she gets to an orgasm. Drugs and sexuality are one and the same. The only difference is the lack of contacts that drugs implies: whether it is Jimmy sniffing cocaine or whether it is Paul using a needle to inject himself with heroin, drugs are taken as individual experiences. The only time when drugs are forced into someone else (Vincent forcing methaqualone down Margaret’s throat), they remain harmless and Margaret does not feel anything. Taking drugs brings out a dehumanized sexuality that calls for physical distance and self-reliance. The bodies being deprived from any craving for closeness are self-sufficient and drugs are more appealing to the characters because they allow a non-sexual sexuality.



13 Vincent uses drugs as a gateway to sex

⁶⁴ Janet Bergstrom, *op.cit.*, p.58.

Of all the characters in *Liquid Sky*, the biggest drug or sex consumers are actually the aliens who came on Earth for the mere purpose of feeding on them. But the aliens' genuine desire for endorphins is compensated by their dematerialization: in science fiction movies, "usually the alien is either monstrous or completely disembodied; there is no organic continuity with human being"⁶⁵. Here, aliens are disembodied. They don't have a body but they only have one eye that they use to spot what they are looking for. We do not know if the eye is a part of the alien body or if it is a device integrated to the spacecraft. But overall, aliens are reduced to a single action that is also the only element they feature physically: looking. Once again, there is no touching involved. Deprived of physical contact, looking becomes key in the movie but distance is still maintained through it. The movie begins by a long zoom-out: the image slowly recedes from the apartment to show the whole building at night. The cinematic patterns of looking have been theorized by Laura Mulvey:

"women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness"⁶⁶ p.837

And indeed, the place where every look seems to converge is Margaret. Margaret is the target of looking and instinctively, we assume the position of a male point of view as we watch her: if we had to gender the aliens, we would say that they are male because the "bearer of the look" tends to be a man in cinema. Margaret's job as a model reinforces the impression that her purpose is to be displayed and looked at. Jimmy is also a model but they are not treated in the same way. When he is the center of the attention, Jimmy usually gets praise when Margaret gets a lot of critiques. She is scanned meticulously when it comes to visuals. When Jimmy and Margaret model for a magazine, we only see Jimmy's face onscreen. But when we see the photos from the photoshoot, we only see pictures of Margaret: only the final images she produces matter. Margaret as a female model is reduced to images with no substance or volume. She ends up performing this image: when Jimmy keeps saying that she is ugly and a "chicken woman", she answers in provocation "you are the most beautiful boy in the world", pushing her performance to the edge by insisting on giving him a blow job. The refusal of physical

⁶⁵ Anne Cranny-Francis, "Robots, Androids, Aliens and Others: the erotics and politics of science-fiction film" in Sean Redmond and Leon Marvell (eds.), *Endangering Science Fiction Film* (pp. 220-243). New York and London: Routledge, 2016, p.237.

⁶⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema", *Screen*, 16 (3) (1975), later published as "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (pp. 833-844). New York: Oxford UP, 1999, p.837.

contacts increases the importance of the action on looking. But even looking is counteracted onscreen.

Mirrors are numerous in *Liquid Sky* and even direct looking is therefore avoided. We see the characters' reflection and the impression of physical distance is increased. The characters not only use mirrors to see themselves but also to see each other. That way, they can look at each other, depriving the action of looking of any kind of proximity. The bodies are undermined because they are reduced to flat images. When two characters look at each other in a mirror, their trajectories of looking do not align as they would with direct looking: mirror acts as a barrier separating both trajectories. Therefore, the lack of physical contacts is compensated by looking which is also deprived of the closeness it usually implies.



14 the multiplicity of mirrors

1.2. The human emotional void

The characters' physical disconnect reflects their inner disconnects towards their environment, given their movements are motivated from within. No genuine physical impulses in this movie where sexuality is a major theme shows the underlying lack of internal sexual desire: sexuality is emptied of its passion. Sexuality is even more dehumanized when Margaret mentions sex as "fucking", mocking Owen when he suggests she uses "making love" instead: she implies sex is a purely physical act that has no value and that does not come with emotion. Just like physical contacts, emotions seem unwelcome. The fashion crew is emotionally distant, either smiling so

much that it seems forced or never smiling at all. Adrian's face expression during her song performance is blank and makes her look like a mannequin. She later on displays constant mocking towards anyone she interacts with and that goes along a very sarcastic look on her face, her eyebrows raised and a small smile full of contempt to showcase superiority, putting herself above everyone else with her behavior: the only emotion she shows gives way for her emotional disconnect. Actor performances convey the lack of human emotion felt by their characters, whose faces are like masks. Anne Carlisle's acting is the best example for this. Margaret and Jimmy's lips barely move throughout the movie. When they speak, their mouths open just enough to formulate sentences that are usually little articulated. Their laughs are very brief and their smiles are small distortions of the mouth. They overall have minimal face expressions and plain voice enunciation. Jimmy's behavior may be justified by his drug addiction whereas Margaret's lack of emotion and little human response put her as a soulless figure. Instead of a human character, she seems closer to a cyborg figure, pursuing a cold and robotic approach to life. Everything she does is thought out and never seems to excite her: she plans her life methodically without taking into consideration her emotions since she does not seem to have any. From an outside perspective, she is human. But analyzing her inner self challenges her humanity. Her cyborg-like figure indeed comes with an undermining of her humanity: "the function of cyborgs, androids and holograms is to counterpoint the specifically human"⁶⁷. Cyborgs have everything that makes a human being but its most important element:



15 Adrian's blank face

⁶⁷ Marion Gymnich, Klaus Scheunemann, "A World Without Gender'? – Robots, Androids and the Gender Matrix in Films and TV Series" in Marion Gymnich, Kathrin Ruhl, Klaus Scheunemann (eds.), *Gendered (Re)Visions: Constructions of Gender in Audiovisual Media* (pp. 181-203). Goettingen: V&R unipress GmbH, 2010, p.181.

actual life. Instead of a soul, they are artificially monitored: they pass as humans without possessing the key element to humanity.

To feel is to be alive and yet Margaret does not seem to feel anything. Orgasm is an “intense or paroxysmal excitement”⁶⁸: in other words, orgasm is one of the highest forms of emotions one could experience. Sexuality being put as non-sexual, orgasms’s potential emotional source is greatly reduced. *Liquid Sky* revolves around emotionless characters and having an orgasm or on the contrary not having one seem to gain a metaphorical meaning, just like sexuality acts as an assertion of power. Margaret endures the cinematic codes of looking and features Mulvey’s “to-be-looked-at-ness”, being constantly reduced to visuals. The sexual act with other men in the movie is initiated first by looking and they reach orgasms by watching Margaret closely during the action. Their orgasms result in the visual perception they have of Margaret which she refuses. Enduring the action of looking is a recurring pattern and it is strikingly visible when we see photos of Margaret from the final photoshoot and the word “look” is repeated many times in a distorted voice. Margaret does not have orgasms and causes those who have one thanks to her to die: her attitude acts as resistance and not having an orgasm prevents her from accepting what comes with it. Having an orgasm may also represent fulfilment in the same way that the French verb *jouir* which means “to come” may mean reaching the sexual climax as well as reaching self-fulfillment. Orgasm put as a proof of acceptance, Margaret not having one leads to her non-acceptance and shows her non-fulfilment: it is a metaphorical way of conveying her not belonging in society and her struggle to find her community. She is unable to reach emotions when they are humanly motivated. But when she gets close to reaching an orgasm thanks to heroin, she is getting into contact with the aliens: her orgasm signals that she has found her people through them.

⁶⁸ From Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Margaret's only genuine emotions are in response to aliens' actions or mere presence. A few moments stand out of the emotionless pattern that rules her persona in the rest of the movie: Margaret's emotional response peaks when she communicates with the aliens. Her saying that she can't deal with so many dead bodies in her apartment is answered by the aliens making the corpses disappear: this act of kindness disrupts the hostility and Margaret reacts likewise, saying with a happy laugh "You did it for me?" In the end, she tries desperately to join them, begging them to take her and saying "we can be happy, I wanna make love to you". Those are the only scenes suggesting warmth from her. The fact that she is talking to the aliens makes her switch her vocabulary from "fuck" to "make love" and she finally shows emotions. The fact that Margaret's only genuine emotions are due to the aliens' actions or mere presence is revealing of her inner self. She does not connect with human beings: she needs an outer influence to have this connection. Therefore, she goes from cyborg to alien: she discovers her true self as she unlocks her emotional potential.



16 Margaret is a cyborg-like figure

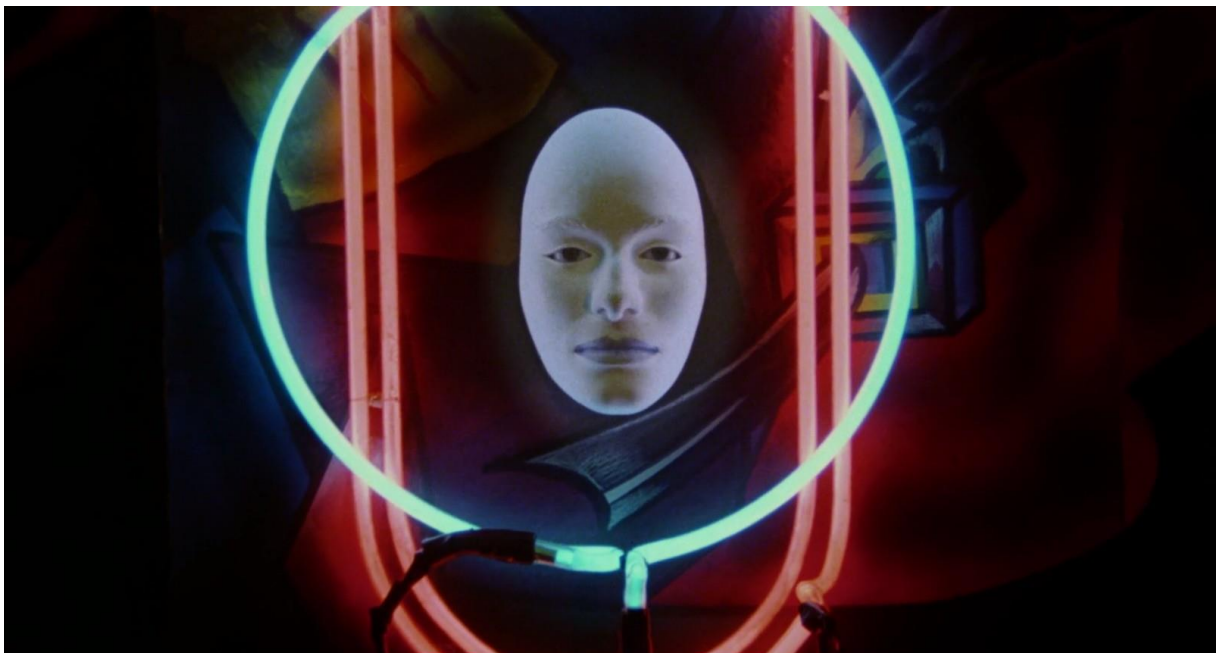
2. Science fiction and the cinematic disconnect

Liquid Sky uses excess in style to create an alternate version of reality⁶⁹. However, the use of excess brings out a deprivation of realism: excess and deprivation, two opposed notions, are here co-dependent in regards to the form of the movie. *Liquid Sky* features many diegetic

⁶⁹ *Supra.* p.26.

disconnects. But taking into consideration the movie moving back from the story reveals that its basic science-fiction identity is in itself disconnected from reality. The music perfectly conveys science fiction influence. The original score was created on the synthesizer: it sounds like the music we would hear at a funfair parade. This electronic music brings machines and artificiality into mind. Neon lighting is the dominant source of lighting: it is the only source of lighting inside Margaret's apartment. Many costumes are extremely sophisticated and not only during the fashion photoshoot scenes: the New Wave aesthetics look futuristic. No natural elements are to be found within the frame: it's all buildings and objects. Artificiality and dehumanization pervade the movie throughout: the basis of the movie is artificial, its own space is created instead of using reality.

The basic concept of science-fiction could also be interpreted as a voluntary attempt to hide the movie from reality. Science-fiction being a disguise for reality, the actions are deprived of their true meaning which must be reimagined. *Liquid Sky* could be interpreted as a visual statement of what Butler would write about years later on the artificiality of gender. The first shot of the movie is a mask surrounded by neon lights, the most artificial devices for lighting. The whiteness of the mask and its realism suggest it is a face molding with eyes and lips painted in blue. The mask is very simplistic, almost blank. But it almost passes as human: its eyes are like looking at us. Heroin is hidden where its brain is supposed to be and the aliens feed on it in the beginning like they will feed upon human orgasms later on. This mask opens the movie which reveals it is an important accessory. The semblance of humanity of an object that is



17 the human-made mask imitating life

evidently deprived of life is reminiscent of gender: its performance acts as a mask inherent to humanity when it only “passes” as natural. The white mask and gender are human-made aesthetics constructed to give an illusion of humanity. Often seen in the background later on, the mask turns into a hidden witness silently peeping on what is happening in the room. In the end, Margaret breaks the mask and joins the aliens: her giving up on society makes her destroy this human pattern of pretending.

Science-fiction devices may replicate a reality deprived of its humanity, giving a sterilized version of it:

“SF’s unique innovation within the code of narrative is to incorporate signs derived from science and technology in such a way as to evoke a sensation of strangeness – not mere novelty but a reordering of categories. Ideally, this reordering carries over from the fiction to the [viewer’s] own experience”⁷⁰

Science-fiction takes society and shifts it enough to make it invisible. Therefore, a whole new freedom of action and interpretation comes with it. Margaret has an obvious lack of emotion and struggles to find a human community accepting her. The science-fiction side of the movie can easily be used as an attempt to justify its characters’ specificities: Margaret’s humanity being undermined, she passes as a cyborg figure or even as an alien since she feels close to them and only reaches an orgasm when she gets into contacts with the spaceship. Freedom of interpretation comes alongside the infinite potential of science-fiction. Science-fiction is thus the ideal cinema genre to play with gender: using the French word for gender, the question “What is your *genre*: masculine, feminine, or science-fiction?”⁷¹ takes its full meaning. Science-fiction is the ideal field of filmmaking to avoid the binary system of gender because nothing holds its departure from standards. Introducing a new potential freedom through this genre allows the possibility of imagining anything we want in a world we can create. The resulting movie may be apprehended as a possible version of our own world:

“In SF, androgyny and other sexual alternatives need not be illusions to be dispelled or exceptions to be avoided but can instead represent plausible features of an extrapolated future or an alien world”⁷²

⁷⁰ Brian Atterby. *Decoding Gender in Science-Fiction*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p.4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.9.

Viewers are invited to take these changes into perspective from experience to imagine a whole new world that could be their own. In *Liquid Sky*'s case, the viewers are led to give life to a dehumanized society in order to make it look familiar again.

3. Escaping gender through androgyny

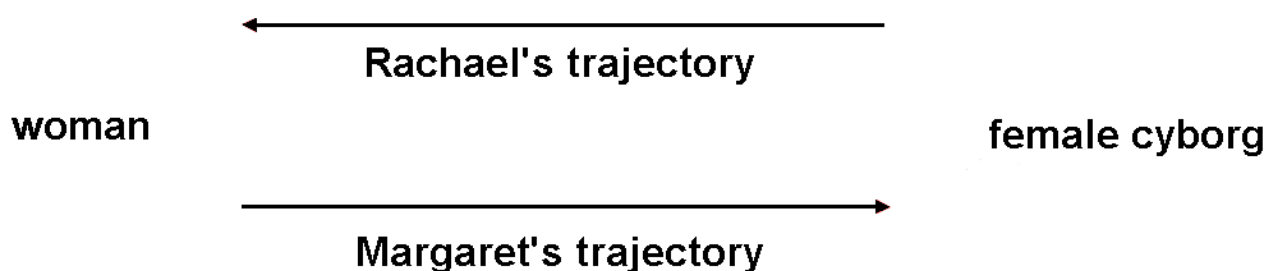
Cyborgs imitate humanity so they theoretically do not escape the influence of gender: anything that is humanoid is supposedly gendered since this is an essential trait for identity making. They are human made and constructed to be as true to life as possible. In *The Stepford Wives*, female androids are perfect housewives, always there to serve their husband and happy to take care of the house. These androids are mere clichés of femininity, dream-like versions of the men's former human wives. They are so stereotypically feminine that they stand out as odd to other human female characters. Androids recreate life as it is supposed to be if it were to be imagined simple-mindedly. The artificiality of their gender is obvious and their stereotypical depiction is more easily justified. Therefore, female cyborgs often pass for even more feminine than average women. Rachael in *Blade Runner* is another example of the highly feminine version of a female cyborg:

“She is a powerless and vulnerable figure who never acquires individual agency, exists at the whim of the male figures in her life, and who epitomizes “femininity” as performance because she is not a “real” woman, but a generic cliché”⁷³

She does not even know herself that she is a cyborg in the first half of the movie because she matches perfectly the stereotypical description of the female gender: performance makes her a woman. The social image she is thrown back to by everyone she interacts with makes no room for doubt: her female identity initiated within her performance is validated by an unanimous social response. Rachael uses the masquerade to enhance her femininity, but in this case, it allows her to hide her dehumanization: she unconsciously genders herself as much as possible to enhance her human identity. Margaret in *Liquid Sky* is deeply related to this concept of the over-feminine female cyborg that Rachael embodies because she is quite the opposite: Margaret is a woman made cyborg-like and Rachael is a cyborg who tends to pass as a woman. The trajectories of their identity developments are opposed but oscillate between the two same entities. Rachael embodies the concept of the masquerade to ensure her humanity: the trajectory

⁷³ Sue Short, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity*, 2005, Palgrave MacMillan, p.82.

of Margaret's identity going the other way raises the question as to how her dehumanization is possible through gender. Rachael creates her humanity by gendering herself: the logical hypothesis for Margaret's dehumanization is her de-gendering herself. And indeed, rather than being enhanced, Margaret's gender is undermined throughout the movie.



18 the trajectories of Rachael and Margaret's identities

One possibility of interpreting androgyny as an addition of masculinity and femininity that coexist within a single body does not match *Liquid Sky*: when it is put as both genders added up, “androgyny sexualizes the transvestite by increasing the eroticism of their ambiguous image”⁷⁴. It does not match *Liquid Sky* as it has been emptied of its potential eroticism. Its refusal for genuine sexuality brings another possible effect of androgyny which seems more appropriate: “androgyny...can be used to signal the eradication of sexuality”⁷⁵. Even though sexuality plays a big part in the plot of the movie, it is hostile and aggressive. It may not be considered a traditional form of sexuality: sexual intercourse only passes as sexual in appearance, being deprived of its defining essence⁷⁶. If we put aside its potentially sexually arousing ambiguity, androgyny's multiplicity of gender signals may erase any possibility of a viable sexuality. Androgyny refuses to stick to one gender only and the visual codes of the sexually appealing are thus disturbed. Androgynous aesthetics are non-sexual when both genders seem to cancel one another, counteracting the basis of sexual attraction and preventing sexuality. Androgyny passing through the eradication of sexuality makes it disruptive and its capacity to go beyond the concept of gender begins to submerge.

In *Liquid Sky*, androgyny is indeed disruptive: Tsukerman “uses androgynous models to project a negative presence, where masculine and feminine sexual connotations cancel each other out”⁷⁷ and “The masculine and feminine aspects of the androgynous fashion image are

⁷⁴ Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and identity in the movies*, Psychology Press, 1997, p.147.

⁷⁵ Janet Bergstrom, *op.cit.*, p.5.

⁷⁶ *Supra.*, p.35.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

split into two antagonistic characters”⁷⁸. An explicit embodiment of androgyny springs up through Margaret and Jimmy. Margaret is the androgynous version of her biologically female self and Jimmy is the androgynous version of his biologically male self. They look so much alike it is striking. They are both played by Anne Carlisle who does not play the two characters in extremely different ways: when she is Jimmy, she only moves her jaw forward and lowers her voice. Her hair flattened with gel and darkened eyebrows are her only other defining features to portray masculinity. Contrary to *Female Trouble*, the viewers understand that the same person lies behind the two characters. Margaret and Jimmy are two androgynous look-alikes and this doubles the already disturbing effect of regular androgyny: as viewers, we are drowned in gender ambiguity. Their resemblance makes us assimilate one to the other and the gender balance within them separately is increased. When they are put together, Margaret and Jimmy’s gender identities are juxtaposed and an absolutely perfect gender balance comes out of it: the slightly more feminine in Margaret makes up for the slightly more masculine in Jimmy. Both genders slowly shift towards one another, and little by little, they align. The distinction between genders gets out of reach, undermining its existence.

Perfect gender balance is the starting point for the de-gendering process because “once gender polarities are reduced, traditional sex and gender differences can be broken and the self can be freed from the prison of gender”⁷⁹: no gender differences could mean no gender at all. Androgyny helps parting from gender: the possibility of de-gendering what is supposedly



19 the two androgynous alter-egos

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁷⁹ Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *op.cit.*, p.3.

gendered by nature unveils gender's fragility and artificiality, supporting Butler's theory. Moreover, being freed from gender means escaping social identity. Margaret's path led her to this social void even though she did everything she could to fit in: she does not succeed in creating her social human identity. Conforming herself to social expectations were not met by acceptance and she gradually rejects conformity more and more as she understands her performance is never rewarded. Her eventual thorough refusal of conformity is what causes Margaret to lose her balance. She is a victim of stereotypical gender polarities in the scene where Jimmy calls her ugly and she calls him beautiful, being constantly reduced to a shallow image by the fashion crew: her female gender is forced upon her. Margaret reacts in provocation at this attempt of re-gendering and she proceeds to killing her male alter-ego by giving him a lethal blow job. She literally destroys her maleness in provocation, performing her attributed behavior as a sexual and desirable image. She loses balance when her alter ego has an orgasm and disappears: by removing her male alter-ego from society, she destroys her fashion androgynous image that she constructed in consequence. Perfect balance is no longer reached and she has to recreate herself. She turns off the lights and starts painting a new face that is evidently genderless this time. She gives a farewell monologue, explaining how she failed to fit it society:

“So I was taught that I should come to New York, become an independent woman. And my prince would come, and he would be an agent, and he would get me a role, and I would make my living waiting on tables. I would wait—till thirty, till forty, till fifty. And I was taught that to be an actress, one should be fashionable, and to be fashionable is to be androgynous. And I am androgynous not less than David Bowie himself. And they call me beautiful, and I kill with my cunt. Isn't it fashionable? Come on, who's next?”

She has now accepted her incapacity to reach acceptance and reflects upon her life development. The paradox is that her androgynous image was also forced upon her because it was fashionable. However, her androgynous image was only apprehended as such: an image. When she had committed herself so much to this androgynous identity that she escaped the concept of gender, she was still apprehended as a visual construction. She was both embraced for her androgynous appearance and apprehended with an inner female identity: gender was forced inside a genderless body. In spite of this collective interest in androgyny for the sake of fashion, the social need for gendering always put her back to the female gender.

Her genderless persona goes hand in hand with this failure: escaping gender makes her escape society and escaping society makes her look dehumanized. Her social identity no longer exists:

“The loss of sexual identity, whether in deliberate gender confusion or in a withdrawal from sex, is paralleled by a loss or abandonment of social identity”⁸⁰

Margaret gets dehumanized as she loses her gender identity: she does not match the basic description of being human according to society. Her cyborg figure gets evident here but her true identity is revealed in the end of the movie: she joins the alien spacecraft and she has now found her community. Margaret literally gets away from Earth, escaping humanity and what comes with it in the most extreme way possible. Margaret is an alien. Alien as an adjective comes from Old French *alien* “strange, foreign” and from Latin *alienus* “of or belonging to another, not one’s own, foreign, strange”⁸¹. What makes an alien is distance and difference. Therefore, metaphorically speaking, Margaret joining the aliens means that she goes “beyond”⁸² the image of her human female self and this is because she has freed herself from gender. She is a post-gender creature who does not match the current gender conceptions. However, her post-gender position puts her as an anomaly in society. To be completely freed from gender, that is to say without having gender forced upon her by outer pressure sources, Margaret has to flee humanity which does not seem to exist without gender. And the aliens don’t have a body: Margaret joins them and her body vanishes. Completely exempt from gender, her body no longer exists and it therefore disappears.



20 Margaret's body disappears

⁸⁰ Janet Bergstrom, *op.cit.*, p.15.




⁸¹ From *Etymonline*, <https://www.etymonline.com/>

⁸² Alien comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *al- which means “beyond”.

Conclusion

Female Trouble and *Liquid Sky* feature many disconnects and distance themselves to reality, distorting it to create a defamiliarized experience. John Waters uses excess to reach subversion, featuring his fascination for the flesh through the use of the grotesque bodies which he exhibits as if he was running a freak show. The outpouring of excess released in order to shock the viewers is revealing of his desire for marginalization: John Waters uses subversion to assert his marginality. However, the lack of seriousness conveyed through his movie prevents it to be taken as anything but a joke. The use of cinematic drag allows a very vocal subversion, but it is a subversion that has been emptied of its subversive value: drag plays greatly with gender but reinforces its standards unconsciously. Subverting through excess is a cathartic experience for the viewers but it does not allow identification and it becomes quite limited. *Liquid Sky* also avoids the fundamentally human but its excess in style comes along with an opposite source of subversion: the subversion through deprivation. Its characters are completely disconnected from one another, whether it is physically, emotionally or sexually. Human contact is constantly repressed and the codes of science-fiction that comes with this increases its departure from humanity. The cyborg-like figure Margaret is a genderless creature who reveals itself as an alien: her perfectly balanced androgyny allowed her to finally escape gender and therefore humanity. Androgyny put as both genders cancelling each other causes confusion which is therefore not as demonstrative as drag. Androgyny is silent and persistent when drag is vocal and limited. Taking as a point of reference the traditional social standards regarding gender, drag pushes those standards further than androgyny⁸³ but recreates it in consequence: drag ultimately needs gender standards because they are at the core of its existence. Drag's playfulness in regards to gender relies on its firsthand acceptance. It does not break gender standards but weakens their rigidity by featuring its artificiality. Androgyny shifts gender standards in a reduced way but places itself right in between the two genders: androgyny goes around gender but features less possibility of demonstrative subversion. In other words, the limits that come with excess meet the slowness subverting through deprivation: excess is instant provocation and deprivation is subtle destruction.

⁸³ see picture 21

use of gender	underlying gender displacement	social perception
social expectations	male standards  female standards	gender standards
androgyny	male standards  female standards	balance
drag	male standards  female standards	gender transposition

21 gender displacements caused by the subversion of gender from a biological male point of view

Unexpectedly, drag queens are slowly entering the mainstream market. Their exposure has never been higher than today and their popularity is exponential. Social gatherings like Drag Con in the United States are more and more crowded and the number of drag following on social medias is increasing. The proportion of non-queer people who are *Rupaul's Drag Race* fans gets larger and larger and therefore, drag gets more and more socially accepted and the marginalization that used to come with drag gets slowly erased. History was made in 2019 when the first drag queens walked the carpet at the Met Gala, the theme of the year being "Camp: Notes on Fashion".

Subversion implies a reversal or at least a troubling of standards: subversion goes against the essence of the mainstream which indicate common patterns of social consumption. Subversion, if popularly accepted and embraced by the social standards of taste, is not subversive anymore. Drag is the highest form of gender subversion in terms of intensity so its growing popularity raises the question: if drag gets mainstream enough to be considered non-subversive, will there be room for subversion anymore? And if not, it is interesting to question

whether it is a good thing or not in regards to art and especially to queer cinema. If drag loses its subversive value, it does not mean that gender fluidity has been embraced by the population, it only means that it has become common in the eyes of the majority. An erasure of the subversive could signify an impossibility to raise awareness upon subjects that are deemed worth fighting for, subjects that are overlooked. Subversion in cinema can act as a wake-up call for many viewers who learn to think differently by encountering a point of view that is not familiar to them. But the loss of shock value that comes with it may destroy any potential effect upon those viewers.

However, the decline of the subversive brings out an increase of tolerance as what has once been rejected is now getting accepted. With an optimistic or even utopian thinking, the destruction of the possibly subversive could mean that no more fights are to be fought. No battle to fight means significant social advances and a step further towards global harmony. It would create a safe space that would probably encourage artists to step forward and express themselves freely, without any fear of discrimination. However, the desire for subversion is a key element to arts: it creates artists as it pushes them to express themselves, building a politically vocal manifesto or implicitly rejecting society as it is through their work. Many queer artists have been fueled by the will to oppose matters that they did not agree with and they have been motivated to create by the rage they felt inside of them. The decline of the subversive could therefore create a decline in such creativity for it links suffering to expression. The anger that was present in the beginning of the New Queer Cinema is still present nowadays but has been slowly declining along social advances, foreshadowing a shift about to come in queer filmmaking. Anger slowly gives room to peacefulness. Social imprisoning patterns being reduced, the renewal of queer cinema would involve an increasing exploration of the self freed from constraint. Subversion involves a reaction to outside elements that are to be troubled. Its decline undermines the exchanges between the inside and the outside as it gets towards boundlessness. Boundlessness does not influence expression if not by allowing its unspoiled development: outer influences and pressure are slimmer without constraints. In other words, if subversion keeps getting weakened, the process of queer filmmaking is likely to be increasingly turned inwards instead of outwards.

Perspective didactique et pédagogique

Comme nous l'avons vu dans la première partie de ce mémoire, la notion de subversion du genre et les questionnements qui lui sont inhérents sont complexes et ne sauraient être délivrés comme tels à une classe dans l'enseignement secondaire ; il est donc nécessaire de construire une réflexion pédagogique et didactique afin que les élèves puissent saisir au mieux les enjeux d'une telle notion. La séance que nous allons concevoir aura pour principal objectif de déconstruire les éventuels poncifs intériorisés par les élèves pour aboutir à la distinction entre le sexe et le genre.

Dans les programmes officiels

Au collège, le seul thème pouvant inclure une réflexion sur le genre est « Inclusion et exclusion »⁸⁴ pour le cycle 4 ; en effet, à partir de ce thème, le programme invite « l'élève [...] à s'interroger sur sa propre identité et à prendre le recul nécessaire dans le but de penser l'autre dans sa complexité et de se construire en tant que citoyen avisé et responsable »⁸⁵, ce qui permettrait de traiter le genre dans une perspective identitaire et citoyenne. Cependant, notre sujet est bien trop complexe pour ce niveau ; c'est pourquoi nous ferons le choix de proposer une séance pour une classe de lycée au niveau terminale, ce qui permettra une réflexion et un échange plus approfondis. Avant d'aller plus loin, il conviendra d'indiquer dès maintenant que nous nous appuierons sur les nouveaux programmes de lycée entrés en application en septembre 2019.

Notre sujet de mémoire s'inscrit pleinement dans le thème culturel « Diversité et inclusion »⁸⁶ ; en effet, le bulletin officiel donne comme mots-clés « intégration », « discriminations », « minorités », « égalité » ou encore « émancipation »⁸⁷ qui sont des termes intrinsèquement liés au genre. La séance présentée ci-dessous s'intégrera dans une séquence intitulée « Fighting for her rights » qui permettra d'évoquer les inégalités et

⁸⁴ *Bulletin officiel du ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse*, 26 novembre 2015, n°11

⁸⁵ *Déclinaisons culturelles : Anglais*, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, mars 2016

⁸⁶ *Bulletin officiel spécial du ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse*, 22 janvier 2019, n°1

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

discriminations liées au genre féminin. Il convient donc avant toute chose de débiter cette séquence par une séance présentant les notions de sexe et de genre, afin que les élèves comprennent avec exactitude ce que recouvre le pronom *her* de l'intitulé de la séance – et ce qu'il ne recouvre pas.

Élaboration d'une séance

Cette séance s'articule en deux parties : la première activité a pour support un extrait de *Mrs. Doubtfire*⁸⁸ et a pour objectif d'amener les élèves à s'interroger sur ce qui définit un homme et une femme en déconstruisant les clichés intériorisés par la société – et qu'ils auront probablement, pour la majorité d'entre eux, pris pour acquis ; la seconde activité a pour support un extrait de *Liquid Sky* et vise à distinguer sexe et genre, pour aboutir enfin à une définition du genre.

Activité 1 : déconstruire les clichés

Après avoir présenté une image précédant immédiatement l'extrait⁸⁹ permettant aux élèves de formuler des hypothèses quant aux rôles des personnages et à l'histoire, le professeur projette un extrait de *Mrs. Doubtfire* (de 1:07:54 à 1:09:13) correspondant au moment où les enfants découvrent que leur gouvernante n'est autre que leur père qui s'est travesti afin de les revoir. Après la première projection, les élèves sont invités à vérifier leurs hypothèses à l'oral pour aboutir à une contextualisation de l'extrait – sachant qu'on pourra très certainement s'appuyer sur les souvenirs des élèves ayant déjà vu le film. Par la suite, l'extrait est à nouveau projeté une à deux fois afin que les élèves le revoient en connaissant le contexte.

⁸⁸ Chris Columbus, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, 1993.

⁸⁹ Voir image 22.



22 premier extrait : Mrs. Doubtfire

Une fois l'extrait compris et les éventuelles difficultés de compréhension levées, le professeur organise un échange sous forme de débat autour de la question suivante : êtes-vous plutôt du côté du garçon (qui rejette son père car il est travesti) ou de la fille (qui, malgré les apparences, est heureuse de retrouver son père et l'enlace) ? Le débat s'organise de la façon suivante : après que le premier élève a été interrogé et a donné son avis sur la question, les autres peuvent lever la main pour prendre à leur tour la parole en rebondissant sur les propos de leur camarade. Le professeur pourra étoffer la réflexion en invitant les élèves à se questionner sur tel élément, permettant ainsi d'aborder ce qui ne sera pas évoqué naturellement par les élèves. Par exemple, on pourra les amener à se questionner par rapport à la réplique « It's a guy thing » : qu'est-ce qui est *a guy thing* et qu'est-ce qui ne l'est pas ? Ce travail argumentatif sous forme de débat permettra de travailler l'aisance orale et le lexique propre à l'argumentation qui prépareront l'épreuve orale du baccalauréat. Les élèves pourront également convoquer le lexique du cinéma pour étayer leur propos, comme le champ-contrechamp qui souligne l'importance du regard dans la scène. À la fin de ce débat, les élèves, aidés par le professeur, auront conclu qu'en effet, il n'existe pas vraiment de *guy thing* mais que c'est la société qui tend à assigner telle ou telle action à un genre particulier, et que ces assignements sont par la suite intériorisés et deviennent la norme. Le professeur pourra demander aux élèves des exemples de ce type d'action pour leur montrer qu'ils sont nombreux dans la société où ils vivent : porter un pantalon, se maquiller, porter des vêtements roses, etc. Il sera intéressant d'évoquer l'évolution de ces normes et la différence selon les sociétés afin de montrer qu'en effet, toutes ces restrictions sont construites socialement et ne sont pas inhérentes à l'individu.

À la fin de cette première activité, les élèves sont arrivés à la conclusion que les hommes et les femmes ont leur liberté restreinte à cause de normes sociales, sans avoir évoqué encore le terme de genre, notion qui va être amenée en opposition au sexe par la seconde activité.

Pour commencer cette deuxième activité, le professeur projette une image provenant de *Liquid Sky*⁹⁰ et invite les élèves à la décrire en utilisant le lexique propre à la description d'une image. Il est attendu des élèves qu'ils remarquent que les deux personnages sont joués par la même actrice ; qu'à droite, le personnage est une femme et à gauche, le personnage est un homme, cette distinction étant mise en exergue par l'arrière-plan qui les sépare symboliquement de part et d'autre de l'image. Ils pourront également relever le jeu sur les couleurs : du côté de Jimmy se trouve un néon rose alors que du côté de Margaret se trouve un néon bleu, ce qui accentue l'idée du mélange des genres puisque le rose est généralement attribué au genre féminin et le bleu au genre masculin ; finalement, l'éclairage au néon, lumière artificielle, pourrait ainsi dénoncer l'artificialité de ces normes genrées. Le professeur peut alors poser la question suivante : puisque c'est la même actrice qui joue les deux rôles, pourquoi dit-on que le personnage de droite est une femme et le personnage de gauche un homme ?



23 deuxième extrait : *Liquid Sky*

⁹⁰ Voir image 23

Pour répondre à cette question, les élèves s'appuieront sur un extrait de *Liquid Sky* (de 05:15 à 06:21) où Margaret et Jimmy sont ensemble dans la même pièce, l'extrait finissant par Jimmy se vêtant d'une robe. Après avoir demandé aux élèves de résumer l'extrait et de le décrire oralement, le professeur leur demande de réfléchir par rapport à la dernière image : si Jimmy porte une robe et se maquille de la même façon que Margaret, ne deviendrait-il pas une femme ? Tous ces questionnements permettent de faire surgir la définition du sexe et du genre de manière imagée pour les élèves : le genre est un costume tissé par la société. Si l'actrice porte des vêtements considérés comme masculins, a des cheveux courts et ne se maquille pas, alors elle devient Jimmy ; si l'actrice porte une robe, a une coiffure considérée comme féminine et se maquille, alors elle devient Margaret. Cependant, l'actrice reste une femme biologiquement parlant car son sexe – ses organes génitaux – ne change pas. Ces deux définitions exemplifiées par *Liquid Sky* feront office de trace écrite pour les élèves.

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