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Singing utopia: body and voice in *Boys Don't Cry*, *Orlando*, and *Una Mujer Fantástica*

ABSTRACT: In this article, I analyse how gender identity is represented and constructed in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), and Sebastian Leilo's *Una Mujer Fantástica* (2017). Taking from Muñoz's theories of queer futurity and performance, I argue that the focus on the singing voice displayed in *Orlando* and *Una Mujer Fantástica*, particularly when it comes to transgender and/or gender-bending characters, indeed constitute a powerful representation of queer futurity, in its never tangible performance of queer world-making that takes away the focus from the physical body and its concrete reality.

KEYWORDS: Boys Don't Cry; Orlando; Una Mujer Fantástica; gender; queer theory; film studies, trans studies.

In his seminal work *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Muñoz responds to Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), critiquing its "embrace of queer negativity" (EDELMAN 2004: 6) in order to move to a celebration of queer future potentialities. To do so, he argues that queerness has to be interpreted as an "ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future", and which therefore embodies a "rejection of a here and now" (MUÑOZ 2009: 1). This particular imagining of queerness as always deferred allows for a practice of "queer world-making" which "hinges on the possibility [...] to cast pictures of utopia [...] in any map of the social" (40), thus reacting against ideology in the present through the imagining of a distant queer future. Muñoz particularly stresses on the value that performance can have in representing queer potentialities: to him, in fact, queer performances portray "an anticipatory illumination of a queer world" (49) in their presentation of "identity as a site of struggle" (MUÑOZ 1999: 6) against the dominant cultural ideology. Queer performance, then, has the "ability to establish alternative views of the worlds" (195) in its continuous portrayal of different and queerer worlds and identities.

Understanding film as creating such a performance of queer world-making, then, this article will explore how film might depict the

“no-longer-conscious” and the “not-yet-here” of queerness (Muñoz 2009: 1-12). The discussion will focus particularly on representations of queer futurity put forward in Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), Sally Potter’s *Orlando* (1992), and Sebastian Leilo’s *Una Mujer Fantástica* (2017): in different ways, all three films revolve around a protagonist whose gender identity is continuously presented as either “a site of struggle” or performance. Rather than conducting a chronological discussion, I will analyse the three films thematically, contrasting Peirce’s focus on the biological body to Potter’s and Leilo’s representation of queer performance, centred particularly around voice and singing. As this article will argue, then, the singing voice becomes, in both *Orlando* and *Una Mujer Fantástica*, a representation of queer futurity, in its powerful and yet never tangible performance of queer world-making.

Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* narrates the real story of Brandon Teena, a transgender man who died as a victim of an extremely violent hate crime in Nebraska during the early 90s. Brandon became known as one of the earliest cases of transgenderism, an element which, along with the extremely violent and rural context he lived in, makes Halberstam define him as a figure who was “out of time and out of place” (HALBERSTAM 2005: 16). Halberstam also sees particular moments between Brandon (Hilary Swank) and his girlfriend Lana (Chloë Sevigny) as creating “fantasy shots in an otherwise wholly realistic film” (87), hinting at “an elsewhere for the star-crossed lovers that is located in both time and space” (77). Halberstam’s notion of queer time and space is also referenced by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (165), and these moments in the film can thus be interpreted as interlacing with the aesthetic of queer futurity put forward by Muñoz.

The opening sequence of the film already introduces the possibility of queer futurity, starting with an establishing shot of the small town where the action will take place (PEIRCE 2002). Peirce’s lens remains on the town for a few seconds, showing a time-lapse of the city and of its lights, and thus indicating the possibility of a different queer world through the use of techniques which “pervert our usual relationship to cinematic time” (SCHOONOVER & GALT 2016: 277) in presenting a different and faster temporality. After the time-lapse, the camera cuts to a highway and then to the interior of a car, where Brandon’s eyes are shown reflected in the front mirror. By blurring time and space through the car in motion, then, Peirce establishes, from the very start of the film, how

“the highway provides the transgender protagonist a space of freedom” (SCHEWE 2014: 39), as a place characterized by its fast-paced potentiality for movement and change.

A similar shot of the town and its highway is featured after Lana stops Brandon from testifying his manliness to her, as her mother and ex-boyfriend requested. As Brandon tries to explain his transgender identity as a “weirdness”, Lana stops him by saying “don’t be scared... look at how beautiful it is out there” (PEIRCE 2002): the camera cuts from Lana’s room to a time-lapse of the town seen from afar, then quickly moving upwards and panning on the blue sky. Lana then reassures Brandon that she is going to tell “what we know it’s true [...]. I know he is a man”. These moments of fast temporality thus represent a queer utopianism in their indication of a future elsewhere, paired with verbal recognition of Brandon’s gender identity. This is further repeated in the final scene, where Lana runs down the highway in her car as the only survivor of the tragedy, and the camera focuses on a time-lapse of the road in front of her as she smiles melancholy. For Brandon, however, utopia remains unattainable and impossible, impeded by his murder at the end of the film.

This fully-fledged representation of queer utopia is further prevented by the film’s insistence on showcasing Brandon’s body, which in its tangible physicality reinstates the “here and now” as constituting a “naturalizing idea of the present” (MUÑOZ 2009: 12). Peirce’s emphasis on the naked body is also understood by Halberstam as re-establishing the “gendered binary on which the stability [...] of mainstream cinema depends” (HALBERSTAM 2005: 86). This is particularly evident in the last love scene between Brandon and Lana: here, Lana asks Brandon to explain “what were you like before [...] were you a girl?” before completely divesting him and showing his naked body, which had been previously forcefully exposed by Lana’s ex-boyfriend (PEIRCE 2002). Peirce’s focus on the body then re-establishes a binary gender opposition which questions and endangers Brandon’s identity. Seeing transgenderism as a state of “permanent dislocation” (HALBERSTAM 2005: 124) and indeed as “a site of futurity and utopian/dystopian potential” (HALBERSTAM 2018: 21), Halberstam then criticizes *Boys Don't Cry* for failing at portraying this utopian potential in its gendered focus on the body and binary oppositions: to Halberstam, instead, transgender identities should be portrayed as a site where to explore the potentialities of queer futurity, in all their power of self-fashioning.

Such a self-fashioning is portrayed in both Sally Potter's *Orlando* and Sebastian Leilo's *Una Mujer Fantástica*, particularly through their focus on performance and the singing voice. Potter's work, taking from Woolf's novel, focuses on the character of Orlando (Tilda Swinton) and their travels across time, space, and identities; while *Una Mujer Fantástica* portrays the story of Marina (Daniela Vega), a transgender woman who performs as a singer. While Marina's occupation renders the role of the voice self-evident in Leilo's film, singing performances play a fundamental role in *Orlando* as well, as a tool of queer self-fashioning. Both of these films, then, move away from Peirce's focus on the body in order to better represent queer-ness' future potentialities, stressing on the role of the voice as a gesture which "signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude" (MUÑOZ 2009: 70). Performance and the singing voice therefore represent, as Muñoz would say, "alternate modes of textuality and narrativity" (MUÑOZ 1996: 10), as a mode of self-fashioning where identity is constantly deferred and never fixed, moving away from the physical tangibility of the body. The self "produced by fiction" (MUÑOZ 1999: 20) in these films, then, performs "new formations within the present and the future" (MUÑOZ 2009: 56) through the utopian value of the singing voice.

In *Orlando*, voice and performance play a fundamental role from the very first sequence of the film. While the opening titles are running on the black screen, viewers can already hear music and a speaking voice: it is Orlando's, shown as he walks back and forth reciting a poem. Swinton serves not only as the main actor, but also as narrator through the use of voice-over. As Orlando continues reciting, Swinton's and thus Orlando's voice-over states: "there can be no doubt about his sex, despite his feminine appearance". After Orlando sits down, the camera cuts to a close up of his face: as the voice-over continues "but when Orlando", the narration is interrupted by Orlando himself looking straight into the camera and saying "that is, I" (POTTER 1999), breaking the fourth wall. From the very start of the film, identity is then presented as a continuous site of struggle and performance between the narrating I and the narrated self, establishing Orlando's "role as a practitioner of [...] self-conscious conjectural thinking who shares activity of sign tracing with the audience" (DEGLI-ESPOSTI 1996: 80-1).

This exploration of identity is particularly portrayed through artistic self-expression and performance. The first sequence ends with a close up of Orlando's fingers holding a pen over a blank page, only to retreat his

hand and look melancholy in the distance, symbolizing his temporary failure of expression. Orlando dozing off against a tree leaves space to the second sequence of the film, starting with several establishing shots of the royal palace: these are accompanied by a high-pitched voice, singing an Elizabethan ode. The falsetto performance makes it momentarily impossible for audiences to attribute a gendered body to the singer, who is then revealed to be Jimmy Somerville, a gay British icon, standing in the role of a castrato singer and dressed in garish courtier's clothes. Somerville's appearance is also paired with the first close-up of Queen Elizabeth, played by another queer icon of the times, Quentin Crisp (POTTER 1999). As Skyora puts it, "the clash of word, voice and image in the prologue of the film [...] can be understood as a paradigmatic introduction to [...] incongruences" of identity (SCHULTE 2006: 337): *Orlando* then portrays identity as a site of struggle and potentialities, where gender norms are blurred and re-invented through self-fashioning and the singing voice.

In its lack of embodiment and thus of a physical and visible signifier of gender identity, the voice is what better represent Muñoz's potentiality of queer performance as a "flux [...] when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there" (MUÑOZ 2009: 97). The potentiality of singing and vocal performance are re-instated at the end of the film, where Somerville reappears as an angel in the sky, draped in golden robes, singing "I am coming [...] neither a woman or a man" (POTTER 1999) and thus chanting the promise of a queer future. His falsetto voice is recorded by Orlando's daughter, symbolizing a new era of self-expression, which also coincides with the publication of Orlando's book. The camera work here rapidly changes from the diegetic video-recorder held by Orlando's daughter to Potter's own camera, ending with a shot of Orlando staring directly at the audience, and thus inviting them into the queer utopia portrayed by the film. While filming and writing remain as valid modes of self-expression, singing and the counter-tenor voice in particular, in its gender-bending value, remain as the topical moment of queer performance: voice is in fact willing to "hurl itself out of sex-and-gender and onto the sands of a neutral, signless shore" (KOESTENBAUM 1994: 164). Somerville stands as a symbol of the queer performer, never defined by gender and instead characterized by the power of his singing voice and thus of self-fashioning performance.

Similarly, voice plays an equally important role in Leilo's *Una Mujer Fantástica*, recounting a week in the life of Marina, a transgender woman whose partner dies suddenly of an aneurysm, leaving her to deal with her own grief and his transphobic family members. Marina is first seen singing in a salsa bar: here, as in Potter's film, her voice is heard before her appearance is shown, as the camera slowly tracks her partner Orlando entering the bar. Interestingly, Marina is also an opera singer, as shown through her performance of Vivaldi's *Sposa Son Disprezzata* during her singing practice (LEILO 2017). The lyrics are clearly symbolic of Marina's own experience, as she struggles to be recognized as Orlando's partner by his own family, who constantly abuses her throughout the film: "Sposa son disprezzata | Fida son oltraggiata | Cieli che feci mai?" (VIVALDI 1734).¹ This is symbolically portrayed in her performance of *Sposa Son Disprezzata* through an almost surrealist moment where, as her singing voice continues the aria, Marina is framed through a tracking shot as she walks down the streets, and resist on her heels against an implausibly powerful wind. After a cut, the last notes of the aria are still resounding as Marina is framed looking into an elevator mirror, staring into the camera. Performance and recognition in the mirror are then strongly connected in this scene: a similar look into the camera is given by Marina at a later point in the film, where she imagines herself dancing in a club and then jumps to meet the camera, again breaking the fourth wall. Like in *Orlando*, then, performance allows the protagonist to establish a sense of self both to themselves and to the audience.

The thematic leitmotiv of the wind introduced in *Sposa Son Disprezzata* connects the performance of this aria to Marina's final performance of *Ombra Mai Fu*, a hymn to a platanus whose lyrics end with "tuoni, lampi, e procelle | non v'oltraggino mai la cara pace" (HANDEL 1738).² Marina's performance of Handel's *Ombra Mai Fu* is particularly interesting in relation to the history of the aria, explicitly written for a castrato voice and now commonly performed by male countertenors and sopranos. While Marina's previous singing performances had been explicitly coded as female, then, her last opera performance is a re-appropriation of a piece traditionally sung by figures who also struggled with public recognition of their gender

¹ "I am his wife and yet I am despised, I am faithful and yet I am scorned. Heavens, what did I do?". My own translation.

² "May thunder, lightning, and storms | never profane your peace". My own translation.

(WOOD 2006). Her performance takes place after Marina is shown lying naked on her bed: having zoomed in on Marina's naked body, the camera cuts and slowly zooms into a shot of her crotch area, where her genitals are covered by a mirror. Her genitals are then made to symbolically reflect her face, creating a moment of recognition of her own gender identity, where by looking at the mirror, Marina is also staring at the audience.

Through this moment of recognition and through her final performance, then, Marina is self-fashioning identity and opening up new possibilities for queer art and representation which are not merely focused on the body, and not relegated to a gender binary: a transgender re-appropriation of the falsetto voice and performance represents a "movement away from an initially assigned gender position" (STRYKER 2018: 456), thus refusing the "here and now" of the body in its power of performance. The singing voice is therefore a "mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force" which, to Muñoz, "would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification" (MUÑOZ 1999: 30).

In presenting the character of Marina through her main occupation as a singer, Leilo's film is centred on the value of the voice and of singing performances: like *Orlando*, then, *Una Mujer Fantástica* refuses the binary opposition of the gendered body present in *Boys Don't Cry* by focusing on the power of self-fashioning and queer world-making introduced by performance and the singing voice. While *Orlando* almost always successfully manages to do so, Swinton's naked body is shown to symbolize her transition from manhood to womanhood, thus temporarily re-instating the gender binary. By contrast, *Una Mujer Fantástica* does not allow audiences to voyeuristically gaze at the body: instead, they are invited to appreciate the power of Marina's final performance, where the voice offers the possibility of "an elsewhere, a place outside of our knowledge, a verge" (KOESTENBAUM 1993: 164). As Koestenbaum states, "singing is a movement that never coalesces long enough for us to hold it" (164), thus constituting, in its lack of embodiment and tangible existence, a performance of queer utopianism that evades gender categorization. In order to represent the utopianism presented by Muñoz, then, film does not necessarily have to utilize particular filming techniques or representation of time and space, as depicted in *Boys Don't Cry*, but avoid to obsessively and voyeuristically focus on the body, portraying its intangible performances

instead. The queer voice can then forever perform and never be categorized, in a utopian space of “ombra [...] | cara ed amabile, | soave più” (HANDEL 1738).³

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