A Queer Utopia: An Exploration of Queerness in the Golden Age of Animation.

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Vito Russo's groundbreaking book and subsequent documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, 1991) detail a long and extensive history of the way that the queer identity was portrayed with Hollywood, especially between the Joseph Breen era of the Hay's code between 1934 - 1954. Queer identities when they were on screen weren't explicit, rather just a series of coded performance identifiers, either as jokes with a lack of importance to the overall narrative, or if they had value to the plot, were made to be feared or pitied for a heterosexual audience (Russo 30). Often they were left off screen and when they were put on screen they met death at the end of their respective narratives. However, in both the film and the book, the presence of animation is almost entirely absent. No indication is given as to whether or not the animations being created at this time period followed the same model of representation. When looking specifically at the work coming out of the leading studios, Disney, Warner Brothers and MGM, not only where characters who could be read as queer included far more often than their live action counterparts. But many of these representations were a subversion of the traditional Hollywood method of homosexual portrayal in effect creating a fantasy, a utopia where these characters had the agency and power that their live action counterparts did not.

There are three key aspects of homosexual portrayal that are seen within this time period. There is the seemingly positive, but conservative representation from Disney in their use of a method that I call the "assumed queer." A character that through their performance can be read in a queer manner. The competing studios of Warner Brothers and MGM pushed further than this with their method that I will refer to as the "imposed queer," when an assumed homosexual figure prompts an identity shift in a separate character. Lastly the connection between every studio in their homosexual portrayal is drag and its various uses. The last aspect is specifically

important in its relationship to how the concept of plasmaticness, the ability to dynamically manipulate one's form, applies to the identities of the characters, further queering these figures.

Before the analysis of each different variations of queer portrayal are divulged upon it is important to understand the methods in which this essay is defining a character as "queer," or in the case of this time period, "homosexual" utilized as an umbrella term to denote queerness. Russo's own definition is that the homosexual identity is based on "what is or is not masculine (8)." While the presence of coded femininity in coded male figures is a valuable tool for reading any level of queerness in media, it is inherently limiting as it only deals with sexuality and not the various types of gendered performances. Because of this limit, two of scholar Alexander Doty's own definitions from his book *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* will be utilized. He writes his definitions as: "To describe any non normative expression of gender, including those connected with straightness (Doty 7)." And, "to describe non-straight things that are not clearly marked as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered, but that seem to suggest or allude to one or more of these categories (7)." These added definitions include the variations in gender performance on top of the "un-explicit" homosexual identity which allows for a wider range of queer readings. All three definitions will be utilized, although in the case of Disney Russo's definition alone work quite well due to their binary nature.

Within Disney Animations, portrayals of homosexuality are expressed mainly through character performance. Much like Russo's writings on live action these representations are implicit, relying heavily on conventions of homosexual coding such as vocal inflections, posturing, and gestures. All of these conventions are highly feminized in the way that they are portrayed, indicating to the audience an implied homosexual tendency within the characters that perform these actions. This particular method of representation is what I term the "assumed

queer" identity as these characters can potentially be read as homosexual through the conventions mentioned. The assumption is based off the character's performance of the code, but also the audience's ability to read into the codes presented. In Disney, characters such as the Cheshire cat in Clyde Geronimi's *Alice in Wonderland* (Geronimi 1951) and the the protagonist in Dick Rickard's *Ferdinand the Bull* (Rickard 1938) are examples of this "assumed" method due to their ability to "perform" homosexual coding, though in distinct ways. Ferdinand the bull is homosexually coded due to his feminized frame and passive nature. The Cheshire cat on the other hand, is homosexually coded through his vocal performance, movement, and his lavender coloring (lavender being a color commonly associated with homosexuality in the 1950's and 1960's). While these are stark differences in the way that these characters are coded, both of them, and many of the other Disney homosexual figures fit under the "sissy" archetype mentioned by *The Celluloid Closet*. Unlike live action films in which Russo explains that "such characters were always irritating to masculine men," these "sisssies," even the most stereotypically portrayed ones such as in David Hand's *Who Killed Cock Robin* (Hand 1935)*,* were rarely vilified or viewed as irritating by the other figures in the diegesis (Russo 8). The "assumed queer" in these animated worlds is unharmed and unbothered, a coded homosexual who is not berated for their identity by the figures that surround them.

Perhaps the strongest example of a this "assumed queer" character within the Disney catalog would be with Hamilton Luske's 1941 film *The Reluctant Dragon* (Luske 1941). The story is about a young boy who after various sightings goes to see a dragon near his home. Expecting a ferocious beast, he is surprised to learn that the dragon isn't what he imagined. The dragon doesn't kidnap damsels (an explicitly mentioned activity, which can be read as coded heterosexual) or scourge the countryside, rather he writes poetry laced with homosexual

innuendo (The reciting of "To an Upside Down Cake" involves the dragon waxing poetically about "tops" and "bottoms"). A knight appears later within the narrative to kill the dragon but once again he isn't what the boy, or the audience imagined. The knight is one of the only example of a subtly coded homosexual Disney figure during this time period, as he presents himself as somewhat masculine, but he also writes poetry and in an odd exchange between the dragon is seen to be essentially flirting with the animal. After this flirting sequence the two agree to battle, leading the dragon to putting on a performance of traditional masculinity and eventually dropping the performance and becoming his feminized identity when he "looses" the fight. The story finishes with the dragon being accepted and celebrated by the town as they bring him into a dining hall and he toasts to the citizens by saying that he won't "rant or roar, and scourge the countryside anymore." Of course, he had never done these things to begin with, rather it was just an untrue assumption from the citizens of the town due to his dragon-ness that they never had seen until then.

The implicit homosexual subtext here showcases a clear acceptance of the "assumed queer." The celebration of the dragon at the end is for the destruction of his false public perception, which was coded masculine and therefore coded heterosexual. His coded homosexual side isn't an issue, an irritation, or a cause for vilification to the villagers. This acceptance of the homosexual identity is repeated often in the works that house these figures. Sometimes the acceptance is through the main character like how Snow White in Hand's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand 1937) is a matronly figure to the various coded homosexual dwarfs. Sometimes the acceptance is with actual familial characters, such as the mother in *Ferdinand the Bull* and how she accepts her sons coded homosexuality without much issue. In

his book *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*, scholar Sean Griffin writes on the accepting nature of homosexuality within Disney.

"Interestingly, the short never seems to suggest that Ferdinand is somehow depraved or deserving of contempt for his desires. Although his mother wants to know why he doesn't want to run and leap and butt heads like all the other young bulls, she accepts her son's "lifestyle" without much second thought. Ferdinand is never shown racked with guilt over his implied homosexuality or worried about what others may think of him. On the contrary, the cartoon continually shows close-ups of him batting his long eyelashes and sighing slowly and contentedly. Neither the narrator nor the visual design of the cartoon ever judge Ferdinand as somehow wrong in his choice. Rather, there is a bemused acceptance and delight in Ferdinand's attitude (Griffin 65)."

The fantasy showcased here in this quote is seen in a majority of the Disney shorts/films. It is one of queer acceptance without the need for heterosexual assimilation.

Despite this, there is still a sense of reluctance to push the "assumed queerness" beyond just heterosexual acceptance. The coded homosexual characters in Disney often end up not having any romantic interests at all. If they do it turns out to be a heteronormative interest. Flower from *Bambi* (Hand 1942) for instance is a coded homosexual from the moment he appears until the end, but he is given a coded female character as his mate, eventually culminating in the creation of a child. The child is interestingly named Bambi, which could be read as a way in which Flower vicariously loves the deer protagonist through his son (though platonically as Disney was highly desexualized), however the child's existence was the creation of a heterosexual coupling, only further showing that homosexual figures in these worlds lack romantic attraction (though bisexuality can still be read out of Flower, thus keeping him a coded queer character through his assumed identity). Even the most "carnivalesque" and homosexual Disney animation of this period, *The Three Caballeros* (1944, Geronimi) has a consistent need to reaffirm a level of heterosexuality within its principle character of Donald Duck through showing that he is interested in women on an overt level.

Whenever a homosexual relationship is implied, it is quickly dissolved or struck down. One mentioning of animation in *The Celluloid Closet* refers to a sequence in Cinderella in which a moment of panic about a potential homosexual relationship occurs.

"Then Cinderella describes how she was swept off her feet by the handsome prince, Gus-Gus, sighing evenly, puts an arm around Jaq's shoulder and holds him close. After a minute, Jaq realizes that they are sitting on a log at the side of the road in each other's arms, and homosexual panic seems to set in on the little fellow. Pulling away quickly, he gives Gus-Gus a quizzical look of wary scrutiny, as if to say, "Hmmm, there's something funny about this mouse (57)."

Disney characters can exist in their own homosexuality without issue to others, but generally they are romantically isolated beyond an "acceptable" level of flirting. If they push beyond that boundary, the coded heterosexual characters are likely to look upon them in a negative manner like in that *Cinderella* sequence. Furthermore, these coded characters tend to be distinctly anthropomorphic animals or magical beings. Human figures within Disney shorts and films are generally coded heterosexual and thus are allowed relationships as apposed to non-humans. But this anthropomorphization has value as it ties directly into the idea of fantasy, as the fantastic allows for what Sean Griffin writes as "a possible critique of dominant society, as well as a picturing of an alternative (Griffin 63)." This alternative is precisely where Warner Brothers and other competing studios built upon and verged from Disney's method of representation.

The Disney "assumed queer" identity can be seen often in a Warner Brothers or MGM short, albeit an appropriated version which is slightly more "carnivalesque," involving a fluctuating hetero/homo persona compared to the more consistently homosexual or heterosexual identity in Disney. When a Disney character is coded homosexual or heterosexual, they stay within that identification throughout the entire film. When a Warner Brothers character is coded they manage to switch in between homosexual and heterosexual seemingly at will. This is how the portrayals of the assumed identity with the competing studio's managed to differentiate

themselves. But if animation is a history of responses to Disney, then the response from Warner Brothers and other competing studios wasn't just their play on the "assumed queer" but in their creation of the "imposed queer" as well (Wells 45). When characters who can be read in a queer manner cause other characters to assume a fluid identity, adding a level of flexibility and plasmasticity to these otherwise stagnant characters.

The best example of this would be Bugs Bunny's influence on his enemies. Chuck Jones's legendary short *The Rabbit of Seville* (Jones 1950) is what I view to be a paragon of the the "imposed queer" as it is very explicit in its imposing. The short involves Elmer Fudd chasing Bugs Bunny onto an opera stage. After assuming a role in the production, Bugs forces his adversary to do the same, having a new role imposed upon the hunter by the hunted. This ramps up throughout the course of the short. Bugs not only continuously puts Elmer into a submissive position, utilizing the barbers chair and bib as bondage to keep Elmer from leaving this imposing. Furthermore, Bugs utilizes the feminine both by putting his body into drag but also by painting Elmers nails at one point. This crossing between feminizing and imposing ends with the two characters getting married after Bugs proposes, causing Elmer to don a white wedding dress and perform a set of vows to Bugs, who is dressed in a traditional masculine tuxedo. This isn't the first time that Bugs Bunny marries a coded male character as the bunny has also married coded heterosexual Yosemite Sam in *Hare Trimmed* (Freleng 1953).

The opera itself causes the meeting between an assumed performative identity, in this case Bugs, with the imposed identity of Elmer Fudd and "queers" it through the marriage on an explicit level, but implicitly it shows the tremendous amount of influence of the coded homosexual on the coded heterosexual. This is seen a lot in the Looney Tunes (1963's *Banty Raids* and 1941's *Wabbit Twouble* having examples of this) but it was also common in MGM

products like Tom and Jerry, although in the latter cartoon the assumed and imposed identities

are not necessarily noticed until the cat and mouse are separated by a coded female, sparking a

jealousy in one character or the other such as in *Smitten Kitten* (Hannah/Barbera 1952). There are

a few exceptions to this within *Tom and Jerry* such as the short *Baby Puss* (Hannah/Barbera

1943) which not only has a duality between assumed and imposed, but it also has multiple

imposed characters and an instance of infantalization, which is linked to feminization, and to an

extent coded homosexuality by Paul Well's in his book *Understanding Animation*. Much like

with Disney these characters aren't seen negatively within the world by the other coded

heterosexual characters. Rather, their homosexual tendencies are a normalized trait within the

animated diegesis. Although, unlike Disney, the studios allowed for these characters to not only

be more overtly sexual, but also influence others. The fantasy here is not only one of just

acceptance, but of individual power and agency in the world.

Now both the "assumed" and "imposed" identities were generally utilized by the studios

that created them on a mutually exclusive level, though on occasion one might see an "imposed"

character in a Disney short. The big exception to this is the use of drag, one of the more common

coded homosexual tendencies represented by many of the studios at the time. Commenting on

the performative nature of gender and sexuality within animation itself, drag is valuable as it

connects both the "assumed" and "imposed" identity in a performer/spectator representation.

Drag by itself relates to the performance of someone from one side of the gendered

spectrum, typically male, dressing up and performing as the "opposite" sex. While that definition

itself is heavily constricted as drag as an art form is inherently about the blurring and destruction

of gender roles in modern society, it is more or less appropriate for the time frame in which these

animations existed in as well as the fact that most of the drag performances in these animations

are done by what are coded male characters. Historically speaking the performance of drag within animation seems to have taken influence from vaudeville and the famous female impersonators at the time such as Julian Eltine, Karyl Norman, and Burt Savoy. Furthermore, there are examples of early animator J. Stuart Blackton performing lightning sketches as the character Mademoiselle Stuart, only helping to solidify drags relation to animation (Crafton 52). The context is important because it shows where the trope came from, as an element of entertainment rather than as a subversive gesture towards strict gender conventions.

Within the context of this paper, drag will be referred to as any type of cross-gendered performance. Despite its parodic intentions drag was used often in animation as a gag to deceive a coded heterosexual and it would be remiss not to note the in a modern context this is highly transphobic. However, the reactions when the drag is removed and the drag itself both have hints of homosexual and gendered subversion, especially in their relation to plasmaticness.

The de-dragging, or removal of drag from an animated character prompts a unique variety of reactions both positive and unfortunately negative. With regards to the latter type of reaction they generally involve the spectator of a drag performer getting angry or violent once the removal occurs. What's interesting is that rarely are these reactions explicitly gender based, though it could be read in that manner. For instance, out of the thirty-five times in which Bugs Bunny was de-dragged, only once was a gendered term ever utilized in a negative manner and even then they never refer to Bugs as explicitly male, rather they refer to Bugs as "not a dame" (The 1963 short *The Unmentionables* by Fritz Freleng). In fact, pronouns were only used in seven of the thirty-five performances mentioned. Bug's status as a rabbit, shown through a tail or ears being revealed (although one could read the ears as being phallic) is often viewed as the singular issue for these spectators.

This is an intriguing pattern for two reasons. First being that many post golden age cartoons that house any type of crossdressing are more likely to use gendered language for both positive, such as in *Star Vs. The Forces of Evil* (Specifically the episodes *St. Olga's Reform School for Wayward Princesses* and *Heinous* 2015) and negative effects, like in *Heavy Traffic* (1973), the latter of which explicitly goes out of its way to mention the queerness of the character in drag as a negative. Secondly in context of the time, many of the "crossdressing" live action films tended have explicit gendered language such as the 1949 film *I was a Male War Bride* (Hawks). The near refusal to use gendered pronouns within these animations and the replacement with "rabbit" or similar terms shows potentially where the meaning is being placed regarding the anger shown. There is an implied jealousy that can be read in these reactions. Sean Griffin once wrote on Bug's Bunny as being "in drag as a human," this leads me to read that the anger is less specifically gender based and more against Bug's ability to manipulate his body to fit another form, whether it be that of a human, a woman, both, or neither. Bug's has a plasmatic power that in the scope of the animation at this time is gifted often to these "assumed" homosexual identities. Characters like Elmer Fudd and Yosemite Sam tend to lack this power unless it is provided to them by someone like Bugs. In his book *Birth of an Industry* author Nicholas Sammond, while referring to black face minstrelsy and audience spectatorship states that certain figures in animation "express a desire for an imagined liberation from social norms combined with a simultaneous fear of that freedom." With Elmer or Yosemite, the fear of plasmatic liberation prompts the negative reaction, but one that desire can be read from, a desire that has ended in marriage.

In addition to this, often times the anger seen isn't new rather it is a continuation of a previous sequence, an emotional return of what had occurred before the gender flip. Drag seems

to be a respite from the violent nature of these animations like in the Chuck Jones short *Rabbit Fire* (1951). The only instance in which a character gets visibly angrier at another character for crossdressing would be in *Hare Ribbin* (1944), this is an anomalous reaction compared to the others found.

To the audience these de-dragging reactions tend to be so ridiculous that it's hard to not see them as mocking this fear, in a way mocking the stagnant nature of the animated heterosexual compared of the dynamic homosexual. This is only furthered by the fact that the plasmatic character is never truly in danger, making attempts at violence laughable as they show the power of the plasmatic coded homosexual over their adversary.

The positive reactions to drag have a much larger range from a passive gaze all the way to joyous acceptance. The passive reaction involves the diegetic spectator being aware of the fact that they are watching a drag performance, but reacting neutrally. This type of reaction is most notably seen in non-Warner Brothers animations like Shamus Culhane's *Chew Chew Baby* (1945), a Woody Woodpecker short from Universal, Geronimi's *The Three Caballeros* from Disney, and Izzy Sparber's *Sheep Shape* (1946), a Paramount "Noveltoon." Joyous acceptance is rarer than the other responses, but has value in showcasing the most homosexually charged meetings between the two identities. For instance, the ending of Frank Tashlin's short *I've Got Plenty of Mutton* (1944), involves a coded male wolf removing his feminized disguise only for the reveal to have no effect on a ram's romantic pursuit, as he howls at the moon to show his lustful desires towards the wolf. Another similar example is within the Tex Avery short *Hound Hunters* (1947), in which a disguised bear has a feminized dog mask taken off during a kiss, only for the reaction of the male kissing her to be positive. All of these responses to drag indicate the pull of the "assumed" on the "imposed" identity and how much influence it has within the

diegesis, seemingly enough to blur the lines between that of a heterosexual character and a

homosexual one and freeing these figures from a stagnant identity. This has value for both the

performer and the spectator of drag in that it, much like the negative reactions, is tied very

closely to plasmasticness. In his works on Disney theorist Sergei Eisenstein writes on

plasmaticness as:

> "The rejection of the constraint of form, fixed once and for all, freedom from ossification, an ability to take on any form dynamically… a being, represented in a drawing, a being of a given form, a being that has achieved a particular appearance, behaves itself like primordial protoplasm, not yet having a stable form, but capable of taking on any and all forms of animal life on the ladder of evolution (Eisenstein 117)."

Plasmatic characters do have definite forms when they are first introduced but these are

not permanent and are susceptible to manipulation. Eisenstein related this specifically to the

physical shapes of animated figures and their ability to change their bodies, such as with the

rubber hose style of animation in the 1920's that allowed for characters to stretch out their body

parts to lengths not physically possible. But if the animated form can manipulate their physical

structure, then all elements of the character including their identity are up for redetermination

after the initial construction (Wells 213). This is similar to the concept of "gender blending" and

the instability of the body with regard to social norms and gendered coding brought up by

scholar Paul Well's in *Understanding Animation*. Referencing Moe Meyer's *Reclaiming the*

Discourse of Camp, Well's reflects, through this constant change that:

> "Not only are the aspects of masculine and feminine sometimes made indistinguishable, but the received notion of what constitutes the conditions of homosexuality and heterosexuality is also made ambivalent (Wells 206)."

This is a blurring, a Doty definition queering of character aspects and drag is the catalyst.

But much like the body in animation, drag is not consistent, often it is a temporary thing while

onscreen. Murray Pomerance in his book *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film*

at the End of the Twentieth Century, in reference to Chris Straayer, has a negative view on this topic indicating that because of the temporary nature of the drag on screen that it "does not challenge gender constructions (Pomerance 131)." Furthermore, in his article *Pronoun Trouble: The Queerness of Animation* theorist Sean Griffin discusses the temporary aspect of drag writing that it is something to be disassociated from the text's in relation to a queer reading as characters who perform in drag often revert back to a masculine or heterosexual form which is seen as their natural state (Griffin 107).

In opposition, the animated trope brought up by Wells in *Understanding Animation* of the "the body as a costume," could be used to argue that with characters that showcase a level of plasmaticness like Bugs Bunny, there is no single natural state of an animated identity. The trope indicates that gender in animation is as much a costume in the diegesis as an article of clothing, establishing gender as a contextual performance subject to change rather than predetermined fact (Wells 205). The idea of a character's natural state is mostly grounded in aesthetics, for instance Daffy Duck has a semi-consistent recognizable "look,", but the identity, beyond some basic traits and catchphrases, is never truly consistent, just put on for a temporary amount of time and subject to change both within a short and over the period in which a character exists. Daffy Duck is a good example of this change as he has evolved over the years as a figure to the point in which his personality is very much dependent on the person who draws him. Daffy in Tex Avery's *Porky's Duck Hunt* (1937) and Daffy in Chuck Jones's *Duck Amuk* (1953) are technically the same character by name, studio, and voice actor. But their designs and personalities are fundamentally different with only a few small similarities to be seen, mainly the fact that both are recognizable ducks with a white strip on their necks. No one version of Daffy is the correct or incorrect version as they are both Daffy. Rather both show that the animated

identity, both physically and emotionally have the potential for a plasmatic shifting, going against the idea of a natural state within his character.

The introduction of Daffy in Bob Clampett's *The Wise Quacking Duck* (1943) has him fully covered at the beginning, at his "natural" state, only for his body to later be removed in a feminized strip tease, thus allowing for the identity to be re-determined. This shows that his natural state is nothing more than a masquerade of identity. Daffy reverts back to the starting shape, but the body has already shifted, doubt about the identity has been introduced into the coding of the character, Daffy has been "queered" through this form change.

To disassociate moments of drag from the text because of coded heterosexual reversion implies that there is stability within the animated identity, but that removes the potential of plasmatic change that these animations use so often. Drag blurs these conditions of the homosexual and heterosexual, plasmatically shifting the character who performs it into a figure that is both distinguishable and indistinguishable by conventional coding methods of gender and sexuality, thus queering them through Doty's definitions.

Through this non-determined identity characters who perform drag often become catalysts for characters that don't to assume a level of fluidity in their own identification. They become the diegetic potential for plasmatic shifting. This is an extension of the "imposed queer," mentioned earlier but it prompts a social structure change where the feminine visually holds power over the masculine, the homosexual over the heterosexual, and through this shift the fantasy of a queer power is fully on display in these animations.

To say that the worlds created by the animation studios were entirely friendly to homosexuals would be incorrect. Instances such as the feminine Nazi in Jack Kinney's *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943) showcase that while there is a noticeable separation in animation from the

live action method of portrayal, they aren't in complete opposition. Similarly, female coded characters, more so villains, are often associated with the evil lesbian archetype presented by Russo. Characters like the Evil Queen from *Snow White* are reminiscent to that of desexualized vampiric figures, without any attraction to men and a jealousy towards other women. Through this the potential for a Sapphic reading can exist. Furthermore, stereotypes are still used in over determining homosexuality in these figures by the creators for the sake of easy and quick recognition. While referring to race in animation Nicholas Sammond writes, "for the sake of expediency and efficiency, animation has a tradition of drawing on stereotypes for its characters: in the seven-minute cartoon the stereotype was efficient because it allowed for the rapid recognition of a social hieroglyphic through character type, thence the easy designation of its proper social status (Sammond 243)." This applies to the homosexual figure as well in that the coding is stereotypical and therefore it is over the top in it's portrayal of homosexual characters. The creators of these figures intended for these stereotypes to be used for the sake of quick identification, though whether or not they were intended to be homosexual isn't known.

But animation is a history of tension between the artist and their creation, therefore there is an illusionary resistance of these homosexually coded characters to the author's control of the diegesis. The resistance presented by these animated figures is against the social norms engrained in the world of their creators and therefore in this struggle, acceptance, power, and agency are provided to these animated characters. It is through this portrayal in which a queer subversion of Hollywood representation can exist. From Disney's consistent "assumed" identity to the competing studios ever changing "imposed" identity, to the many uses of drag it is clear that the queer identity in animation represented something adjacent, but different than live

cinema. And while live film reaffirmed the fear and mistrust of the homosexual in the 1930's

through 1950's, animation at this time provided a fantasy.

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