

Cross-dressing in film notes

Cross dressing in film

1. The donning of opposite sex clothes does not necessarily undermine But rather reinforces prescriptive gender codes

Costumes

1. Clothes tend to be reflective of the dominant, established and unquestioned sex of the wearer
2. Cross-dressing severs this relationship between the body and social appearance, Signifying that the biological body is also culturally inscribed

Terms

1. The terms cross-dressing, transvestism and drag need to be differentiated
2. Cross-dressing as a general term for wearing of clothes of the opposite gender
3. Stoller, 1985 suggests that transvestism should only refer to fetishistic cross dressing, whereas others also suggest can be expression of social defiance.
4. Drag is applied to cross-dressing as theatrical performance – often in a gay context as in The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert

Relationship to clothes

1. Stoller places an emphasis on the real sex of the individual cross dresser,Rejecting the idea that transvestism or cross dressing can alter the individual's core gender identity
2. Thus the transvestite's relationship to their clothes is sustained by the desire to reinforce sexual difference.
3. Similar to the femme fatale – Stoller argues that transvestites have chosen a different outfit to demonstrate their essential sex

Other understandings

1. Garber proposes that cross-dresser/transvestite needs a third term which exists outside traditional gender binaries
2. The transvestite, in this viewpoint, precipitates a category crisis – not just by questioning firmly held notions of male and female
3. But by eluding categorisation altogether and occupying a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture
4. Which runs counter to Stoller's belief that binary gender classifications cannot be transcended.

Cinema

1. Mainstream cinema's limitation of its subversive potential occurs through the marginalization of fetishist transvestism
2. E.g., The cross dressing in films such as First a Girl and remake Victor/Victoria, Some like it hot, and Tootsie, Mrs Doubtfire, are plots
3. Where the cross dressing is forced upon the characters reluctantly Usually for reasons of socio-economic necessity.
4. They are strategies to generate comedy – similar to Stoller's notion of transvestite disavowal

Body and the actor

1. The fissure between the sexed body of the actor and the gender being performed is often crudely emphasised
2. There are slippages – the male cross-dresser tripping up in high heels, hitching up stockings etc. which Serve as a reminder that the performer is uneasy in women's clothes and ready to discard them

Self-awareness

1. Most of the time, transvestites do not describe anything remotely resembling a confrontation with their cross-dressed image
2. There is enforced segregation between actual body image and the different gender assigned body the transvestite routinely eroticises
3. The transvestite does not merely blur gender
4. But embodies difference as both genders become somehow inscribed on the performative reflective image

Misconceptions

1. Often in cross dressing comedies, sexuality is also being challenged
2. However, often the endings reinforce the binary –
3. Leaving the woman behind in Tootsie for example

Fault lines

1. The transvestite image is a fault line – a crack between sex and gender, a site of ambiguity and change
2. But in films they are not allowed to linger – there is the reveal of who they really are so that the binaries remain

Theatrical conditions

1. There have been national theatrical traditions from Greeks to Romans and Italy, Japan, China, England – Where cross-dressing is accepted performance
2. In China the female impersonators rose to prominence in the late 18th century
3. There were several distinct categories of roles for such actors, All demanding specific skills and emphases
4. The confusion between these Chinese female impersonators and women forms the basis for the play and film M. Butterfly

Straight

1. Many comic narratives utilise performance as a means of legitimising cross-dressing And the deviance of the straight characters' behaviour

Butler

1. Butler focuses on the relationship between the exteriority and interiority of the drag performer
2. Newton (1979) suggests that the male/female binary is enacted by the first two layers of gendered clothes
3. Either femininity on the outside and masculine on the inside Or vice versa
4. The clothes that are visible are defined as costume – and resumed to be symbolic of a role or act, Whilst those that remain hidden reflect the wearer's inner identification
5. The second level of female impersonation juxtaposes the stable, gendered body with one set of gendered costumes
6. Here drag is still perceived to be a primary indicator of difference
7. The exterior is consciously citing a gender which remains distinct from that of the concealed body.

Gender identity

1. Butler reverses the dynamics of the body/social performance relationship and emphasises the fluidity of identity and the construction of that identity at the moment of performance
2. Clothes are always performative as they function as signs or enactments on the body to give that body the illusion of integrity and substance.
3. But they are not always read as such

Naming

1. Naming can become a dynamic discursive practice which can problematize identity and definition
2. A name can exist as a point of negotiation between the private and public domains

3. The name offered at any particular moment stabilises it – but temporarily.
4. In most drag scenarios the use or alteration of a name symbolises the way in which the individual or character is viewed at that time
5. There is always a sex which is being disguised and a gender which is being constructed
6. Any radical blurring of that, it is argued by some, at the level of fantasy
7. The dangers of fluidity and uncertainty are not always evoked in conventional television and film.