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Westernizing Queerness: Through a RuPaul's Drag Race Lens

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Introduction

RuPaul's Drag Race made its debut in February of 2009 on the LGBTQ+ television network, Logo TV. The show follows the surveillance-based reality competition format, and in each episode, we see the competing queens scramble their way through a low-stakes mini challenge, high-stakes main challenge, and the final runway. The two contestants who did not succeed in either of the three events, will go head-to-head in a "lip-sync for your life" where the two queens will have to perform a lip-sync together, while trying to outshine one another, with the hopes of staying in the competition.

While reality media programs have existed since around the 1940s, the first platform to generate mass viewership toward stigmatized and marginalized social groups and their individual stories was the American talk show, this environment formed a beginning step in showcasing real people facing real issues. The rise of reality TV began with MTV's series *The Real World*, premiering in 1992. This show led the way to creating platforms which have a major on cultural condition and consumerism, shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race.* Reality TV tends to be viewer-based, and works to target specific groups in order to generate higher ratings and profitability. For my thesis, I will challenge how queer representations on television, specifically *RuPaul's Drag Race,* have generated a cultural shift toward those interpretations of social bias toward marginalized groups, specifically queer identities.

TV and Mainstream Media

In September 2020, *RuPaul's Drag* Race received their fifth Emmy award. With their rise to becoming an Emmy-award winning reality series, the show has been able to elevate their exposure via television networks and streaming platforms. The series has recently shifted their platform, formerly Logo TV from 2009-2012 and VH1 following from 2012- 2021, *RuPaul's Drag* Race has shifted again, and is planning to air the upcoming "All Stars" season on Paramount Plus. In the article, *Occupying the Intersection: RuPaul's Celebration of Meritocracy,* Hermes and Kardolus coin the term 'celevision.' They note this to be "the multiplication of screens allowing television a multi- and cross-media presence, linked by the figure of the celebrity and providing individuals with seemingly effortless social mobility and for us, the viewers, forms of deep affective intimacy (Kavka, 2016: 297)" (Hermes and Kardolus, 2019, pg. 464). This idea of multi-level exposure of television and social media interactions can help to further prove my thesis

where, queer representations on television have generated a cultural shift toward those interpretations of social bias toward equity among marginalized groups.

Culture and Society

Queer representation is complex, Eir-Anne Edgar questions if *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the right platform for representing current dialogue around this complexity (2011, p. 143). Is *RuPaul's Drag Race* a good representation of gay representative dialogue? Or does it merely inhibit certain cultural, social, and political ideology tailored toward the consumption of the brand itself? Edgar notes the legitimacy of the dialogue by comparing the program with the groundbreaking documentary film *Paris is Burning*, which showcases the authentic life of the drag ballroom scene in New York circa 1980 (Edgar, 2011, pg. 136). With reality TV generating a complex dichotomy of representation and performativity, there is much debate over reality stars and the manipulation of story-lines by producers. When it comes to *RuPaul's Drag Race,* Hermes and Kardolus state, "According to Rusty Barrett, 'Feminist scholars have traditionally argued that drag is inherently a misogynistic act, primarily because it represents a mockery of women or, at the very least, a highly stereotyped image of femininity and womanhood' (2017: 38)" (Hermes and Kardolus, 2019, pg. 464).

Diversity and Acceptance

RuPaul's Drag Race is known to be criticized by the feminist group to be enforcing, stripping, and policing femininity through the standard they set for competitors. Additionally, racist logic and the condoning of many different forms of stereotyping and stigmatizing has been widely discussed in regard to *Drag Race*. The series has come a long way since the American debut in February of 2009. In order to make a long list short, *RPDR* has given drag performers in the countries of the UK, Canada, Thailand, Holland, Australia and Spain a chance to compete in

their home countries – spanning vastly across the globe. Unfortunately, the series has been critiqued for its ability to translate, tele-visually, both American connotations and drag vernacular in countries like Italy (Luca, 2020, pg. 6). Though queer work is never finished, it is exciting to see how the series has made itself a place where queer individuals can speak freely on matters of discrimination, oppression, violence, drug abuse, mental health, BLM, and so much more. Additionally, *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* has given their contestants a dear platform to showcase the difficulties of being queer in the United Kingdom and across Europe.

The Italian journal, *Lip-sync for your Life (Abroad),* focuses on how *RuPaul's Drag Race* has mediated Italian cultures. First, we see some of the positives and negatives associated with the series, matters such as representation, subjectivity, subversive subcultures, and mainstream popularity have been widely critiqued when it comes to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. There are accusations regarding "gender-bending exploitation," as well as pop culture, more specifically how the series affected the political agency of the pre-*drag race* drag community. Further, the journal points out the negative matter of subversiveness, and that drag has been commodified to exploit or navigate television, in a performative way that tailors itself to hegemonic structures. Additionally, the negatives are more of a focus point on critical analysis and discussions, and it is important for my research that we give the same intensity toward critically analyzing the positives — the journal uses the words of those who celebrate the series, those who have said *RuPaul's Drag Race* "has served to propel drag culture from the obscurity of the gay bar/club scene to the mainstream of reality television. It has also helped to transform common views of drag as subculture into drag as art and as a valid profession" (Barra, 2020, pg. 9). One major quote from this article states;

> "Despite its US centrism […] [*RuPaul's Drag Race*] has made drag queens and drag culture infinitely more accessible to American and global audiences. For American LGBTQ viewers located far from the gay meccas of New York, Chicago, San Francisco or Los Angeles, and for straight viewers who would not consider attending a drag act, [*RuPaul's Drag Race*] provides an up-close, even technical view of what drag entails" (Barra, 2020, pg. 9).

Conclusion

It all began with the radio show – while reality media programs have existed since around the 1940s, the first platform to generate mass viewership toward stigmatized and marginalized social groups and their individual stories was the American talk show. This environment formed a beginning step in showcasing real people facing real issues (Gamson, 2017, p. 227). Reality television is defined by Laurie Ouellette (2017) as "an ambiguous term that encompasses the swatch of ostensibly unscripted programming featuring ordinary people as contestants, participants, and subjects" (p. 4). There are many reality television programs, genres such as make-over, competition, dating, lifestyle, and survivalist. Still, reality television programs can be created to serve a few purposes – one that showcases the lives of real people for entertainment purposes and one to engage the viewer so much as to initiate societal or cultural norms among specific targeted audiences. It's important to note how stereotypes and stigmas are common among marginalized social groups, and these stereotypes can be used as tools to keep mainstream audiences at ease, and, "queer difference, in many cases is made more dramatically useful by its presentation as a formulaic type in a crowd of formulaic types, or made more marketable by its presentation as a consumer identity rather than a political one" (Gamson, 2017, pg. 229).

The purpose of this research was to develop a higher understanding on the performativity of queerness within the realm of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and how this not only effects late modern capitalist structures, rather it contributes to greater good and globalization of social equity among the queer group. If I were to take my research further, I would put emphasis on the household, and how many argue RuPaul Charles to be a household name. This is important because parents of young queer children may have been exposed to the series, the chances strengthen toward become more accepting of their children if they want to pursue the art of drag (ultimately leading to the coming-to-terms with their true gender/sexual identity). Another cause for futher analysis would be the correlation between a discussion surrounding marriage equality in Northern Ireland and how marriage equality was only passed after the airing of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* season one. Specifically, drag queen Blu Hydrangea exemplifies her struggle with her native country's same sex marriage laws. Hydrangea is a *Drag Race UK* (2019) season one contestant from the county of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Belfast has since passed a marriage equality act since Hydrangea spoke about this issue on the series — county legislators voted on the decision 20 days after episode one aired, and there is still a lot of work to do by the government such as allowing those who are in civil partnerships to transfer their partnership into a marriage easily.

(34:40 – 36:25). Conversation among Blue Hydrangea, Divina DeCampo & Cheryl Hole.

B. Hydrangea: I'm awfully jealous by all of you girls because in Northern Ireland we actually don't- we can't get married. It's illegal still for gays to get married. I mean we can get- we can get- have have civil partnership, but actual marriage is still not legal. So, we're behind the rest of the UK actually.

D. DeCampo: Just blows your mind that in 2019 there are still parts of the UK where you can't get married if you're a gay person.

C. Hole: That’s mad.

D. DeCampo: That's f*cked up mate.

B. Hydrangea: There's this party called the DEP, and they have this petition of concern that they pull out every time gay called marriage is mentioned, saying that it offends their beliefs.

D. DeCampo: That's fine because your belief is a belief. My existence is a reality.

B. Hydrangea: And they believe that because of their religion, it shouldn't happen in our country. Which is really upsetting because when you find someone you know that you want to spend the rest of your life with them… Imagine being a young clear kid and hearing on the news that marriage equality isn't a thing, and it might make you not want to come out to your parents. So, me and my partner have made a pact that we will not get married until we’re equal. He's Blu’s biggest supporter. Without him, Blu wouldn’t be a thing. So, I mean, I have a lot to thank him for, and a lot of appreciation for him. I just wish I could show it to the world. My family. If anything happened to him, I would want to be there for him.

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