"PEOPLE BELIEVE WHAT THEY SEE": CLOTHING AND GENDER(S) IN *VICTOR/VICTORIA*

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Hollywood representations of cross-dressing are ambivalent texts in the sense that they are both conservative and subversive in addressing issues of gender and sexuality. *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982) inscribes itself in the comedy genre which allows the spectator to view cross-dressing as a mere joke and its closing scene restores the conventions that the cross-dresser temporarily defied. Chris Straayer points out: "[Its] use of comedy both creates and controls homosexual possibilities. [Its] visual play simultaneously challenges and supports traditional gender codes" (1996, p. 42). The dominant narrative in *Victor/Victoria* is neither subversive nor progressive since cross-dressing is mainly used to reinforce traditional gender roles and to maintain that gendered clothing should correspond to one's "true" sex. Moreover, the narrative also sustains patriarchal authority: it is a (gay) man, Toddy, who imposes the rules of Victoria's cross-dressing ("If you listen to me and do exactly as I say") and it is a (straight) man, King Marchan, who changes the rules and pushes Victoria to put an end to her act of cross-dressing ("I said you can stop pretending"). Yet, in its representation of female cross-dressing, the film is subversive in revealing gender as a cultural and social construction. As Straayer puts it: "The representation and containment of gender by clothing and other visual systems offer gender as a construction susceptible to manipulation by cross-dressing, drag, and masquerade" (1996, p. 43).

In the first part of the discussion I consider how the notion of cross-dressing in the dominant narrative of the film functions within the binary sex/gender system of normative heterosexuality. My interest is to see how the postulation of gender-specific clothing is both acknowledged and negotiated through Victoria's act of cross-dressing. Mainly, I want to resist what Marjorie Garber stresses, that is, "the tendency on the part of many critics [...] to look *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser, [...] to want instead to subsume that figure within one of the two traditional genders" (1992, p. 9). Clearly, the cross-dresser is an ambivalent figure blurring gender identity and gender norms. Hence, reading "Victor" persona as simply a woman in disguise is to fail to look at cross-dressing as a powerful trope to undermine mundane assumptions about gender presentation and clothing. Similarly, to read the appearance of Victoria as only masculine is to fail to recognise the multiple and contradictory signs inscribed on the cross-dresser. Thus, what interests me here is not to determine to what extent Victoria succeeds in passing as a man, but rather to look at how the image of "Victor" as both masculine and feminine reveals the artificiality of a binary sex/gender system and allows the viewer to undermine normative heterosexuality.

The term cross-dressing defined as "the action of dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex" contains the oppositions female/feminine and male/masculine in terms of clothing. The prefix cross- foregrounds the existence of a boundary between women and men which has to be transgressed in order to reach the opposite side. The term is anchored deeply in the Western notion of sexual difference. Precisely what is disturbing about this definition is that it implies that clothes pertain to the category of sex and not of gender. It

may seem redundant to say that sartorial Western codes are historically and socially constructed and not biologically determined. As such the definition would be "the action of dressing in the clothes of the opposite gender". But then again the term cross-dressing would still maintain an opposition between two genders, women and men, even as historically and socially constructed categories. Therefore, drawing on lesbian film studies and queer theory, in the second part of the discussion I question the definition of cross-dressing by looking at two lesbian gender roles, butch and femme. I claim that the image of Victoria in male clothing invites the viewer to see her as a lesbian butch and by contrast that the character of Norma could be identified as the lesbian femme.

Clothing in the film represents gender differences and economic status. The narrative takes place in Paris in 1934 and the film costumes are made to resemble gendered clothing styles of that period. At the beginning of the film Victoria looks ordinary, the clothes she wears during her audition at "Chez Lui" are common, passé, shapeless, sombre coloured and most of all signal the condition in which she is: "broken". It is a period of economic crisis, Victoria has no job, no money and she is starving. When Toddy recognises her in the restaurant, Victoria has changed for a black dress and a black hat but still her look is ordinary and the clothes don't suit her. Things go worse as we see Victoria at Toddy's place, wrapped in a blanket with naked feet. Victoria's "best dress" is completely ruined by the rain and she is left with rags. Her hairstyle has also suffered from the wet and altogether she looks pitiful as she holds men's pyjamas that Toddy lends her for the night. Although she is not shown wearing them, this item of clothing marks the end of Victoria wearing women's clothes. Clearly, Victoria's unattractive appearance in women's clothes in these scenes is only meant to contrast with the way she looks in masculine clothing throughout the film. The black dress Victoria wears in the final scene shows that now she has the means to display femininity with expensive and fashionable clothes, which contrast with the plain and simple dress she wears at the beginning. Also her economic success and probable marriage with King Marchan implies that she will never have to wear ordinary, cheap women's clothes anymore.

Victoria's first appearance in men's clothes (white shirt, pinched trousers and dark jacket) actually precedes and initiates Toddy's scheme to disguise Victoria as a "gay Polish female impersonator". She fixes the necktie in a "natural" way as if she did that every day when Toddy observes: "You look better in Richard's clothes than he does". This comment raises an important question: if men's clothes suit a woman "better than" a man, then why are clothes gender-specific? Toddy adds that Richard (his former lover) "looks better out of them" but one possible subtext is that Richard would "look better" in women's clothes. What is clear in any case is that Victoria "looks better in Richard's clothes than" in her own. In this scene she appears to be a new person: assertive, self-confident and more importantly attractive. According to Jackie Stacey "female characters who cross-dress [...] continue to look sexually attractive and desirable... [This] can also be explained in terms of the place of women as a sexual spectacle in cinema -so much that even in masculine attire she remains eroticized for the *look*" (1990, p. 102). However, in that instance it is through cross-dressing that Victoria is made "sexually attractive and desirable" and it is because of "masculine attire [that] she [is] eroticized for the *look*". Men's clothes suit her whereas women's clothes do not.

Dressed in Richard's clothes, Victoria is instructed by Toddy on how to become "Count Victor Gresinsky". First she has to lower her voice, then Toddy cuts her hair and finally hides her absence of an Adam's apple with his own scarf ("Very dashing! Might set a fashion"). Though Victoria exclaims that "[she] can't wear this all the time", she consistently "hides" this absence with a high collar or a neckerchief when she is "Victor" and with a neck band when she impersonates "Victoria". Then as Victoria gets ready in her

dressing room before her first performance as a female impersonator, she complains of having to strap her bosom, this time to hide the presence of a female gender attribute. At this point the transformation of Victoria into "Victor" is achieved and s/he successfully impersonates "Victoria" on stage.

In the following discussion I think it necessary to distinguish between the feminine costumes that "Victoria" wears on stage and the different men's clothes that "Victor" wears throughout the film. "Victor"'s performance as the female impersonator "Victoria" consists of two numbers in which s/he wears feminine costumes that cannot be perceived as women's clothes. For the first, "Le Jazz hot", s/he wears a dark and silver lamé ensemble made of numerous fringes, a head-dress to match and high-heeled shoes. In the other number, when s/he sings "The Shady Dame from Seville", "Victoria" is appropriately dressed in a typical Spanish costume and wears a wig. The glamorous and theatrical costume as well as the gesture of removing the head-dress or wig signal her/him as a female impersonator to the audience in the film. "Victor"'s short hair is combed backwards with brilliantine and this hairstyle casts masculinity on her/his face while the rest of her/his appearance is feminine. This blurring of gender norms is similar to the one performed by real female impersonators and as such I consider "Victor"'s impersonation as being convincing for the spectator of the film.

Although, the spectator does not see if, when, and where Victoria purchased men's clothes, or if the clothes she wears are Richard's or Toddy's, "Victor" changes clothes several times for different occasions. S/he wears casual masculine clothes during rehearsals and s/he dresses up in formal menswear (dinner jacket or tails) to go out in the evening. There are several scenes in which s/he has got a dressing gown on and in the privacy of her/his hotel room s/he wears men's pyjamas. According to the 1930s dress code "Victor"'s clothes are unquestionably masculine and gender specific. Therefore, within the narrative cross-dressing functions since gendered clothing accounts for Victoria Grant to be perceived as a man. Toddy persuades Victoria that: "People believe what they see". Appearances are deceptive and the plot relies on the existence of a "true" sex beneath the clothes. For viewers of the film, however, things do not work that way since they know from the start that Victoria is a female cross-dresser.

I would now like to turn to what Straayer calls "the conventional use of an unconvincing disguise" (1996, p. 56). She argues that:

> In fact, the convention of inadequate disguise relies on the image superseding narrative articulations. [...] Even though the disguise is supposed to be convincing within the narrative, it is not generally allowed to be convincing in the direct image presented to the film viewer. This would pose too great a threat to society's trust in sex-gender unity as a system to communicate and recognize sex. [...] Finally, an inadequate disguise is not equal to no disguise -the inadequately disguised character signals both sexes simultaneously. (1996, p. 57)

This visual convention is even more ambivalent in scenes that present Victoria dressed in masculine clothes and wearing make-up. For instance, when King and his girlfriend Norma are introduced to "Victor" after her/his performance s/he still wears the stage make-up but has changed outfit and now wears a masculine dressing gown. A close-up of King and "Victor" shaking hands shows that s/he wears bright red nail polish. The combination of feminine and masculine signs blurs any fixed notion of gender identity. By "signal[ling] both sexes simultaneously" the cross-dresser opens up possibilities to look at her/his appearance from multiple gendered positions which challenge the easy notion of sexual difference.

Hence, if one maintains that "People believe what they see", then one may raise the following pertinent question: what do viewers see when they look at Victoria? And so, is it possible to see what one believes in? Here I would like to posit myself as a lesbian viewer, that is, as one of "those viewers who do not experience pleasure in heterosexuality, or for whom pleasurable heterosexuality does not pacify cross-gender aspirations, [who] need to resist the traditional narrative thrust and to focus instead on potentially subversive performance and visual elements" (Straayer, 1996, p. 53). My point is that Victoria's appearance in masculine clothes can be seen as an image of lesbian style. I suggest that "Victor"'s apparent gayness in the film is counterbalanced by a nonapparent lesbian subtext produced by references to Marlene Dietrich in male costume. Finally, the contrast between Victoria and Norma played out in many narrative and visual elements leads me to propose a subversive reading of the two female characters as an "invisible" butch/femme couple.

As that of a female cross-dresser Victoria's dashing appearance in tails and very short hairstyle is an imitation of high-fashion lesbian style of "Gay Paree". To say that when I look at Victoria I see a lesbian image is not to affirm that lesbian styles are essentially identical to cross-dressing. Rather, it is to emphasise that the representation of female cross-dressing in the film owes more to a historical and cultural lesbian strategy than to a heterosexual notion of sexual difference. The scene in which "Victor" dines out with Toddy, André Cassel, and King Marchan illustrates my point. In this scene, a one-shot of Victoria who wears a dinner jacket shows her holding a cigar between her fingers. This image of Victoria is potentially subversive in its borrowing of lesbian signs typical of the in-between wars period: "The tuxedo, the cigarette [or cigar], the cropped haircut, and the monocle are the most recognizable and readable signs of the lesbian culture of Paris" (Garber, 1992, p. 153).

These signs as markers of high-class lesbian style have been appropriated by the female star Marlene Dietrich who has thus become the paradigm for fe(male) cross-dressers on screen and on stage. However, this does not mean that this lesbian style has been definitively recuperated by heterosexual culture. On the contrary, as Judith Mayne mentions in her introduction of *Framed*: "contemporary lists of preferred lesbian films [attest to] the fascination with Garbo and Dietrich" (2000, pp. 20-21). This "fascination" is most certainly grounded on what the author observes in her analysis of *The Blue Angel* (Joseph Von Sternberg, 1930) : "[Dietrich's] sexual ambiguity has been noted more than once, in the sense both of her androgynous beauty, underscored by her appearance in drag, and of her transgression of heterosexual boundaries" (2000, p. 4). For these reasons, I find it meaningful to comment upon the references to the actress in *Victor/Victoria*.

The image of Marlene Dietrich is introduced at the very beginning of the film through a camera movement from the street to Toddy's apartment: on a table stands a picture of the actress in her classic male costume. On the one hand, the picture epitomises the theme of the film and, on the other hand, it refers to films in which Dietrich cross-dresses, such as *Morocco* (Sternberg, 1930). I want to argue that Toddy's implied admiration for the actress as well as the clothing styles of the year, 1934, in which the narrative is situated aim at visualising Victoria's act of cross-dressing in direct resemblance with Dietrich's. The scene which best exemplifies this comparison is when Victoria in male evening dress sings "Crazy World". The performance is an impersonation of Dietrich which is made explicit by the gesture of throwing a red carnation to King, "an obvious reference to *Morocco*" (Straayer, 1996, p. 67). By referring to this film the scene evokes another gesture which is symbolic of the actress's "sexual ambiguity": In *Morocco*, "Dietrich, as the nightclub singer Amy Jolly, elegantly attired in her men's clothes, casually leans down to kiss a woman in the audience on the lips" (Garber, 1992, p. 337). Thus, reading Victoria's performance as an impersonation of Dietrich challenges the dominant heterosexual narrative

and opens up possibilities for a lesbian counternarrative. Although Victoria's citation of the Dietrich persona is closer to the stereotype of the sophisticated lesbian than to the lesbian butch, the narrative and visual contrasts between Victoria and Norma "invisibly" represent them as a butch and femme couple (*Viktor/Viktoria* [Reinhold Schünzel,1933], the German film on which the story is based, included a blonde woman falling in love with "Viktor"). This "invisible" representation is achieved mainly through stereotypes of differences between women in films and of mainstream representations of lesbianism on screen. Victoria dresses like a man while Norma's clothes are hyperfeminine and sexy. This opposition is illustrated, for instance, in two parallel shots showing both female characters in night clothes: the first is a one-shot of Norma in a sexy night-gown seducing King into coming to bed and the second one is a two-shot of Victoria and Toddy in bed both wearing men's pyjamas. Also, blonde hair signal Norma as the femme figure while the butch figure, Victoria, is a reddish brunette (see Mayne, 2000, p. 128; Whatling, 1998, p. 76; Straayer, 1996, p. 290).

Another interesting contrast between the two female characters is the following: while Victoria can be seen as impersonating Dietrich, the character of Norma owes much to the icon of (hyper) femininity: Marilyn Monroe. For instance, in the performance scene "Chicago, Illinois" Norma's dress is blowing as in the famous subway vent scene in *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1954). Argues Peter Burton: "Even Lesley Ann Warren, who plays James Garner's mistress Norma, appears to be doing an impersonation of Marilyn Monroe, thereby applying an additional level of ambiguity to the film as in effect she is a woman impersonating a woman" (1994, p. 231). As Clare Whatling suggests (1998), "[t]he embracing of a hyperfemininity, a kind of high femme drag seems a possibility" to identify the lesbian femme on screen.

Another possibility, I would argue, is to read Norma's incorrect behaviour as the disrupting narrative element that distances her from heterosexual femininity. According to Straayer: "The crime committed by Norma [not matching the ideal feminine mold] can also be seen as a transgression of gender boundaries. In contrast to proper feminine behaviour, she moves too much, gets angry, and talks too loud" (1996, p. 297). Though Straayer states that Norma's "transgressive behaviour" (1996, p. 297) is curtailed by the narrative, I still think it possible to read the dissonant combination of her (hyper)feminine appearance and "masculine" behaviour as a way to recognise her as the femme in the film. Finally, Norma's provocative outfit and suggestive performance are the opposite of the respectable look and proper behaviour of her butch counterpart.

One of the most interesting scene is the one which portrays Victoria and Norma alone together in King's bedroom. The longing looks between the two female characters, through a process of shot-reverse-shot, associate them as a butch/femme couple. This scene, like the one in which Victoria undresses in the bathroom, serves the narrative purpose of proving that beneath her/his clothes "Victor" is really a woman. Victoria drags Norma into the bedroom and pushes her inside saying: "It's very important, it's going to change your whole life!". Indeed, from a counternarrative point of view this declaration echoes what Toddy says to Norma in a previous scene: "You know, I think the right woman could reform you too". And as the butch counterpart of this femme Victoria could be "the right woman". Once inside the bedroom Victoria takes her jacket off. She looks steadily at Norma, lying on the floor, who gazes back at her. Shots of Norma dragging herself up the bed show her facial expression that shifts from bewilderment to excitement. These are intercut with shots of Victoria as she slowly removes her braces, a ironic smile on her face. The last shot shows Norma standing on the bed, looking at Victoria she winks and says in a complicit low tone "shut the door". The bed reminiscent of other bedroom scenes in the film evokes lesbian desire. Though Straayer states that "[t]he narrative uses Victoria's gender transgression to

exert a threat of sexual violence against Norma's less acceptable gender transgression" (1996, p. 298), I want to maintain that read through the butch/femme roles dynamic, underscored by the "gender transgression" of both female characters, this scene potentially subverts traditional gender roles. First of all I do not think that a "macho" behaviour is a male prerogative: women, be they homo-, hetero- or bisexual, may well take pleasure in playing with these kinds of stereotypes, precisely as a sex/gender transgression. Secondly, Norma seems to be turned on by this attitude and as their facial expressions reveal both her and Victoria seem to enjoy the situation.

However, it must be emphasised that my point is not to suggest that in butch/femme couples the former is always the "macho" while the latter is her submissive partner. As Garber stresses "choice of dress [do not] necessarily signal anything like active or passive roles in courtship or lovemaking. The fiction that the "butch" or the female-to-male cross-dresser is always the seducer was no more true then [in the twenties] than it is now" (1992, p. 146). Yet, considering that the film is mainly a heterosexist production it comes as no surprise that the "invisible" lesbians are (un)represented as a stereotypical butch/femme couple.

The final scene shows Victoria dressed-up in a black evening outfit. Since she was dressed in masculine clothes throughout the film it is at this moment that her lesbian butch image is the most powerful as she eventually looks "cross-dressed" in her feminine clothes. Contrary to Norma's, Victoria's femininity is used to abide by the rules, to comply with traditional gender roles, and to obey patriarchal law. On the whole, the display of femininity and masculinity through different gender strategies reveals that the mundane definition of cross-dressing based on the notion of sexual difference needs to be reformulated. (Cross-) dressing is a strategy which engages multiple signs of both femininity and masculinity and creates multiple gender configurations. My reading of both female characters in the film as lesbian figures suggests that butch and femme (and "others") roles disrupt the codes of sexed/gendered clothing.

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