

From Cinderella to the Snow Queen

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I cannot write this text from another viewpoint.

At the end of the 1990s, the air of anticipation for a favorable future was filled with eager curiosity about everything new and brought with the wind of change from the outside world (from old German Wehrmacht boots to welcoming aliens at the Shtarkelovo Airport). When there is talk about the rapid commercialization of the Eastern bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall and how we did voluntarily lost the collective spirit and social benefits in favor the West's colorful packagings,¹ one forgets that people in this part of Europe longed for freedom and desired the radical transformation of life. And this longing for freedom has manifested itself in all spheres of public life.

This was also the time when the image of non-heterosexual people came out in public space. For an entire era, different sexualities were simply invisible. If I ever learned about the existence of homosexuals, faggots or transvestites, it was through the *Bulgarian Encyclopedia* in 5 volumes under the letters "H," "F" or "T." In reality, such people were invisible. The first public image for me was specifically related to the agonizing death of Freddie Mercury due to AIDS. His death and last days were richly covered on the National Television. And although Queen and Freddie were well known, suddenly his sexual orientation and illness changed his image of a rock'and'roll star and introduced two topics in Bulgaria that were difficult for the social norms.

In the 1990s, men cross-dresses as women appeared on television screens. This happened somehow naturally. Then unisex fashion was established, there were perfumes and unisex clothes, women with very short hair and men's clothing or boys and girls with short hair dyed in very bright colors and piercings who looked almost identical. The faces of David Bowie, Robert Smith and Freddie Mercury

¹ Keti Chukhrov, "The Socialist Past," in *Atlas of Transformation*, eds. Zbynek Baladrán and Vit Havránek (Prague: JPR Ringier and tranzit.cz, 2010), 596.

have long been present. More and more minimalistic, androgenous models came into vogue, perhaps fueled by futuristic fantasies for a cosmic unisex society. This fusion from the female to the male image and vice versa was part of the time and its tendency.

The Spartacus Club, as well as the then-emerging entertainment sector, were part of the creative energies of the 1990s. Although these were the thuggish years, the anarchy and aggression remained outside its doors, enclosed by the strict face control at the club's entrance.

I found myself in Spartacus with friends at around 20 years old. On my very first visit, as I was expecting to find myself in an almost secret society devoted to debauchery and perversions, I actually found myself in a club that was bursting at the seams by people of all sexual orientations dancing and rejoicing. This is why it cannot be said that Spartacus was exactly a gay club. On the contrary, the audience was more of a mixture of so-called "liberated people" (perhaps today they would be declared "Sorosoids") or, in other words, people from the creative circles of television and the so-called high-life, as Evgeni Minchev likes to call it, students from the arts academies and the creative industries who had come mainly for the party.

To me the 1990s coincided with a time when I myself was drawn to different fashions and identities. My position is the one of a spectator who experiences nothing but an aesthetic feeling, devoid of desire for the beautiful creatures that appeared on the stage of Spartacus. Although I did compare with the eye of a rival what about them is not woman-like: whether the shoulders, the palms or the face. The face was always fake with too much makeup, but some queens really had very pronounced cheekbones and chins. I envied their tight hips, but I felt superior with my breast, and with my girlish size at that. I tried to imagine if this womanly image could deceive she was a woman buying bread in the supermarket. To me, drag queens were men who wanted to be women, and because of this delusion of mine, I resisted those exaggerated female images. It was something I felt I was not, and I wondered if ever a woman would become that in her life.

Of course, as a child I had tried many times to put on my mother's clothes, to wear the high heels and put and use all of her make-up, sometimes all at once, to take on the role of a grown-up woman and imagine that I would look like that. (Later on I actually wore a lot of my mother's clothes given the lack of normal prêt-à-porter in the 1990s.)

But I could never rise to such a lavish image of a woman. This incarnation seemed unreal to me: socially and psychologically. Starting with overly high-heeled shoes, the amount of make-up, the short and overly decorated dresses and skirts, the heavy accessories and that arrogant fluttering on the stage. It is at this point that you realize how untrue, exaggerated and performative the image of the woman they create is.

Ursula seemed to me this giant woman, a great sadistic bitch who did her real deeds off stage. It was not until much later that I realized that this was partly due to the clothes she was wearing - the work of Kristina and Konstantin. It is as if she comes out of the real underground darkness only for the stage of the nightclubs and at sunrise returns to the dungeon. At one point it was rumored she was performing a python number. It only ignited the image of a powerful witch in my mind.

In contrast, Miss Julieta was no different than a real woman on stage, the gentle cutie type. She always radiated with tenderness in everything due to her soft movements, the charming smile and of course the thin bones. In fact, she was probably the most girlish image out there who seemed quite natural, as if it had always been this fragile creature.

Drag history in Bulgaria seems to date back to the late 1980s in the form of socialist variety programs, where mise-en-scène and choreography are mainly represented. Elza Parini, Miss Boni and the artists from the Tamara Night Show, as well as other artists of the time, entertained the audience with dancing, Miss Bonnie even completely concealed the fact she was a man. The audience does not seem to mind, even when it is obvious that men are dancing in women's clothes. Everything is in the spirit of entertainment and partying.

While the first queens faced scarcity and created sequins made of jar tin caps, then in the 1990s the drag queens entered the milieu of the media, not without the help of designers who generously dispersed their creativity and extravagant ideas. At the time there was a free fusion from male to female and from female to male identities, or to those that combined both; as an androgynous and cosmic identity, techno futuristic, S&M-shaded dark-fantasy, femme fatal, Amazon-domineering and exaggerated carnival-variety type of identity. Mariela Gemisheva, Kristina and Konstantin contributed to the aestheticization and embodiment in the flesh and image of these identities. There is no denying that television was also relatively tolerant to this new phenomenon of transvestism and driven by motives to present, above all, something interesting.

When the drag queen culture entered the entertainment industry, as if the result of a Dionysian bacchanalia, in which the chalga and drag culture had had a shameless intercourse in front of everyone, the kid called Azis came out. Azis is liked by both straights and homos in the chalga audiences, but is valued for his singing talent, he is a star and at the same time a despised gay gypsy.

This apogee of the drag queen imagery and its publicity, however, proved too frightening and ostentatious, and gradually became an irritant to the homophobic sentiments. The rise of nationalist parties, the eloquent defenders of the Christian family, and the constant recitation of the idea of a glorious past have aroused an age-old hatred of homosexuality. It was as if the public debate had forced every inhabitant of the country - from grandmother to grandchild - to have an opinion on the issue and to express it out loud. And the representation of gays was illustrated almost entirely by Azis. The mildest motive against homosexuality is that its open display is wrong. "One might be gay, but they should not show that off on the street/" It sounds like, "If one shows he's gay, I'll be forced to show that I'm against it, because that's what the majority demands."

In addition, in order to restore our wounded national dignity, our ancient origins were referred to, a kind of proof often backed up by archeological ruins. Thanks to the highest quality construction in the country, which turned out to date back to Roman times, in Plovdiv, Sofia and elsewhere the

chauvinistic feeling was revived. We are partly proud of the large-scale construction that took place in our lands during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, who sometimes visited theaters and stadiums built under his direction with his beloved Antinous.² At the same time, anti-gay sentiment culminated against a gay parade in Plovdiv, which, it turned out, no one wanted to organize. Thus, the problematic of drag queens and gays in general seemed to be gradually removed from presence in the public space, so as not to disturb the general taste, which became more and more susceptible to conservative sentiments. On the other hand, newer and newer concepts were introduced to circulate in the public space, coming from a complex scientific register that distinguishes sexual orientation and behavior. As if in parallel with homophobia, the disciplinary society had turned into a society of “publicizing and dispersing perversion.”³ One must study a whole galaxy of categories to find one’s own label.

In the age of social media, or what Paul Beatriz Preciado prefers to call pharmacopornographic biocapitalism,⁴ all bodily transformations are possible. Drag queens can transform themselves into anything they want. (Undoubtedly, new sexual categories will be generated.) Sculpting themselves in silicone, hormones and implanting all necessary to build their sexual corpuses. Many of them turned their bodies into a product circulating in social media. Obviously, the screen image has almost completely replaced the real presence of the performers. Today’s queens have kept any chance of failure to a minimum. They, along with their colleagues - young girls in swimsuits soaking themselves for hours on end in inflatable pools - fight for attention on the Internet and sell fantasies about their bodies to online audiences.

The Eros that mixed different people, attracted by the show, performance or party in one place, had almost entirely evaporated out of club and public life. The different sexualities remain divided by categories and do not mix up, save for some theoretical text. Only the parties organized by Julieta

2 Robert H. Allen, *The Classical Origins of Modern Homophobia* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2006), 120-21.

3 Мишел Фуко, История на сексуалността, т. 1: Волята за знание, превод Антоанета Колева (София: Критика и хуманизъм, 2019), 72.

4 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013).

Intergalactica and events such as Sofia Queer Forum manage to summon that Eros at times for a little while. And this is the thing about the 1990s I can only think of with nostalgia, because, in addition to taking political positions, fighting for rights and putting the discourses of sexuality on the agenda, we need to live and have fun.

The COVID crisis has only deepened these tendencies. With even more nostalgia we watch footage from Black Madonna's parties with thousands of bodies dancing side by side. The drag queens and their flawless image tore the umbilical cord from the ground and flew into the outer space of the Internet.