

RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE AND THE SHIFTING VISIBILITY OF DRAG CULTURE

Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (editors)

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Reviewed by Armando Ferrara

Since its beginning in 2009 on Logo TV – a US-based channel with contents oriented toward an LGBTQ audience – *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) changed the perception of the drag queens, at first in the US and later worldwide. The aim of the show is to elect “America’s Next Drag Superstar” by way of reality/competition-based challenges and the critiques of well-known judges and guest judges.

RuPaul Charles (actor, producer, singer and self-proclaimed drag “supermodel of the world”) is the host, the mentor and the confidant of its aspiring contestants, appearing in every episode of the series both in and out of drag. RPDR has immensely influenced popular culture by giving a new life to what one may call “drag discourse”, that is to say words, catchphrases and gestures that were typical of the drag scenes. Some examples may include catchphrases such as “Condragulations,” “Sashay,” “Shantay,” “Werk,” and a specific language such as “cooking” (in referring to the make-up which has to warm until it reaches body temperature so it can be better applied), “read” (the act of taunting or mocking someone in a humorous way), “shade” (the act of giving a light comment with slight disrespect towards someone), and so on.

The main goal and ultimate effect of the series is one of queer-friendly fierceness fused with a sense of queer community. The show regularly confronts homo- and transphobia, as well as several forms of bigotry and oppression. At the same time, it incorporates the milestones of American LGBTQ social, cultural, and political history. Finally, the show helped drag culture rise from the obscurity of the gay bar in which it was hidden, transforming the view of drag as a subculture into drag as an art expression and established profession.

Although RPDR may be perceived as an unusual subject for a collection of scholarly

essays, Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, the authors of the book *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (2017), think that the program is now at a crucial point where its social, cultural, and political implications can no longer be ignored. Niall Brennan's research focuses on discourses of representation, identity, and belonging in Brazilian, US, British, and Australian television programming, while David Gudelunas researches and teaches in the areas of emerging media, critical and cultural studies, gender, sexuality and communication, media history, and communication industries.

The book is divided into three parts, each one concerning and focusing on different aspects of the relationship between drag culture and its representation in reality television. The book is not intended for a lay audience. In fact, its language is not reader-friendly, due to its jargon which may be of difficult understanding for readers who are not familiar with the academic discussion related to Communication and Media. Maybe the use of explanatory footnotes could have avoided this problem, allowing readers to better enjoy this work and its contents.

The first part of the book explores the tensions between RPDR and its representation of femininity, often perceived as misogynistic and for that severely critiqued. The issue, for many feminists, relates to the fact that those who are deciding on and playing with the notion of femininity are still biological men. Through a Foucauldian lens of representation and power (a form of discourse analysis which focuses on power relationships in society expressed through language and practices), Julia Yudelman analyses how two contestants of two different seasons of RPDR embody transformation into subjectification; the use of references to the show made this chapter of easy understanding for one who has seen it.

Brennan explores contradictions that can be noted between the dimensions of drag culture in RPDR, taking into account Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) in which are discussed frameworks of gender performativity regarding men performing femininity through the art of drag. The author also analyses competition and consumption as main narrative aspects of RPDR and interrogates the boundaries between drag as fantasy and the growing presence of queer culture on reality TV.

While Dieter Brusselaers examines how inclusivity and marginalization occur in the show and how drag queens can be perceived as illiterate in the "fine arts" while being literate only in bar/club culture, Joanna McIntyre and Damien W. Riggs' essay, instead,

focuses its attention on the presence of Puerto Rican drag queens and their struggles with understanding and speaking English as their second language. The essay also explores how Puerto Rican queens are stuck in stereotypes and unable to perform anything else other than the “sexy, sassy and crazy” Latinas, an important reflection on questions such as interiorised racism.

As an extension of the previous topic, Sarah Tucker Jenkins explores the impossibility of having to be at once connected to and separated from one’s cultural heritage, as it happens with Puerto Rican queens or with the winner of season one, Bebe Zahara Benet, where her Cameroonian identity eclipses any other aspect of her drag persona.

Due to the presence of the so-called “big girls” in RPDR, Amy L. Darnell and Ahoo Tabatabai interrogate how the show depicts body size through seasons and episodes. In a space where aspects such as queerness, ethnicity, and aesthetics are celebrated, body size and in particular “fatness” fall short of celebration. Ami Pomerantz takes into account the presence of fat drag queens in RPDR, taking into analysis their performances across the different seasons.

The second part of the collection provides first-hand, interpretive perspectives taken from viewing, learning from, and performing drag. The salient aspect of this section is the cohesive sense of community that arises from varied participation in RPDR. Rob Rosiello traces the unexpected and explosive growth of the first RPDR behind the television screens. We learn that drag culture as conveyed through RPDR is not simply about gowns, wigs, and make-up, but also merchandise, sponsorships, and tours. Rosiello reveals how queens, promoters, sponsors, and fans all come together as a community to portray RPDR as we see it today.

Colin Whitworth analyses RPDR’s potential not as a promotional tool, rather as a queer pedagogical one. Rather than observing the queens and their portrayed lives from distance, Whitworth employs a self-ethnographic method of analysis. He reminds us of the potentialities and responsibilities of RPDR in serving as a queer pedagogical platform. This is a very important essay, which could be further developed in a variety of studies. It is important to have such programs, because they can help closeted persons to accept themselves and find out that out in the world there are several communities ready

to be supportive towards everyone; no one is alone in this world.

In an interesting way, Anna Antonia Ferrante explores the implications of the concept of families and community in drag culture as represented in the show. With links to the well-known 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, RPDR is compared to the film's portrayals of drag houses, parents, and families, giving the reader detailed background on the drag culture.

RPDR's influence reached even Brazil LGBTQ community. Although Brazilian fans, drag queens and followers have made RPDR part of their culture, the authors Mayka Castellano and Heitor Leal Machado question the extent to which the force of the show can be seen in Brazilian queer culture that fights everyday with an homophobic government. Garza Villarreal, Valdez García and Rodríguez Fernández, instead, explores how RPDR is perceived in Mexico, where the portrayal of drag queen and queer culture struggles with the *machismo* typical of the country and its difficulties in becoming part of the Mexican queer culture.

Despina Chronaki's question regards how the Greek audience perceives RPDR. The author finds that her Greek viewers have a sophisticated understanding of drag culture and other non-normative gender and sexual identities, particularly developed thanks to RPDR. Kate O'Halloran, on the other hand, given the popularity of RPDR outside the USA, argues that instead of building a global community, the show creates and frames divisions between contestants that reveal disparities, showing that the LGBTQ community is far from united.

The third and last part of the volume considers how the new television environment and social media spaces help in constructing global participation in RPDR. From here, the chapters start to become more technical, and the reading a bit difficult because of the issues discussed above regarding the use of a specialised discourse. Gudelunas looks at how RPDR is a TV show produced by and for the new media environment. The author also argues that the success of RPDR should be judged by how the program is shared, perceived and transformed by its fans in these new spaces. RPDR's fans gather in bars, tour locations, and conventions around the globe to interact with each other and see their favourite drag queens. As Alexander analyses, in Perth, Australia, the Australian drag scene is highly disconnected from the traditional family structure, where a drag "mother" serves as a mentor for her drag "daughter" in passing through the

art; instead, Australian drag queens look at the transformational aspects of RPDR to achieve their goal of becoming professional entertainers.

Even though RPDR is distributed globally, its values are not shared in the whole world. In her essay, Chelsea Daggett uncovers the unexpected link between the neoliberal agenda and the promotion of family, self-love and community. Back to Brazil, Henn, Viero Kolinski Machado and Gonzatti take a theoretical approach in evaluating the implications of RPDR for Brazil's online queer spaces.

The authors of the book end their work with the hope that the volume will provide a basis and an inspiration for further explorations of the importance of alternative modes of expressions and identities. The book is a fine critique of RPDR and its representation of queer culture, with various authors that face their issues with passion and competence; it surely faces problems that are still present in the LGBT* community (such as racism, fat-shaming, internal homo- and transphobia, etc.) and this is of great importance. Yet when it comes to the part of the book concerning mostly the show's representation in the Media, it becomes difficult to read, due to the technicality of the language used. Except for this little issue, however, the book did not show any weaknesses or negative aspects in its contents; for what concerns us, this is an essential book for anyone interested in queer culture and/or queer studies, a must have in everyone's libraries.

Armando Ferrara holds a master's degree from the University of Naples "Federico II" in Modern European Languages and Literature, with a specialisation in English Literature. Among his main research interests are the history and literature of the Victorian Era. His master's dissertation focused on the literature created for the working-class (in particular on the penny-issue fiction) and its impact on the society of the time. Ferrara's other research interest is related to Queer Studies and Lavender Linguistics.