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DOI

[10.1177/1749602019875864](https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019875864)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Critical Studies in Television

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Citation for published version (APA):

Hermes, J., & Kardolus, M. (2019). Occupying the intersection: RuPaul's celebration of meritocracy. *Critical Studies in Television*, 14(4), 462-467.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019875864>

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Occupying the intersection: RuPaul's celebration of meritocracy

Critical Studies in Television:
The International Journal of
Television Studies
2019, Vol. 14(4) 462–467
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DOI: 10.1177/1749602019875864
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RuPaul's Drag Race (2009–2019) started its run on the gay-friendly 'Logo TV' in 2009, and made its way to the reality television-focused VH1 network (also part of Viacom) in 2017, where it was a great success with mainstream viewers. *Drag Race* spoofs *Project Runway* (2004–) and *America's Next Top Model* (2003–) by pitching 10–16 professional drag queens against each other to become America's Next Drag Superstar (Collins, 2017). RuPaul herself is a drag queen, a gay man and a television host, excelling in all three like no other. We are using 'herself' rather than 'himself', as one of the authors feels more comfortable calling Ru a 'she'. RuPaul does not care about pronouns: 'You can call me he. You can call me she. You can call me Regis & Cathy Lee; I don't care! Just as long as you call me' (as declared on the official *RuPaul's Drag Race* twitter account, @RuPaul #RuFERENCE, 9:35 AM—3 September 2013).

At the point of writing this intervention, we have had 11 seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, 4 seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* (2015–present) and 5 international *Drag Race* versions (either announced or in production). As *Drag Race* moved to VH1 Ru won three Emmys for best host of a reality competition programme in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Meanwhile Netflix, where *RuPaul's Drag Race* is now available in the Netherlands, became the premier on-demand television portal and helped break the stronghold of broadcast television (Lotz, 2017). *Drag Race*, it appears, is an intersectional show on multiple levels: it broaches new forms of representation as well as new televisual culture.

To us, the international mainstream success of the programme is a celebration of diversity and a clarion call for a new world that is not predominantly White or

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heteronormative. *Drag Race* makes you dream of a different kind of television landscape that seems to be on the verge of becoming a reality. In this intervention we want to expand on that: how is this show—a monument to trans and queer representation—twined with how television is changing? And seemingly in contrast to this: might its new-found mainstream success also obscure how its politics of representation can be problematic?

This intervention comes in two parts. The first part uses *Drag Race* to identify how television has changed not just technologically as a platform and in its business models, but also ideologically. The second part tackles the problematic parts of RuPaul, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and drag. Drag does not make everybody happy, nor are Ru's strong neoliberal views about making your way and owning your future entirely comfortable. A third issue is how RuPaul and the show handle diversity and altercations that involve body politics (Strings and Bui, 2014). While a social activist in her own way (Raymond, 1994), Ru has taken a long time to speak out on behalf of trans people and when she finally did, it was not what people had expected her to say.

The trans moment of television

The art of drag satirises gender; *RuPaul's Drag Race* does television viewers the camp service of satirising television as a medium. For one thing, the show disproves of lingering connotations of television as a medium that makes viewers passive. The sheer volume of viewers, contestants and additional television content made by its host, illustrates how television has become a cross-media mode of storytelling where professionals and television lovers challenge one another in a process that takes place across different screens and platforms. This helps television transition away from its former 'feminine' inscription as passive (see Newman and Levine, 2012: 20). It is no longer a medium ruled by paternalist public service broadcasters nor can it be identified with the non-offensive content of commercial stations seeking to maximise audience figures or by its key women-addressed genre of the soap opera (see Modleski, 1984; Newcomb, 1974).

Drag Race occupies different 'spaces' as Annette Hill (2017) puts it, one of which is a real-life political space. The election of Donald Trump has spurred RuPaul to give interviews to news media and speak at gay pride rallies on LGBTQI+ representation and rights in current day America. Contestants are social activists too: Bob the Drag Queen is a Black Lives Matter advocate, Carmen Carrera and Gia Gunn are trans activists and Nina West is a LGBTQI+-youth charity founder. Occasionally, discussion of politics enters the television programme both in serious forms, for example in the discussion of the nightclub shooting in Orlando in 2016 in the third episode of season 9, and in comedic forms, as in 'Trump the Rusal', which was the main challenge in the fourth episode of season 11.

Television space is *Drag Race's* most prominent and complex space: this is real-life entertainment cast and produced for television, which spoofs but also *is* reality television. It is a television space that Ru makes good use of as a celebrity. As Misha Kavka argues when writing about industry convergence shows, this is television crossed with consumer and leisure industries (here drag as performance art) (Kavka, 2011: 77). It is

‘celebration’, 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). No wonder that for Ru to be a television celebrity success, she needs to spark controversy and be both lovable and hateable. This is exactly where television is able to produce economic value (Kavka, 2011: 87) and where incidentally one’s heart may be broken by one’s hero/heroine.

Drag Race shows how television has become ‘post-television’: it has moved towards a more personal experience across platforms and can no longer be identified as foremost a family medium. It no longer needs to practice suffocating heteronormativity. It encourages active viewerdom of many different guises and offers layered and wide-ranging affective links between media and ideology.

Drag and gender, race and reality TV: Occupying the intersection

As much as we love drag culture and commercial television, both have their dark sides. The art of drag has long been criticised from a feminist perspective as a sexist representation of traditional femininity by men with masculine privilege (Taylor and Rupp, 2004: 115). 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). While neither of us agrees with this reading of drag culture—we both see drag as a challenge to hegemonic gender ideals—it has to be said that definitions of femininity in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* are surprisingly rigid.

Drag comes in many guises. Common distinctions are between high and low camp, between camp and fish queens. High camp is pure imitation while low camp allows performers their own style and creativity. Ru is a low-camp queen of the glamour camp kind (Zervignon, 2002). The provokingly controversial term ‘fish’ is part of a slightly different distinction where fish denotes real-life likeness (for the queen to represent a convincing woman), and camp the artier and politically provoking forms of drag, in which queens forgo the perfect female illusion in order to fit their act.

Drag Race has historically not encouraged camp drag. Competing queens who do not follow the hegemonic ‘fish’ ideal of drag have been admonished since the start of the show by Ru and the judges: this is not the kind of femininity we are looking for in *Drag Race*. Cisgender ‘correct’ representations of femininity are also ‘a thing’ in the work-room and ‘Untucked’ discussions among candidates. Fights between ‘fish’ and ‘camp’ queens have been a staple of high drama in the show since it started.

Similarly, highly problematic policing of the female body is also part and parcel of how transgender candidates in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* have been treated over the years. Ru has likened transgender drag queens to athletes who use doping during sports events. Allowing them to compete would ‘[change] the concept of what [*Drag Race*] is doing’ (Aitkenhead, 2018), implying that trans contestants would have an unfair advantage. Until recently, candidates were not allowed to be in transition. This meant candidates had

to stop their transitioning to be able to compete, which, of course, did allow for their emotional coming out as trans women on the show. While this was amazing reality television, it was also painful disciplining of bodies and gender expression of trans candidates. Drag is meant to produce strong gender identities as performance, no matter what body is underneath the outfit. Recent seasons have had competitors who identify as trans women, such as Peppermint and Gia Gunn, as Ru seems to have altered the rules after the backlash of her controversial statements. What exactly the rules are now, we could not say.

It is interesting that Ru argued that trans women competing would be making use of an unfair advantage. Throughout her career RuPaul has preached meritocratic ideals and making good use of your assets (Charles, 1995). Ru does not believe in complaining about one's position or lack of means, nor has she ever believed that intersectional identities speak of oppression and structural inequality. If Ru was able to overcome issues of race and sexuality and find ways to satisfy mainstream audiences (read: White straight), everybody else can too. When Chi Chi DeVayne in season eight dared complain that her lack of resources excluded her from buying the expensive designer gowns she felt were expected by the judges, she was told that she simply needed 'to make it work'.

Ru's denial of structural inequality and meritocratic convictions prohibit her from thinking like the intersectional hero she is for us. (Indeed, research into meritocratic convictions illustrates that those who hold these simply have no truck with intersectional understanding, see Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Littler, 2017). While *Drag Race* is the ultimate case for 'post-television' as a hopeful and exciting multiple transition, it is at the same time limited by the ambitions that created it. Discussing early seasons of *Drag Race*, Sabrina Strings and Long T Bui (2014) point out that lighter-skinned queens were far more likely to win. In addition, *Drag Race* has encouraged queens to play on racial stereotypes, following the adage that this makes for strong (reality) television. What Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012: 136) have called the pedagogical invitation of reality television (of which they are critical for its disciplining of lower-class culture) extends in an unfortunate camp reversal to what is ultimately racist stereotyping.

Likewise, in the early seasons Ru's allegiance to commercial television was a great joke. *Drag Race* looked like a parody of capitalist entertainment. A small group of sponsors would mostly make products available: vodka, make-up, a vacation. Prizes you could not be sure anyone would really want to win. The camp tone and feel of the show allowed the prizes and commercials for the sponsors to be hilariously funny in their own right. The more successful the show has become, the less easy it is to read this as parody, which, in a sense, compromises how we watch it: the show has become what it promised to satirise for so long.

Conclusion

Ultimately our issue with RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race* is that we have decided to champion someone who polices femininity, condoned forms of racist logic and said that she does not believe in structural inequality. While for us RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag*

Race are intersectional politics come alive, we may be engaging in a form of self-congratulatory leftist politics that tries to appropriate minority culture. Even worse, we might be seen as denying the show and its creators their definitions of themselves in a flagrantly patronising neocolonialist move. While we might want to see Ru and the show in intersectional terms, we acknowledge that the purpose of the show is not intersectional at all: it is commercial television and it celebrates neo-liberal meritocratic ideology.

So there we are: we enjoy the media products created by the RuPaul conglomerate in a most unironic manner and are critical of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and our own viewer motives and judgements. It helps somewhat to recognise that even progressive media texts have their problematic aspects. It is a bit like Jade's tucking failure in season one: 'Interesting to see such a beautiful woman with such a big dick' (Edgar, 2011: 133). When we venture out of our self-congratulatory bubble (look at us being 'woke' viewers), we can see both beauty *and* awkwardness in the drag that commercial television likes. The RuPaul we know will not care either way: as long as our watching is paying her bills, she ain't paying *these* bitches no mind.

Authors' Note

Joke Hermes is also affiliated with Inholland University, Netherlands.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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