

## THE PARADOX OF TRANSVESTISM IN TIM BURTON'S ED WOOD

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**Abstract:** Tim Burton's quasi-biopic *Ed Wood* (1994) features Johnny Depp as a transvestite that does not conform to any established conventions and who disrupts fundamental binarisms about basic human nature and identity. The image of Wood/Depp dressed in an angora sweater, blouse, skirt, tights, heels, wig and make-up is highly comical but it also undermines gender definitions and subverts the status quo. Such a confusing amalgamation of opposing gender signifiers disrupts the highly regulated semiotic system of clothing, constructing and equally deconstructing gender and gender differentiation. The divergent theoretical standpoints of Marjorie Garber and Robert Stoller are useful in illustrating the slippery nature of gender and what the transvestite signifies in *Ed Wood*. Garber argues that the transvestite is an important site of cultural anxiety disturbing the assigned sartorial boundaries between "male" and "female", thus exposing the artificiality of the assigned social and cultural paradigms that clothing signifies. Stoller's understanding of gender is quite the opposite to Garber's, as he places an emphasis on the "real" sex of the cross-dressed individual and rejects the theory that transvestism, drag or cross-dressing can alter one's original gender. For Stoller, gender cannot be transcended and for the male transvestite wearing feminine clothes allows him to reinforce sexual difference, thereby paradoxically emphasising his masculine identity: The image of Depp in this role equally conforms to both of these arguments whilst also dismissing them. This article also consider Depp's star persona, as his feminine face and lean body connotating androgyny.

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*Ed Wood* (1994) is the quasi-biopic of Hollywood B-movie director Ed Wood, best known for writing and directing the science-fiction/horror cult classics *Glen or Glenda* (1953), *Bride of the Monster* (1956) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959). The film centres on the production of these three films and spans the period of Wood's life from 1952 to 1959 when Wood's cross-dressing first became public<sup>1</sup>. As a transvestite, Wood's body is a confusing amalgamation of opposing gender signifiers that are united on the one body. This image combines the stereotypical social gender signifiers of femininity, which include long hair, make-up, hips, breasts, and female clothing and the male signifiers of moustache, male gestures and male voice. This disrupts the correspondence between the body and social appearance and hence between sex and gender. Thus, the film's director Tim Burton and its star Johnny Depp have collaborated to create a character that does not conform to any established conventions and who disrupts fundamental binarisms about basic human nature and identity. Cross-dressing feminises the male body and illustrates the transgression of gender but it can also highlight the importance of the presence of gender and can reinforce the male/female binary. In this essay, I will investigate the character of Ed Wood and Depp's performance within this contradictory dichotomy.

It could be argued that gender is the fundamental distinction we automatically make about people when we first meet them and we are taught that there is no possibility for multiple meanings or gender ambiguity: "When you meet a human being the first distinction you make is "male or female" and you are accustomed to making the distinction with unhesitating certainty" (Freud 1966: 5). The term gender here refers to "the culturally established correlates of sex" (Goffman 1979: 1), which

are the many ways in which males or females adopt the sex-coded behaviours, cognitions and characteristics that are socio-culturally associated with their biological sex. Clothing and appearance are included in these behaviours as dress is a regulated semiotic system and one that is highly significant to a discussion of gender. This may be due to the fact that clothing not only consists of garments but is also how the social world interprets and contextualises the individual and distinguishes male from female. Thus the distinctions between sexual categories are obliterated and the social order is destabilised through the act and image of the cross-dresser, as clothing in everyday life and similarly on-screen constructs (and equally deconstructs) gender and gender differentiation.

In order to examine Depp's/Wood's gender display, it is first important to briefly differentiate between the terms "cross-dressing", "transvestism" and "drag" and to examine how each is represented in cinema as these three terms are often problematically conflated. Unlike the transsexual, the transvestite, the cross-dresser and the drag performer take their pleasure from wearing the clothes of the alternative sex rather than changing their body to become a member of that sex (Garber 1992: 3). Whilst some theorists such as Marjorie Garber use the terms cross-dressing and transvestism interchangeably, Robert Stoller (1985) emphatically differentiates between the two terms, specifying that transvestism refers exclusively to fetishistic cross-dressing, "that is erotic excitement induced by garments of the opposite sex" (176), which implies that cross-dressing is dressing in the opposite sexes' clothes purely for aesthetic reasons, with no erotic motivations or connections. The male transvestite retains the penis, which, according to Stoller is the absolute insignia of maleness and takes his erotic pleasure from his having both a penis and dressing in women's clothing simultaneously: "[a]n essential part of his [the transvestite's] pleasure is to know that while dressed as a woman he has a penis" (13). The final category "drag" can be further differentiated from cross-dressing and transvestism as the term is applied to cross-dressing as a theatrical performance rather than erotic necessity and it stereotypically answers to a viable gay aesthetic with drag queens regularly proclaiming their homosexuality through their clothes and appearance<sup>2</sup>.

Two theorists who have examined transgender images are Marjorie Garber (1992) and Robert Stoller. Their divergent theoretical standpoints are useful in illustrating the slippery nature of gender and what the transvestite signifies in *Ed Wood*. Marjorie Garber considers cross-dressing and transvestism underestimated and calls for the transgendered individual to be considered a "third term" or "third sex" which exists outside of the male-female binary. Garber believes that it is a "third" because the cultural effect of transvestism destabilises all sex, gender and sexual orientation binaries (male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, sex/gender), creating what she calls "category crisis": "By 'category crisis' I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (4). Through the social anxieties evoked by the figure of the transvestite, Garber believes that this transgression arouses "not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself" (17). Garber's conception is quite a radical figure that occupies a space of immense possibility and of perpetual mobility, which alters and confounds culture. Stoller's understanding of gender is quite the opposite to Garber's, as he places an emphasis on the "real" sex of the cross-dressed individual and rejects the theory that transvestism, drag or cross-dressing can alter one's original gender. For Stoller, gender cannot be transcended and for the male transvestite wearing feminine clothes allows him to reinforce sexual difference, thereby paradoxically emphasising his masculine identity:

[Transvestite men] *wish* they were [female] (at least to the extent of being a woman with a penis) and their transvestism is an acting out of that wish, but *they know they are not*. Their core gender identity is male; that is, they know

their bodies are male . . . and that all the world unequivocally considers them to be and always to have been males (30) (emphasis in original).

According to Stoller's theory, outfits are used by transvestites as tools to accentuate, not dissipate, their own masculinity and masculine attributes. These two approaches will act as a theoretical framework whereby I can examine how transvestism in *Ed Wood* operates and what it signifies both for the figure itself and for both Burton's and Depp's concept of gender and transvestism.

### **On-Screen Ambiguity**

The Garber/Stoller dichotomy is also useful in the examination of other mainstream films that feature transgender images. Working within a mainstream Hollywood context, Burton and Depp were fully aware of the cross-dressed images contained within other on-screen narratives and what their images imply. They would also have been aware of viewer-text interactions and interpretations and the implications of these performances on the star personas of the actors who performed these roles<sup>3</sup>. Mainstream Hollywood films such as *I Was a Male War Bride* (Hawks 1949), *Some Like it Hot* (Wilder 1959), *Tootsie* (Pollack 1982) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus 1993) all feature male characters that dress in female clothing. Such representations have been interpreted as having both radical and conservative functions in relation to how the cross-dresser is to be read. Importantly, within the narrative of such films, cross-dressing is unwilfully forced upon the characters involved for various reasons of socio-economic necessity. Henry becomes "Florence" in *I Was a Male War Bride* in order to board an American ship, Joe and Jerry become "Josephine" and "Daphne" in *Some Like it Hot* to escape the mob, actor Michael in *Tootsie* cross-dresses for financial reasons and Daniel in *Mrs. Doubtfire* cross-dresses in order to spend more time with his three children after his divorce. In all of these examples cross-dressing is necessitated rather than erotically desired as opposed to the transvestite who gets an acute sense of erotic satisfaction from dressing in female clothing. According to Stoller's definition, the lack of eroticism makes these characters (temporary) cross-dressers as opposed to transvestites or drag artists. At first in these films, cinematic cross-dressing provides a way of playing with liminal states and its multiple possibilities as the films visually play with traditional gender codes by temporarily challenging them. Yet, in the tradition of temporary cross-dressing films, which Garber labels "progress narratives", the films end with a vehement affirmation of the cross-dresser's original sex and heterosexuality. From this analysis it is easy to see that the mainstream appropriation of cross-dressing is vehemently conservative and does not legitimise transgender complexities, as Hollywood films actively marginalise and vilify sustained and unexplained gender ambiguity. As a result, the films are not as subversive as they first seem as they are not interested in evoking a positive image of Garber's "third term" and instead seem to support Stoller's theory that gender cannot be transgressed in culture.

The conservative nature of these films is emphasised by the desexualisation of the transvestite through the use of comedy and each film is marketed exclusively as such in order to have mainstream appeal. Stella Bruzzi (1997) states that in cinema "cross-dressing is used to desexualise the transvestite and deflect the potential subversiveness of the image through comedy" (147) and thus to suppress transgression and any display of a radical act. She believes that within the context of mainstream comedy, cross-dressing is defined by the acknowledgement that there is always a sex that is being disguised and a gender that is being constructed for farcical reasons. Examples of this include the images of Josephine and Daphne having trouble walking in heels in *Some Like it Hot* and the image of Mrs. Doubtfire's "breasts" catching on fire when Robin Williams leans over a pair of boiling pots. Such instances remind the audience of the protagonist's original sex and emphasises their

awkwardness of being in the clothes of the opposite sex. This is also signalled by character's often manic oscillation between masculine and feminine clothing, which is only partly to generate audience laughter but is also a device to remind the audience of the "real" person underneath the disguise. Such films marginalise fetishistic transvestism through comedy in order to limit their subversive potential and to uphold a conservative image of transgender behaviour. Their use of comedy controls and prevents erotic or homosexual possibilities.

Yet, despite this sense of conservatism, the transgender image can also paradoxically be considered radical. Drawing on Esther Newton's (1979) differentiation of inner and outer psychic space and her conclusion that drag highlights that "appearance is an illusion" (14), Judith Butler claims that the drag artist or female impersonator mocks both the corporeal expressive model of gender and the notion of a "true" gender identity. Parody denaturalises gender by means of often excessive performance, which dramatises the cultural mechanisms of gender's fabrication. Humour is therefore inherent in parody and for parody to operate successfully the audience must recognise that this is a humorous imitation that pokes fun at the "original" idea. This originates from the fact that the "performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (137). Yet, the gender parody at play in such a mechanism does not assume that the parody is of an original rather it is in fact a parody of the very notion of an original. Therefore "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (138). Such imitations effectively displace or recontextualise any meaning of the original and imitate the myth of originality itself. This is most easily recognisable in mainstream drag films, as drag artists do not intend to pass as women in relation to either the on or off-screen audiences. Films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliot 1994), *To Fong Woo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (Kidron 1995) and *The Birdcage* (Nichols 1996) offer playful critiques of gender and sexual identity but the drag performances in the films are offered no stability or normalisation. In these films, drag becomes a liberation and clothes become statements that proclaim exactly the type of tensions that other more conservative cross-dressing films seek to submerge. Thus the transgender image reveals that all gender is itself a myth or fantasy and that gender resides in the imaginary and the cultural symbolic. Both Butler's theory and Garber's can be correlated because in each the idea of a stable binary is dislocated and disregarded. Both theories denaturalise all cultural notions of gender, highlighting that there are not just two genders and that multiple and intermediary genders are possible that cannot be interpreted as either fully masculine or feminine. From these opposing readings it is clear that the transgender image is inherently contradictory and both radical and conservative.

### **Johnny Depp's Persona**

The casting of Depp in an androgynous and transgressive role is significant considering his early career and star persona. In terms of star theory, Depp is fascinating due to his physical ambiguity, which leads to connotations of androgyny considering the gender ambiguity of his characters. His body and image are wrought with female physical attributes, such as a small non-muscular body, a typically hairless, "pretty" and thus effeminate face with high cheekbones and "delicate" features and often long shoulder-length glossy hair. The actor's ambiguity can also be recognised in his choice of film roles, which are more often built on emotional and dramatic characters than on musculature and stereotypical male violence. Depp usually appears in melodramatic roles and occasionally comedic roles, avoiding the action/adventure genre altogether<sup>4</sup>. Depp usually plays the leading man in the films

he appears in, although it is very often an ambiguous leading man. Depp's ambiguous roles before appearing in *Ed Wood* include Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and John Waters' *Cry Baby* (1990), a musical that depicted Depp as the quintessential "song and dance man" a highly feminised image of masculinity, as this performance profoundly marks him as spectacle. This coupled with his ambiguous appearance and "beauty" feminises him. As a transgressive star, Depp is perfect to play the mythical androgyne because although the audience is assured that the actor is male, there is an imaginative and abstract femininity that approaches the concept of androgyny.

Within the Hollywood star system, Depp belongs to the tradition of the male star that embodies a version of masculinity that is accommodating in its vulnerability and gentleness rather than being overly imposing and aggressive. Depp exudes a "helpless" and transgressive quality, which is based and depends upon his star persona's maintenance of ambiguities, contradictions and mysteries. This is best seen in his choice of roles as he mostly plays the outsider roles traditionally associated with the vulnerable actor. Transgression in relation to Depp implies a movement beyond traditional and stereotypical definitions of masculinity because he does not have to preserve the fact that he is invulnerable and instead bases most of his performances on this concept. Many of the actor's roles have established and sustained a construction of his star persona as sensitive, artistic, compassionate and sincere, as opposed to the "tough guy" and "macho" roles associated with other actors such as Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Depp's particular brand of masculinity has been typically referred to as the rebel or revolutionary and this facet of the actor's persona is key to the appeal of the vulnerable star's version of masculinity. His image can be related to that of 1950s male stars including James Dean, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Sal Mineo, all of whom base their performances and personas on a fundamental sense of vulnerability.

### **Ed Wood as a Subversive "Third" Gender**

Considering the above definitions, it is easy to recognise that Ed Wood is a transvestite, due to the fact that he has an erotic relationship with angora. As a commonly fetishised surface, angora is feminine and sensuous due to its soft texture and appearance. This highlights that his is sexual cross-dressing and is more subversive than the more conservative images of the temporary cross-dresser. The above films do not imply a fetishistic fascination or attachment to women's clothes in the same way as is apparent in *Ed Wood* because Burton's film subverts the convention of necessity and his transvestism remains unexplained at the end of the film. However, Burton displays the male body in a transgressive and vulnerable way for comic effect as Wood is made into a comic character. *Ed Wood* resembles such mainstream films in its use of comedy, as it uses humour to take away the potentially "dangerous" or "threatening" aspects of the character and of the film as a whole.

From the beginning of the film, Wood is coded as heterosexual and professes that he "loves sex with girls". He emphatically denies that he is a "fag" and argues that he is "all man" and even fought in World War II. Arguably, these could be interpreted as progressive elements, dissociating sexual orientation from dress codes and gender. This "incomplete" or unconvincing image of the transvestite, such as Wood's is much more disturbing and radical than cross-dressing and it is this radical image that conservative Hollywood films rarely depict. *Ed Wood* restores pleasure to the practice of on-screen cross-dressing and uses clothing to examine the tensions of gender that are bypassed by its other more conservative Hollywood counterparts. *Ed Wood* can be related and correlated with films that feature drag characters as the drag acts never strive for verisimilitude and never try to fool other characters.

As a transvestite, Wood visually represents Garber's "third" term; he is a male that is dressed in female clothing, representing the fissure between the two sexes, whilst both are simultaneously inscribed onto his image. This radical image is perhaps most disturbing and obvious when Wood's disguise oscillates between masculine and feminine appearance, representing the incomplete cross-dressed image and illustrating the moment of transgression, rife with subversive ambiguities. A scene which strongly supports the theory that Wood does not conform fully to either masculine or feminine gender display gender is the scene in which Wood dresses as a belly-dancer and dances for his *Bride of the Monster* cast and crew at the film's wrap party. He is dressed in full harem costume, wearing a head veil, dress and angora sweater. With his head-veil covering the bottom half of his face, Wood is enacting a particularly erotic form of femininity for comic effect but is simultaneously desexualised. When he removes his veil and displays his mouth and moustache, he "unveils" his masculinity and shows that he consciously wishes to confuse both on-screen and off-screen understanding of gender binaries, as his face is heavily made-up. This image of Depp/Wood as a harem and dancer is enough to lead one to question gender, representation, identity and relations. Like Garber and Butler's theories, Wood denaturalises all cultural notions of gender and illustrates that multiple forms of masculinity (and femininity) are possible. He also demonstrates that intermediary identities that cannot be interpreted as fully masculine and feminine but as "thirds" exist and that the concepts of masculinity and femininity can be deconstructed.

As the character is a transvestite, Burton is provided with numerous opportunities of making him the centre of attention both on-screen and off and drawing attention to the fact that he is a "third". The first time the audience sees him dressed in women's clothing, he is framed by a doorway that draws Dolores' and the viewer's gaze towards his body. Another instance is in the dancing scene referenced above, where he becomes the pinnacle of all on and off-screen gazes. He is encircled by his cast and crew as he dances. His face is shot in close-up when he reveals his face, which is transgressive as it unites masculine and feminine visual attributes. His performance in this scene is highly self-conscious and theatrical as he uses exaggerated gestures, making him prominent on-screen. Laura Mulvey (1975) equates femininity with spectacle, differentiating feminine exhibitionism and passivity from masculine voyeurism and agency. According to this theory, by becoming spectacle and drawing the cinematic gaze towards himself, Crane/Depp connotes what Mulvey terms, "to-be-looked-at-ness" (19). In *Ed Wood*, Depp/Wood is constantly the centre of attention, thereby feminising his body and making it transgressive.

The sense of vulnerability that is apparent in Depp's star persona is incorporated into his character and performance in *Ed Wood*. Wood is portrayed as a troubled and vulnerable individual, who constantly points out his weaknesses and concerns. In an early scene, Wood confesses to his girlfriend Dolores (Sarah Jessica Parker) that he is worried that he will not succeed in Hollywood as a filmmaker. He tells her that "Orson Welles was 26 when he made *Citizen Kane*. I'm already 30". This admission of his anxieties indicates that Wood is not the stereotypical invulnerable on-screen male who does not show his weaknesses to the audience. Another instance of Wood's extreme vulnerability comes in the moment when he first discloses his transvestism to Dolores. He announces that wearing women's clothes makes him "feel comfortable" implying that he is otherwise uncomfortable in men's clothing, as opposed to the temporary cross-dresser discussed earlier. As the film progresses, it becomes clear to the audience that Wood mostly cross-dresses in times of mental distress, so his cross-dressing and its frequency become a symbol of his expression of vulnerability. Clearly, Burton suggests an innate connection between

the interiority and the exteriority of transvestism and the importance of clothing in general in relation to psychological processes.

In addition to representing Garber's theory of the "third", Depp's character also demonstrates Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance. In such a "marked" image of "womanhood", that is played for laughs, the audience is tacitly invited to speculate on the nature of "femininity" and gender itself and this invites the question of what exactly "woman" and "man" are and whether womanhood or manhood are cultural constructions. It also opens up the question of the relationship between the authentic and the imagined, which is part of the transvestite's power to transgress and to hence disturb greatly, even if this transgression occurs exclusively within the realm of fantasy. It is through the marked transvestite figure or parodic drag artist, such as Wood, that the feminist debate regarding essentialism versus cultural constructedness is most clearly tested. This binarism between "real" women and "masquerading" women has dominated debates amongst psychoanalytic, feminist, lesbian and queer theorists. Such theories inform Garber's theory of the transvestite as a third, putting dualism into crisis with its hypotheses that gender is a performance and that the binary is a mere social construction. Drawing on Joan Riviere's essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), theorists have sought to define "woman" as a cultural construct that relies upon masks and masquerades for social, political and erotic reasons. Riviere argues that it is impossible to separate womanliness from masquerade and that womanliness is in fact an impersonation of what society has deemed womanliness to be and it therefore has no original. Most notably, Judith Butler has extended Riviere's essay to suggest that *all* gender display constitutes a performance and that *all* masculine and feminine attributes are acts or a "*stylized repetition of acts*" (140) (emphasis in original). The term performance itself suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning and suggests a corporeal act or masquerade, using costumes, disguises, role-playing and improvisation. She believes that there is no such thing as a primary gender identity and that all gender is a socially prescribed, necessitated and controlled performance or cultural fantasy. The discrepancy between sex and gender apparent in the transvestite focuses our attention onto the act of performing and it problematises and deconstructs the signifiers of gender. This notion of gender as a mere representation with no original is helpful in investigating how gender operates in *Ed Wood* as Wood's embodiments of masculinity and femininity are illustrated clearly as being performances.

Wood demonstrates this through his transgressive image and Depp demonstrates it through his persona of the vulnerable male. Butler's concepts of all gender as mimicry of an absent original, as well as Garber's "third term" are supported by Depp's performance as the transvestite, as he calls into question what we consider masculine and feminine and the origins of both genders. He clearly parodies gender especially since he is located within the performance arena of Hollywood and his image deconstructs gender relations and enacts an awkward struggle between the semiotics of masculinity and femininity, which in turn create an "in-between" or hybrid image. A significant part of Wood's performative "disguise" is his blond wig, which appears almost identical to both Dolores' and later Kathy's hairstyles and shades. In the first scene in which the audience sees Wood's transvestite image, he is juxtaposed with Dolores in shot-reverse-shot so their images can be easily compared. Here it is apparent that Wood has copied Dolores' hairstyle and has even "put on" her clothes, signifying that he is consciously attempting to mimic Dolores' femininity in what can be seen to be an artificial performance. Breasts and hips here become items of clothing requisite for the part. His performance in the dancing scene referenced above also illustrates his willingness to perform in public for a crowd.

Wood's sense of masculinity is also shown to be a performance that he can manipulate. This becomes very apparent after Criswell explains to him that show business is all about "razzle-dazzle, appearances. If you look good and sound good people will swallow anything". Following this, Wood grows a moustache and carries a briefcase. These changes which occur halfway through the film clearly illustrate that Wood is not only able to manipulate his female image but also his male image, highlighting that in his case both are performances, thereby supporting Butler's and Garber's theories and problematising the binary.

*Ed Wood* not only subverts traditional audience understanding of cinematic transgender images, it also undermines generic on-screen representations of transgender images and characters. It is in this sense that *Ed Wood* posits the "crisis of category itself" (17) according to Garber's theory. Burton confuses audience expectation regarding stereotypical and generic images of the cross-dresser, the transvestite and the drag artist, thereby questioning the limits of stereotypical images and criticising their construction. Burton and Depp's complex representation of Ed Wood suggests that there is a new or a "third" representation of "perverse" transgender experience, aside from transvestism and drag that can be depicted in mainstream Hollywood.

### **Wood and the Reinforcement of Masculinity**

In contrast, even though Wood represents the fantasy of crossing gender boundaries, the audience is never allowed to forget that he is biologically male. He never becomes a woman but rather plays a performance of a female that is never particularly authentic or convincing. Wood's/Depp's transvestite in this case is a bad one in that he does not resemble a woman at all in terms of body language. He looks male, albeit with a feminine face dressed in female clothing and his transvestite "disguise" serves to accentuate not dissipate his masculinity. In effect, he most resembles a parodic drag act. Despite the fact that Wood does confuse gender boundaries, his body language is constantly in conflict with his gender presentation when he is dressed in female clothing, making him a visually uncomfortable female impersonator. Depp's/Wood's body language is different when he wears female clothing to when he is dressed in stereotypically masculine attire. Visually Wood is introduced to the audience as a heterosexual "normal" confident male. He is portrayed as a professional man wearing male clothing consisting of a dark suit that traditionally characterises "consistency, functionality and durability" (Bruzzi 1997: 69). The suit has become symbolic of traditional manliness and functions in the normative dissociation of men from narcissistic self-admiration, thus establishing Wood/Depp as masculine.

In the audience's first encounter with Wood in female clothing, a scene which I have previously examined but which I now return to from a different perspective, he wears an angora sweater, skirt, tights, high heels and a blonde wig. Importantly, as a "woman", he is more awkward is hunched over more and seems to walk with more difficulty and more self-consciousness, despite the fact that he ironically tells Dolores that wearing women's clothes makes him feel comfortable. This display of awkwardness is a clear signifier to the audience of the lack of authenticity of Depp's and Wood's performance as a "woman", which connects him with the comedy strategies of temporary cross-dressers discussed earlier. This has clear implications for Depp's audience, as it reassures its members that his transvestism is temporary and just an act or performance and is one that he is uncomfortable with. As I have already outlined, the temporary cross-dresser is depicted as a comic character first of all to appeal to a mainstream audience but the key benefit of using comedy in transgender films is in relation to the image and persona of the star playing the transgendered figure. This is because a humorous depiction and performance of such

a character reassures the audience that these “performances” are temporary and are only enacted for comedy reasons. This is a phenomenon that Burton and Depp would have been fully aware of when making the film and when well-known stars do play such characters, their images are usually dismissed as comical as the actor’s body and sex are in conflict with their clothing and appearance. Thus, the star does not “enjoy” wearing female clothing outside of the narrative and his masculinity is in no way jeopardised as a result of this cross-dressing as it is done only for the sake of performance and to generate a comic image. Unlike Wood himself, Burton and Depp intentionally sanitise the potential deviancy of the transvestite through the mechanics of comedy.

What is highly significant about Depp’s portrayal is that when he is dressed as a woman, he has never looked so masculine and his masculinity has never been made so clear, thus supporting the theory of Robert Stoller. His masculinity in this scene is accentuated as his transvestite image is directly juxtaposed with the image of the “authentic” femininity of Dolores, who is the personification of 1950s womanhood as she wears an apron, a stereotypical symbol of female domesticity and submission. Her presence immediately draws attention to the anomaly of a man that is wearing her clothes. Ironically, such a display reassures the audience that Depp’s masculinity is not fully disguised but is instead signified blatantly through his particular display of feminine attributes. This display shows that masculinity may be more powerful when masked or veiled. Depp is undoubtedly fully aware of his “feminised” persona and what it signifies, so in this role he can parody and play with his image, whilst simultaneously stressing his masculinity. The most important element of this image is Depp’s/Wood’s moustache, which represents a visual and literal “slip” of the female disguise directly reminding others that he is male, even if a reminder is not needed. Such an obvious male characteristic contributes to the subversive and contradictory play of signification. The moustache is grown at a crucial part of the film, when Wood wants to assert his authority as director to a bigger cast. The moustache therefore signifies that from that point on even when he is dressed in female clothing, his face, once hairless and feminine, has now become undoubtedly masculine.

The incomplete image also makes him a “phallic woman” because he is the representation of the (imperfect) disguise of the penis but has the sure knowledge and outward signals that it is retained. In fact Stoller explains that “One cannot be a male transvestite without knowing, loving and magnificently expanding the importance of one’s own phallus”(188). Wood is the personification of this statement and his display of masculinity demonstrates the outward signs of how the phallus is regarded with such importance by the transvestite. Significantly, it is veiled poorly and his disguise appears rather makeshift. He does not grow his own hair but instead wears a bright blonde wig, which draws attention to itself as a synthetic accessory. I have already stated that this is important in relation to the performative aspect of Wood’s gender display but here this poor attempt at femininity signifies that Wood does not want to be considered a real woman but conversely wants to draw attention to his own masculinity. The intention is not to create a credible illusion of femininity, but to directly refer back to masculinity via the ill-composed caricature that is created from a few thrown-together signifiers. This is not “female subjectivity” rather it is Wood’s/Depp’s idea of femininity and hence male subjectivity in drag. Such a reading acknowledges the importance of gender and gender relations and the profusion of the binary. Such an embodiment supports the theory of Stoller as Wood is vividly and inherently engendered and thereby reinforces the insurmountable binary of male and female.

## Conclusion

Whether the film is meant to be read as progressive in mainstreaming transvestism or as reactionary is debatable. The type of gender representation is also debatable as is the question of whether the text can access a fully utopian multiplicity of gender. Both sides of the argument that I have outlined can be argued equally and as a result they become irreconcilable. This mimics the inherently contradictory nature of gender itself, which is Burton and Depp's main concern. In the film, gender is both obsolete and exaggerated, absent but also strongly present and established. Depp's failed masquerade can be described as an ironic mimesis in which a male's attempt at femininity results in the exaggeration of his own masculinity, which in turn ironically reveals the performative activity of gender and sexual identities and deprives stereotypes of their currency and power. He parodically reappropriates the image of the woman from male-female impersonators so that the object of his (and Burton's) joke is not the woman itself but the idea that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image. Therefore feminine identity and more broadly all gender identity is always a masquerade or impersonation. Depp demonstrates the incomprehensibility of gender and its ties to an audience's understanding of star images through both his character in the film and through his star persona. He intentionally portrays the image of the vulnerable and sensitive male, a contradiction of terms itself to illustrate the contradiction that is gender and gender representation. He is parodying the very notion of the sex symbol by illustrating that gender at all times is a mere illusion that can shift at any moment. Conversely in *Ed Wood* he also shows that the strongest display of his own masculinity comes through his dressing in drag. Burton recognises this fact too and fully exploits it. Ultimately, it is impossible to resolve this negotiation and Burton and Depp acknowledge and attempt to represent this in their film. In the case of *Ed Wood*, to resolve such complexities would result in an oversimplification of the film and a denial of its complexity. Ultimately, this is the very essence of Burton and Depp's conception of the meaning of gender, particularly the role of gender in relation to stardom. Both collaborators seem mainly concerned with demonstrating the "category of crisis", not only in relation to gender, sex and sexuality, but also with the depiction of the star, the type of transgender image embodied in the film and its connection with the gaze. The film illustrates that early in his career, Depp consciously seemed more concerned with disrupting any consistent reading of his persona than in establishing and maintaining any uniformity through his roles, as does Burton who subverts genre conventions. Yet both also paradoxically acknowledge the importance of the structures of gender, genre and stardom within which they are working to create truly contradictory and transgressive on-screen figures. *Ed Wood* acts as a substantial star vehicle for Depp and allows him to maintain the conventions of a vulnerable male star as well as subvert them, thus representing a contradictory image within the star system itself.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For more biographical information on Wood, see Rudolph Grey's *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood Jr.* (1994)

<sup>2</sup> For more on terminology and definitions see Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross-dressing, Sex, and Gender* (1993) vii.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this discussion I will not be concerned with female cross-dressers and my analysis will be limited to on-screen instances of male to female transformations and impersonations. This approach is adopted not as a presumption of the male as universal but because I am most interested in examining Depp's image of transvestism, how he is contextualised within on-screen traditions of masculinity and how the audience views and interprets the "male star". Female to male cross-dressing and transvestism incorporate a completely different set of social dynamics and paradigms, with theorists such as Stoller believing that the female transvestite does not exist and that women only cross-dress to temporarily experience the greater freedoms given to men (1985: 195). So, films such as *Victor/Victoria* (Edwards 1982), *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian 1933), *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor 1935) and *Yentl* (Streisand 1983) will not be included in my analysis.

<sup>4</sup> The obvious exception to this trend is his appearance in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy (Verbinski 2003, 2006, 2007). However, his role as Captain Jack Sparrow in these three films is itself ambiguous and crosses genres, as he is not portrayed as the typical masculine Hollywood hero, but is conversely a comedic figure, who often resorts to witty one liners and sarcastic retorts instead of becoming involved with the action. When the character is involved in action sequences, it is often for comedic purposes instead of stereotypical masculine bravado that is so connected with masculine stars and heroes. Furthermore, the character constantly appears intoxicated, thus hardly a model of heroic masculinity.

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