

# DRAG IN THE DESERT

READINGS OF *THE ADVENTURES OF PRISCILLA,  
QUEEN OF THE DESERT*



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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	1
Why readings of <i>Priscilla</i> ? An introduction.....	3
Main area of exploration.....	4
<i>Priscilla</i> and the music.....	6
Different types of music in <i>Priscilla</i> .....	9
Aspects of Identity in <i>Priscilla</i> .....	13
Identity and Music.....	14
Nationality, Ethnicity and Performance in relation to music.....	18
Gender and sexuality.....	22
Queer Theory.....	27
Camp and the Diva.....	35
<i>PRISCILLA IN THE READING</i> .....	45
Dragging on the roof of a bus: Exciting the main road.....	45
Opera on the road.....	45
Priscilla the bus.....	51
Adam (alias Felicia) performs Violetta.....	52
Madness and euphoria on the roof.....	58
The Desert Campfire.....	61
Aboriginal blues under a full moon.....	61
Drag in the desert.....	65
Gloria Gaynor's 'I will survive'.....	65
The campfire show.....	66
Aboriginality, music and drag.....	71
Drag show without music: Adam (alias Felicia) meets the miners.....	78
Viewing the 'woman'.....	80
Frank's new gaze.....	85
Bernadette's wound.....	87
The chase ends.....	88
The <i>femme fatale</i> and the <i>femme castratrice</i> .....	91
Conclusion.....	96
<i>Appendix: The lyrics of 'I will survive'</i> .....	103
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	106

## WHY READINGS OF *PRISCILLA*? AN INTRODUCTION

The thesis grew out of a question that caught my attention three years ago. I was doing a course in popular musicology analysis at the University of Oslo, and tried figuring out what subject to do my term paper on. Having been to numerous drag shows during the last years, I began thinking of why it was that certain types of music tended to be used in these shows. I had no idea how to approach the subject. Just sitting down and writing a paper about drag performances and music in general felt like a difficult task, somewhat too big and unclear in its focus. I figured it would be easier if I could find something specific to examine. But if I was to write about one particular live drag act, I would be unable to return to it and study it as I was doing the paper, making this approach somewhat unpractical.

Then I got the idea of turning to a film that contained one or several drag performances. This way I would be able to see and hear the chosen shows as many times as I wanted while writing, and I would have something particular to investigate. My choice fell upon the Australian film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the desert* (1994), directed by Stephan Elliott. I had seen it recently and it made an impression: The great actors, the sparkly, fun musical tracks that accompanied the ‘live’ drag shows, the great costumes and amazing nature the main characters moved through on their journey were all elements that made the film memorable. I did not find the narrative to be as strong in comparison, but the sheer energy of the film seemed to outweigh this aspect.

And so I did my term paper on the use of music in *Priscilla*<sup>1</sup>. In many ways the paper became a door opener. The interaction between sound and image became my focal point; the way I became able to write about drag<sup>2</sup> in a manner that felt tangible. I ended up not only exploring why certain types of music were used during the drag acts, but also studying the relation between gender, sexuality and music, finding myself in the field of music and identity.

When I was to choose a subject matter for my master thesis, I ended up with the project I started spring 2006. I always felt that there was much more to write about

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is called ‘Dragging to ABBA, on film: An analysis of ‘Mamma Mia’ in the film *The Adventures of PRISCILLA, Queen of the desert*. The original Norwegian title is ‘ABBA til drag, på film: En analyse av ‘Mamma Mia’ i filmen *The Adventures of PRISCILLA, Queen of the desert*’.

<sup>2</sup> Stan Hawkins writes: “In popular culture, displays of drag are made explicit through the fictionalised role-playing of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque body, especially in the guise of the transvestite look” (ibid.: 124). This is actualized in *Priscilla*. The transvestite look here involves two men and one born man-turned-woman wearing clothes associated with the female sex.

*Priscilla* and the film's music in relation to identity. Also, I still liked the film a lot. Together, these two aspects made the project seem feasible.

To my surprise, Adam (alias Felicia), played by Guy Pearce, has ended up as the central character in my readings, something I had not planned. Somehow he is easier to write about than the two other main characters, being the most extreme. Adam (alias Felicia) is the one that moves across the greatest specter emotionally, sometimes expressing happiness that borders to euphoria. The joy also has a manic element that never seems to be far away, and he is also the most self-destructive of the three. Music is crucial to his self-expression and exploration, and makes him able to challenge norms regarding sexuality and gender. When he dresses in drag without music, his safety net is taken away. Simon Frith writes how "...musical identity is both fantastic – idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits – and real: it is enacted in activity" (ibid.: 274). When removing music from the drag act, some of the magic disappears as well, and one is left with 'reality', which can, like in the scene where Adam (alias Felicia) meeting the miners, be a grim one.

Music, then, seems to be a stable element in his life, something both he and the other main characters define their identities against. This function of music is important in my thesis.

## MAIN AREA OF EXPLORATION

My intention is to shed light on certain aspects of music and image in terms of their interaction to identity. The film will be used as a point of departure for more general discussions. How does music open a space where gender and sexuality can be explored and revealed as an act of staging? This is a central question in my thesis. Also, I will also look at how music can work in an opposing manner, as a tool to limit investigations of identity. In these cases music can lead the listener towards certain positions that are aligned with those of the mainstream (Kassabian 2001). These two functions of music, one that opens to exploration of identity, and one that narrows it, contrast each other in *Priscilla*, thereby making the film a suitable case-study when wanting to delve into the relationship between music and identity formation. The contrasting use of music can be understood as an expression of another kind of conflict: That between mainstream Australia and the minorities within it. The relation

between majority and minority, between the dominant and the suppressed, is not clear in *Priscilla*, something I will give much attention. Anahid Kassabian's *Hearing music* will be particularly important in this discussion.

This is in other words not a thesis about *Priscilla* alone. In several ways I do not do the film justice. There are many important aspects of the film that I do not delve into in my readings, its focus on family being one (Lumby 1998: 85). The film challenges traditional family structure in several ways. First, the subculture of the main characters functions as an extended family. Second, the mother-father-child combination is unorthodox, as neither the mother nor the father figure align with the common understanding of these terms. Even though I do believe that the study of family identity in the film would have been an interesting one, I have left in behind in order to focus on other aspects of identity.

When writing about the historical context of drag, I have chosen to focus on drag in Australia only. Similarly, stereotypical ideas of the male performer will be discussed in an Australian context. Although it would have been interesting with a greater scope with regards to these issues, I have chosen to focus on the country (and continent) where the film takes place.

In my readings I will draw upon theory from popular musicology<sup>3</sup>, film music theory and gender and sexuality studies, emphasizing Queer Theory. Although relevant to my thesis, I will focus less on postcolonial theory. The scene and the two scene sequences that I will do readings of have their own approaches, adjusted to their content. The reason why I chose these particular excerpts, is that I feel they are good starting points for my discussion: In their different manner, they reveal something about the relation of music and identity. Music, sexuality and gender are important in all three passages, as are questions regarding music and ethnicity, particularly in the scene sequence around the campfire. The conflict between the dominant majority and the suppressed minority can be found in the interplay between sound and vision in all three excerpts of the film, particularly the last two. Also, the camp and the queer are particularly important aspects of the first two, while the third one is focused on conflicting types of masculinity within Australia, leading to homophobia.

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<sup>3</sup> Popular musicology attempts to address popular musical texts in relation to their context. Hawkins writes "... the task of interpreting pop is an interdisciplinary task that deals with the relationship between music and social meditation" (Hawkins 2002: 3). Pop is just one of popular music's genres, though the same can be said for the other subgenres as well.

This leads me to the next step in my thesis: I here wish to define important concepts in my theoretical approach. Then I will move into the second main part of the thesis. Here I do the readings of the scene and the two scene sequences, and to some degree relate them to each other, when that is useful. The following conclusion will summarize what I have discovered during my explorations of music in relation to certain aspects of identity. But first I wish to present *Priscilla* and the music of the film.

### *PRISCILLA* AND THE MUSIC

*Priscilla* is about three drag artists, Tick (alias Mitzy), Adam (alias Felicia) and Bernadette<sup>4</sup>, who are driving through the Australian desert in a bus named Priscilla. The film starts off in Sidney, where the main characters live. Tick (alias Mitzy) gets an offer to do shows in Alice Springs, and asks the two others to join him. As the story evolves, it becomes clear there is more waiting for him in Alice Springs than ‘a gig’: it turns out that he is married and has a son, the wife being the one that hired them to do the gig. Bernadette finds love on their journey through the desert, and Adam (alias Felicia) must go through his own ordeals before reaching his goal: to climb Kings Canyon in drag.

Although it is considered to be for the gay and transgender<sup>5</sup> community, the film has shown considerable appeal on a mainstream audience as well. The film is often mentioned in relation to two other Australian films from the same period, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Muriel’s Wedding* (1994), the three films sharing a strong camp sentiment<sup>6</sup>. *Priscilla* received international recognition, amongst others receiving an Oscars in 1995 for best costume design. A musical based on the film, named *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, the Musical*, had premiere in Australia in 2006. It is currently playing in London and opens in Toronto this fall (2009), emphasizing that even though fifteen years has passed since the release, the film and its story is still very much alive within popular culture.

Turning *Priscilla* into a musical seems appropriate, considering the importance of music in the film. The director even calls the movie itself a musical

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<sup>4</sup> Tick (alias Mitzy) is played by Hugo Weaving and Bernadette is played by Terence Stamp.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Whitesell writes the film has a “subcultural purview” (Whitesell 2006: 274).

<sup>6</sup> The films also have an actor in common: Bill Hunter, who plays Bob in *Priscilla*, is playing in all three films.

(Elliott 2005b). Philip Brophy does the same, writing: “A film featuring drag performances should rightly be regarded a Musical, and *Priscilla*’s dynamism comes less from it being a film and more from being a Musical” (Brophy 2008: 17).

Catherine Lumby does not go as far when setting the film up against the musical. In her article on *Priscilla* and *Muriel’s wedding* she writes that “...the soundtracks of *Priscilla* and *Muriel’s wedding* have something in common with the narrative thread of traditional musical comedies which incorporate performance of key songs from the soundtrack” (Lumby 1998: 78). In other words, Lumby sees similarities between the musical and *Priscilla* because of the importance of certain musical numbers.

Another more specified term comes across as more accurately describing the film: the backstage musical. Peter Larsen defines it in this manner: “...films that go ‘behind the scene’ of a theater and tell a story about professional singers and dancers working on putting up a music performance [my translation]<sup>7</sup>” (Larsen 2005: 87).

This term is not precise either though, since the focus in *Priscilla* is not only on the gig in Alice Springs. We see and hear them practice on that particular show, but the film has a rather whimsical storyline, twisting and turning as the main characters make their way through the desert. This brings up another genre, to which *Priscilla* most definitely belongs: the road movie. Most of the film is happening as the main characters are on the road from Sidney to Alice Springs. I will therefore explore this genre, and comment on how some of its main traits are present in *Priscilla*.

In *Driving Visions* (2002) David Laderman draws a line from the journey narrative of literature to the road movie (Laderman 2002: 6). He writes: “The road movie grows out of this long-standing literary tradition, which in turn reflects the Western culture at large” (ibid.: 6). He writes how the journey narrative got its own character when reaching USA: “The very birth and adolescence of America seems crucially founded upon the notion of the journey, which thus becomes an essential feature of American cultural identity” (ibid.: 7). Another trait particular to the American version of the journey narrative, is how it romanticizes of the wilderness, at the same time wanting to conquer it (ibid.: 8). Although the *Priscilla* takes place in Australia, the film reveals several of these themes: the connection between cultural identity and the journey. It also shares the American journey narratives’ fascination

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<sup>7</sup> The quote is originally in Norwegian: “...filmer som går ‘bak scenen’ på et teater og forteller en historie om profesjonelle sangere og dansere som jobber med å sette opp en musikkforestilling” ((Larsen 2005: 87).



with the wilderness, and holds the split between conquest and celebration of the wild, in the case of *Priscilla* being the desert.

The film is unconventional in the sense that the main characters are three drag queens, and that they are driving a bus, the usual vehicle being the car (Laderman 2002). It does, however, stand out less when seen in context of the decade it came out: *Priscilla* is a part of the wave of 1990s queer road movies (Lang 1997: 330). Laderman writes: “The driving force of most road movies... is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique” (Laderman 2002: 1), underlining how central “...rebellion against conservative social norms” (ibid.: 1) is to the genre. *Priscilla* is no different. The film raises issues concerning the acceptance of expressions of sexuality and gender that lay outside the norm. The road movie opens to an exploration of the external landscape, the desert, and the inner: “...the comedies<sup>8</sup> emphasize self-transformation, the reversal of obstacles, and the attainment of dreams” (Mills 1997: 324). *Priscilla* is however not only about the acceptance of that which lays outside the norm, in some ways protects the very structures that it seeks to challenge. The film soundtrack reveals this conflict, and it will be further explored throughout the thesis.

The soundtrack of *Priscilla* consists of both well-known hit songs, and music composed specifically for the film. However, the official soundtrack CD *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (1994) does only consist of compiled music. Many of the tracks are well known, and therefore draw attention to themselves: Village People’s ‘Go West’, Gloria Gaynor’s ‘I will survive’ and Abba’s ‘Mamma Mia’<sup>9</sup>. The soundtrack holds music from several different musical genres, ranging from disco to jazz, pop ballads and rhythmic pop tunes. Also, the time range is wide, the oldest track being from the thirties, and the most recent being ‘Finally’, released in 1994, the same year as the film (Ong: 2005).

The composed music is written by Guy Gross, and anchored in Hollywood film music tradition. That this music is left out of the film’s soundtrack CD, states something about what kind of musical profile wanted for the film, and what role Guy’s music plays. I will now clarify some terms from film music theory that will be

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<sup>8</sup> Mills is here referring to *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), a Hollywood production where the main characters also are drag artists on the road (Mills 1997: 323).

<sup>9</sup> This creates another link between the movie and the musical: Abba’s ‘Mamma Mia’ is also a part of the musical carrying the song’s name. *Mamma mia!*, the musical, had its premier 1999, and became the hit film *Mamma Mia! The movie* (2008).

relevant throughout the thesis, and start with two terms already mentioned, compiled and composed music.

#### DIFFERENT TYPES OF MUSIC IN *PRISCILLA*

First, it is important to underline that the compiled and the composed film music share a premise: The combination of sound and image creates new meanings, not present when only sound or image is present (Chion 1994, Brown 1994, Larsen 2005).

According to Kassabian the kinds of meanings that arise differ, depending on which category the film music falls into, the compiled or composed (Kassabian 2001). To investigate this point further, it is necessary to turn to definitions of the terms.

Kassabian defines composed film music as “a body of musical material composed specifically for the film in question” (ibid.: 2). A composed score is created to serve the audiovisual combination, building on a meaning making system created in the Hollywood movie industry. Claudia Gorbman describes the role of composed film music in this manner: “As we follow a movie’s narrative in the perceptual foreground, music inhabits the shadow of our attention, inflecting our reception of screen events by means of a musical language that has been developed through decades” (Gorbman 2000: 234). Gorbman underlines how this type of music is in the background of our perception, but nevertheless plays a crucial role in how we interpret what we see. According to Larsen the musical language Gorbman mentions was developed in Hollywood during the 1930s (Larsen 2005: 14-15). Kassabian addresses the US dominance, and writes that “...film music functions as a global culture that begs to be studied” (Kassabian 2001:8). She is of the opinion that the ideological ground on which the film music of Hollywood is based, needs to be examined with a critical eye, particularly regarding questions concerning gender, ethnicity and nationalism (Kassabian 2001). This angle is useful in my readings of scenes from *Priscilla*, since the main characters of the movie challenge norms of sexuality and gender, often through their use of music. This needs to be investigated in light of nationalism and ethnicity.

The term ‘film music’ is often used when referring to composed music, although the two are not necessarily the same. Compiled music is often used as film music, and this category is not written for the film in question. Kassabian defines the

category as "...a score build on songs that often (but not always) preexisted the film" (ibid.: 2). Here, the connection between images and sound is a different one. Since the music most often existed before the film, it is not made 'to fit' the image, like traditional film music. Therefore it does not build on the Hollywood meaning making system in the same way. Although the soundtrack can be shaped in ways that makes the compiled music work in a similar fashion than the composed music, the compiled music usually leaves the viewer/listener with more alternatives regarding meaning.

Larsen writes that the compiled score challenges the clearly defined: "The compiled music's breakthrough during the 1970s generally challenges the traditional film musical categories and creates blurred transitions and diffuse in between forms [my translation]"<sup>10</sup> (Larsen 2005:160). Kassabian takes this a step further, and brings identification processes into the discussion. She writes that compiled scores offer affiliating identifications, and that these identifications "...depend on histories forged outside the film scene, and they allow for a fair bit of mobility within it" (Kassabian 2001: 3). She suggests that compiled music opens a larger space for the viewer/listener, where the individual more actively is a part of the meaning making process. The viewer/listener might have personal associations to the music, which she or he brings into the film experience.

This contrasts the type of identifications that composed music creates, according to Kassabian. She writes: "There is no necessary relationship between film perceivers and the identity positions they take on in an assimilation identification" (ibid.: 2). Here, viewer/listener is directed towards a specific position, led on a path made out by the film music composer and the director. The viewer/listener is in other words more passive in the process. Gorbman writes: "Film music is like the medium of a dream, forgotten in the waking state; but this medium is itself not neutral. It embodies and disseminates meaning, all the more powerful in not actively noticed" (Gorbman 2000: 234). It is this lack of neutrality Kassabian points to: "Assimilating identifications track perceivers toward a rigid, tightly controlled position that tends to line up comfortably with dominant ideologies" (Kassabian 2001: 141). Where the composed music with its assimilating identifications follows old tracks and supports the existing norms of a society, the compiled music and its affiliating identifications

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<sup>10</sup> The quote is originally in Norwegian: "Kompilasjonsmusikkens gjennomslag på 1970-tallet utfordrer generelt de tradisjonelle filmmusikalske kategoriene og skaper flytende overganger og diffuse mellomformer" (Larsen 2005:160).

breaks new ground. The audiovisual combination of image and compiled music explores new possibilities.

The terms compiled and composed music are also related to two other concepts central in film music theory and to my analysis: diegetic and non-diegetic music. Royal S. Brown writes: "Diegetic music theoretically comes from a source within the diegesis – a radio, a photograph, a person singing, an orchestra playing – and the characters in the film can theoretically hear that music" (Brown 1994: 67). This music is a part of the action of the film, a part of the diegesis, which Annabel Cohen defines as "...the fictional, imagined, narrative world of the film" (Cohen 2001: 253). In *Priscilla*, the diegetic music is also compiled music<sup>11</sup>. This connects the film music to the music video: Here as well, the music is diegetic and compiled, giving the image a secondary position. Brophy writes that *Priscilla* is "... building upon a cinematic framework whose scaffolding sprouts outwards from two 80s musical expressions: music videos and stage musicals" (Brophy 2008: 18). Because of its ties to music video, I will draw upon theory written on the subject, in addition to film music theory. Carol Vernallis' *Experiencing Music Video* (2004) will be particularly important when I explore similarities between scenes from the film and the music video.

This is less relevant when reading scenes with non-diegetic music, since this kind of music usually is composed for the film (Brown 1994: 67), which is also the case in *Priscilla*. Brown writes: "Nondiegetic music theoretically exists for the audience alone and is not supposed to enter in any way into the universe of the filmic narrative and its characters" (ibid.: 67). Separated from the action and therefore not causing it, the music is to a lesser extent part of the immediate, filmatic experience. Nonetheless, just like its more striking opponent, non-diegetic music is crucial in the formation of meaning that evolves as a result of the interaction between music and image (Brown 1994, Chion 1994, Larsen 2005).

Kassabian questions the sharp distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music, and writes that it "...obscures music's role in producing the diegesis itself" (Kassabian 2001: 42). She adopts Earle Hagen's category 'source scoring', which describes music that falls between the two categories (ibid.: 43, 45). Being aware of the oversimplification in the division between diegetic and non-diegetic music, it is

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<sup>11</sup> There is one possible exception: I am not sure if the blues tune played by the Aboriginal Australians during the campfire scene is compiled or composed.

striking that the classification between the compiled and the composed music is not discussed in a similar manner. For just like the division between the diegetic and non-diegetic music might seem rigid, so does the division between the compiled and the composed, since the two sometimes overlap.

Sometimes preexisting tunes on film and TV that very much become a part of the audiovisual combination, to the extent that they seem made for it<sup>12</sup>. The music in the TV-series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) is an example of this. Several songs in the series ('Falling', 'the Nightingale', 'the World spins') came out on Julee Cruise's album the year before, but became known through the series. The lyrics of these songs are by David Lynch, one of the directors and creators of *Twin Peaks*, and the music is made by Angelo Badalamenti, who also wrote the music composed specifically for the series. Also, Cruise performs the songs as a bar singer in the series. In other words, the music becomes so intertwined in the world of *Twin Peaks*, that it is difficult to call it compiled and state that it leads to affiliating identifications.

In contrast, the compiled and the composed music of *Priscilla* do seem more separated, the two types of film music seemingly having different functions. The compiled music dominates, both because many of the songs are well known, and because compiled music is more frequently used in the film. Lumby observes: "Both soundtracks<sup>13</sup> contain songs which derive much of their contemporary significance from performance – not simply performance by the song's original artists but, crucially, performance across the pop culture spectrum by cover bands, drag queens, fans and bedroom amateurs" (Lumby 1998: 78). These songs are not only well known hits, they are well known cover songs, suggesting they are particularly open to interpretation. The composed music is, like traditional Hollywood music, the less dominating part of the audiovisual combination. It follows the action on the screen, rather than creating it. However, as my readings will show, the compiled music is changed on a number of occasions in order to fit with the image. This makes it more similar to composed music than what seems to be the case at first, and might even lead to assimilating identifications.

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<sup>12</sup> There are many differences between music made for TV, and music made for film. The viewer/listener situation is different, the sound quality is not the same, TV has ties to radio and theater as well as film, and music is often used in different ways in the two medias (Lindvig 2006, Stilwell 2003, Larsen 1988). Nonetheless, I find it useful to bring in music from a TV-series here, since it exemplifies music falling between Kassabian's categories.

<sup>13</sup> Lumby refers to *Priscilla* and *Muriel's wedding*.

Still, some of Kassabian's arguments regarding compiled music are relevant to *Priscilla*. She writes that the compiled music can be a tool to explore territory outside the main norm of society, which is clearly the case in several scenes in the film. Kassabian writes: "Popular music soundtracks operate by crossing that boundary<sup>14</sup> evoking memories of emotions and subject positions, inviting perceivers to place themselves on their unconscious terrain" (Kassabian 2001: 88). Through the soundtrack the viewer/listener has access to other characters and other meanings than those Hollywood film music has to offer. According to Kassabian, the compiled popular music score has caused a movement away from the stereotypical female figures produced by traditional Hollywood film.

In *Priscilla*, gender and sexuality are approached from unusual angles. If following Kassabian's argument, the compiled soundtrack opens up to such investigation. Through the main characters, both biological sex and socially constructed gender are questioned. This again leads to a destabilization of masculinity, an area that will be further explored in my readings of the scenes. However, since the compiled music carries traits of the composed, the music also opens to questions regarding how much the film is building on principles of hegemonic Australian masculinity. One might suggest that the music reveals that the dominant ideology has a stronger grip on *Priscilla* than what seems to be the case.

In my readings of the scenes I will look at the interaction between sexuality, gender and music in more detail. It is necessary to bring nationality and ethnicity into the discussion as well, in order to get a broader understanding of the interplay between music, gender and sexuality. I will now investigate some of the terms that are used to define the characters, related to sexuality, gender, nationality and ethnicity, and therefore also to their identity.

#### ASPECTS OF IDENTITY IN *PRISCILLA*

The focus of my thesis how music can allow identities to surface, identities that otherwise could have been kept hidden. But it is also about the opposite: how music can suppress and limit, through using codes tied to dominant ideologies. Here I do not refer to the idea of an inner identity belonging to an individual, being brought out into

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<sup>14</sup> She is here referring to the border between the conscious and the unconscious.

light in the meeting with music. I am concerned with how identity can be created when people and music interact, and the opposite: how it can be held down. Because of the importance of the term, I will start by trying to grasp the meaning of the word 'identity'.

#### IDENTITY AND MUSIC

To define 'identity' is not an easy task. In *Settling the Pop Score*, Stan Hawkins writes that "...a most effective way of comprehending identity is by disconnecting it from an 'essence' and perceiving it as a dramatic effect rather than an authentic core" (Hawkins 2002: 14). In other words, identity is not solid, but changeable, fluctuating. Frith also moves away from the idea of an identity core, writing "... identity comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover." (Frith 1996: 273). If identity is not rooted in the inner life of the individual, it must be seen in relation to the outer world. It must be somewhat dependant on the surroundings and by difference. Hawkins writes: "Identifying the Other refers to a unitary grouping of any minority groups who are characterized only in so much as they are others" (ibid.: 13). In *Priscilla*, sexuality and gender distinguish the main characters as the Other, pointing them out as people opposing the heterosexual norm. This creates a shared sense of identity, a bond between the main characters that comes across as stronger than their differences and arguments. This shared identity is tied to the gay and transgender subculture, to which they belong.

Just like identity represents something fluctuating, its meaning is not constant, but marked by time. The understanding of the term has changed during the last decades. Susan McClary uses the expression 'the sovereign self', which can be seen as a particular part of identity, originally tied to the idea of the inner core of the individual. McClary writes how both "...art music and the sovereign self were regarded as autonomous and self-generating..." and therefore "...neither seemed dependant on social ideologies" (McClary 2002: xvi). Since the self, just like art music, was not touched by the surroundings, it was regarded as unnecessary to delve into how culture influences the individual and art music.

However, there was a change during the 1980s. McClary writes that "...an increasing number of theorists began to posit that the Self can usually be understood as a construction formed at the intersection of a wide range of discourses" (ibid.: xvi). The 'absoluteness' of art music was questioned, as was the notion of the 'true' self.

She writes:

Not coincidentally, many of the theorists who first raised these issues operated from positions previously disenfranchised by the mainstream: women, gay individuals, persons of color, and those who grew up in colonial or postcolonial context (ibid.: xvi).

In other words, those who belonged to the Other, separated from the norm, questioned the absoluteness of the self first. Being outsiders, they found a common theoretical ground and a shared viewpoint. McClary writes: “For people of this sort, most of whom had been shaped by Western culture yet continually found themselves cast in the role of the Other, the impact of cultural ideologies in the production of social realities was relatively clear” (ibid.: xvi). Since social realities shape the individual, their identities also are formed in the meeting with their surroundings. Frith writes: “Self identity *is* cultural identity” (Frith 1996: 275). According to the author, it is not possible to separate the two, for they are linked per definition.

McClary writes that the questioning of art music as absolute can be understood as a way of elevating the importance of music, not diminishing it. She writes: “If some of us want to deny art music its radical independence from cultural life, we also elevate it to a new level of importance as a site ... where many crucial aspects of social formation take place” (McClary 2002: xv-xvi). Art music becomes a part of people’s life, and does not exist as something autonomous, separate from everything else. However, there is a danger in giving cultural and social life too much importance. Examples of this can be seen in more recent branches of musicology.

Whereas the musicologists concerned with Western art music have had trouble letting go of its absoluteness, those within the field of popular musicology have had a tendency to give too much room for social influence. Frith writes: “The academic study of popular music has been limited by the assumption that the sounds somehow reflect or present ‘a people’” (Frith 1996: 269). He goes against the idea that music is “...a form of ideological expression” (ibid.: 269) that mirrors society. This point of view both diminishes music’s value on its own, and as an object that influences its context. Frith writes: “The point is not how a piece of music, a text, ‘reflects’ popular values, but how – in performance – it produces them”. In other words, popular music creates values and impacts the individuals it touches. In doing so, it shapes the identity of those individuals.

Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh write about an older and a newer



model in relation to “...theorization of music and sociocultural identity...” (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000: 31). The older model “...argues that music reflects or enunciates underlying social relations and structures” (ibid.: 31), and has been criticized for being deterministic and mechanical, simplifying the complex formations of identity. As Frith writes, the model also underestimates music’s power of influence, music being much more than a mere reflection of the group. The newer model lines more accurately up with Frith’s point about how music forms its surroundings. Born and Hesmondhalgh write that according to this model “...music ‘reflects’ nothing: rather, music has a formative role in the construction, negotiation, and transformation of sociocultural identities” (ibid.: 31) The problem with this model is, according to the two writers, related to reductionism: “...processual analysis, as it currently exists, cannot generate the conceptual complexity adequate to the challenge of theorizing music and sociocultural identity” (ibid.: 31). Since the second model fails as well, oversimplifying the relation between music and sociocultural identity, they suggest that the most useful approach is one that takes insights from both models:

There is a need to acknowledge that music can variably *both* construct new identities *and* reflect existing ones. Sociocultural identities are not simply constructed in music; there are ‘prior’ identities that come to be embodied dynamically in musical cultures, which can also *form* the reproduction of those identities – no passive process of reflection (ibid.: 32)

When turning to the subculture in *Priscilla*, this approach seems the most useful one: seeing music as both reflecting sociocultural identities, and simultaneously shaping them. The importance of studying the music *and* the surrounding culture thoroughly therefore becomes crucial in order to get a fuller understanding of the interaction between music and identity, and how they shape and reflect each other.

The compiled music in *Priscilla* is representative of the gay and transgender subculture to which the main characters belong. If choosing the combined model of Born and Hesmondhalgh, one could say that the music both reflects and creates the subculture of the main characters. Through the interaction with popular music and performance, the main characters act out gender and sexuality and shape the subculture. At the same time what kind of music the members of a subculture choose as their own, states something about the subculture to begin with, the music revealing something about the setting and the people who seek it. Frith writes how we “...hear

the music we like as something special...” (Frith 1996: 275), and continues: “It is this sense of specialness (the way in which music seems to make possible a new kind of self-recognition, to free us from everyday routines, from the social expectations with which we are encumbered) that is the key to our musical value judgments” (ibid.: 275). In *Priscilla*, the main characters use the music of the subculture as a tool to break free of inner and outer expectations, music removing them from their mundane bodies and lives, and into another kind of reality. The music through which they seek to express this, is particularly open to identity-play.

Pop music does not claim to express the ‘real’. Hawkins writes: “Often in pop, notions of authenticity are not only undermined through musical codes being destabilized, but are through the suspension of norms linked to the portrayal of gender and sexuality” (Hawkins 2002: 17). In pop, the belief that there is a ‘true identity’ at the core is absent, and this colors the handling of gender and sexuality in the genre. The main characters of *Priscilla* emphasize this aspect of pop music and the pop star, when acting out the music on stage in drag. Through the music genre these main characters investigate identities connected to gender and sexuality, through their exploration of the body and how it is presented.

Frith writes: “Music constructs our sense of identity through the experience it offers of the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (ibid.: 275). When placing ourselves in these narratives, we can enter unexplored and even dangerous spheres. Music can allow investigation of that which is culturally taboo, as shown in the gender- and sexuality play of the drag shows in *Priscilla*. If the music is taken away and the performing individual in drag is placed in a different setting, drag becomes more provoking. The scene where Adam (alias Felicia) meets the miners is a fictional example of how dressing in drag can become dangerous in the wrong context, without the aid of music.

There is actually music in this scene: Guy Gross’ composed music is used as soundtrack. Being outside the fictional world of the film, the music is targeted towards the audience alone, and does not reflect the gay and transgender subculture in the same manner as pop music does. Kassabian writes how this type of music does not open to play with identities in the same manner, being built on a musical language supporting dominant ideologies (Kassabian 2001), something I will explore in further detail in my reading of the scene.

Pop music might also support dominant ideologies, though. In *Priscilla* this happens less in relation to gender and sexuality. It is when raising questions regarding nationality and ethnicity the issue becomes more complex. These areas of identity therefore also need to be discussed, since nationality and ethnicity intertwined with the discussion of gender, sexuality, and music. The rules of sexuality and gender differ in different locations, and ethnicity and nationalism play a role in this. I therefore find it necessary turning to these aspects of identity.

#### NATIONALITY, ETHNICITY AND PERFORMANCE IN RELATION TO MUSIC

In the introduction of *Music, Space and Place*, Sheila Whiteley writes that a thread throughout the book is the following:

...the recognition that musical processes take place within a particular space and place, one which is inflected by the imaginative and the sociological, and which is shaped both by specific musical practices and by the pressure and dynamics of political and economic circumstances (Whiteley 2004: 1-2).

Music must be understood in relation to the physical space in which it is practiced, since it is influenced by the context, just as music forms the people and groups it touches. Frith writes: “In responding to a song, to a sound, we are drawn ... into affective and emotional alliances” (ibid.: 273). These alliances do not have to form because of nationality and ethnicity, they can move across space and place, as Andy Bennett points out. He writes about music’s role “...in the articulation of symbolic notions of community, which transgress both place and time” (Bennett 2004: 3). The link between the gay and transgender subculture and the belonging music is an example of this kind of community. But even though there is a strong connection between their gay and transgender identities and their music, the music in *Priscilla* is also colored by where the film takes place, and the nationality and ethnicity of the characters.

Frith writes: “For the best part of this century, pop music has been an important way in which we have learned to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, classbound, gendered, national subjects” (Frith 1996: 276). Music is used to define ourselves as individuals and members of social groups, and usually some of these groups will overlap: In *Priscilla*, the main characters are white Australians *and* gay and transgender. Their latter identities might be emphasized, but that does not mean that their nationality and ethnicity are not reflected in their actions and their choice of

music. For example, references to Abba are made throughout the movie. It is true that Abba's music is a part of the gay and transgender sound landscape. But the group was particularly popular in Australia, with six number one hits during the 1970s<sup>15</sup>. The song that is used in the final drag show, 'Mamma Mia', was ABBA's first number one hit in Australia (Botten 1994: 4). In other words, Abba is linked both to the main characters' subcultural identity, and to their national.

Another example of how the Australian identity is revealed through music, is the scene where the drag artists meet Aboriginal Australians in the desert. The two minority groups end up doing a 'shared' drag show: the main characters perform 'I will survive' in drag, and the Aboriginal Australians join in, both in the actual performance and musically. Chanting and clapsticks, supposedly representing Aboriginal Australian music, have been added in post-production to the soundtrack of 'I will survive' by the film producers, underlining the problem: The music is filtered through a white Australian, stereotypical understanding of 'Aboriginality'. Marj Kibby and Karl Neuenfeldt point to a possible reason for these Aboriginal Australian musical effects:

The appropriation of Aboriginal culture validates the position of the settler in Australia and of Australia within a world-wide cultural scene. Traditional Aboriginal instruments are used by non-Aboriginal filmmakers to confirm an identity, situating 'Australianess' in an international mediascope (Kibby and Neuenfeldt 1998: 72).

When the drag artists meet up with the Aboriginal Australians it underlines their national identity, and also place the film in the Australian desert. The scene also reflects the film producers' wish to create a scene where minorities stand together and celebrate their difference. However, since the Aboriginal Australian are portrayed stereotypically, signifying "...time and place that is remote and exotic" (ibid.: 72), the attempt for such unification fails. Instead, the scene can be read as another example of white dominant Australian society suppressing Aboriginal Australian people and their culture. Pop music is used as a tool to do so.

I now wish to turn the focus towards the white dominant Australia, more specifically to one particular white male identity: the bushman. Greg Young defines the bush legend in this manner: "...a mythologised late nineteenth-century Australian masculine image ... that saw the urban as the feminine and the rural as the masculine" (Young 2004: 173). I will take a closer look at how this myth came into being, and

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<sup>15</sup> [www.abbasite.com/the-story/history/success.aspx](http://www.abbasite.com/the-story/history/success.aspx) [Date of reading: 11.04.09].

how it is relevant to my readings of *Priscilla*. In my exploration of the bushman, I find Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* useful.

Ward does not share Young's definition of the bushman as a myth, but sees it as a national character:

... rather a people's idea of itself and this stereotype, though often absurdly romanticized and exaggerated, is always connected with reality in two ways. It springs largely from a people's last experiences, and it often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they 'ought to' behave (Ward 1965: 1).

It is worth noticing how the writer moves from writing about a 'people' to writing about 'men', as if the two were interchangeable. This tells about a male dominated society, where the people as a group is represented by the man, whereas the woman is in the background, not mentioned when the character of the nation is studied. The text is in marked by the time it was written<sup>16</sup>, but at the same time it seemingly still says something about the more modern Australia as presented in *Priscilla*: The film lacks women in numbers, and those that do appear are portrayed as stereotypes that do not evoke sympathy. However, perhaps it is the men that see women as stereotypes that are parodied in the film, not the women themselves. In his quote Ward points to something important when writing about the stereotypical and why it is so difficult to come to terms with: Based on the earlier experiences it shapes the presence, creating thoughts about how it is supposed to be. Both the stereotypical view of women and men might therefore be difficult to come to terms with.

I now wish to turn to what Ward calls the Australian national character, the bushman. Ward writes that the Australian male is "...a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance or affection in others (ibid.: 2)". The bushman usually is of the more silent type, and "...skeptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally" (ibid.: 2). Also, his mates are particularly important to him, and there is a strong bond of loyalty between them (ibid.: 2). To explain these sets of characteristics, Ward writes that "...material conditions of the outback life were such as to evoke these qualities in pastoral workers..." (ibid.: 2), but more important is the heritage from the original bushmen: "...the first and most influential bush-workers were convicts or ex-convicts, the conditions of those lives were such that they brought with them to the bush the same, or very similar, attitudes" (ibid.: 2). According to Ward homosexual relationships

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<sup>16</sup> The first edition of *The Australian Legend* came out in 1958.

were not uncommon amongst the convicts and ex-convicts (ibid.: 13), and even though bushmen of later generations did not act out homosexuality, it remained a part of the mates' interaction in a more subconscious way.

Young writes how the bushman resembles "...the idealised American pioneer, but in a harsher, more arid continent. The image was of men who depended upon each other – mates – and women were largely absent from that image" (Young 2004: 174). The importance of friendship between the tough, solitaire macho carry with it potential homosexual undertones, "...implied, but rarely foregrounded..." (ibid.: 174). Instead, homophobic tendencies are acted out amongst the mates, directed towards those that do not fit into the role of the bushman (ibid.: 175). Since the bushman type is physical and practical, as opposed to intellectual and artistic, historically the homophobic tendencies got directed towards men that were intellectuals and artists (ibid.: 175). The male performer, the singer, musician or the dancer, has therefore automatically been linked to homosexuality: "Normative, hegemonic Australian masculinity...has historically assumed homosexuality to be a given for male performers" (ibid.: 176). However, in Australia few performers have come out as gay. This suggests either that even though the artist is assumed to be homosexual, it might just be a stereotypical prejudice connected to the stage, or that being an open homosexual in Australia is more difficult than being an assumed homosexual.

The consequences of homophobic tendencies are not always what one would expect. Young writes:

Australian masculinity, despite, or maybe because of its homophobic response to any implications of being homosexual, had a history of encouraging the development of unstable, largely caricatured, Australian male gender representation in music performances and texts throughout the nineteenth century (ibid.: 177).

Seemingly, hegemonic Australian masculinity caused a counter-reaction, in the sense that it opened up to gender play. During the two World Wars, it was not uncommon that soldiers cross-dressed in order to entertain fellow soldiers. Entertainment groups were formed, some of them continuing to tour up to ten years after the wars ended (ibid.: 177). Also, Melbourne and Sydney had clubs with drag shows. These were "...integral rather than separate part of the bohemian club culture..." (ibid.: 177), again underlining that drag artists and cross-dressers did not belong to a clearly defined subculture, but were a more incorporated part of society.

The drag artists in *Priscilla* can be seen as representatives of this tradition. Adam (alias Felicia) and Tick (alias Mitzy) are stereotypical in the sense that they are gay performers, therefore living out the myth that men on stage are homosexuals. All three artists live in Sydney, and their shows carry the signature of the drag scene that developed there: “The camp aspect of that burgeoning club scene, dominated by the presence of drag queens...had its roots in the arts and movie theme balls that had gained a place in the calendar of Sydney’s bohemia from the 1940s onwards” (ibid.: 178). Camp is such an important facet of *Priscilla*, perhaps one of the most characteristic traits of the film. Interestingly, in the 1960s Australia, the word ‘camp’ actually referred to the homosexual male, emphasizing the strong link between the camp and the gay in the country.

As Adam (alias Felicia), Tick (alias Mitzy) and Bernadette travel out of Sydney and into the desert, they bring their tradition with them out into the unknown. The journey can both be interpreted to represent something within and outside the selves of the characters. It can symbolize their fluctuating identities on a personal plane, most clearly expressed in the area of sexuality and gender. But still, traditional heterosexuality and hegemonic Australian masculinity always seems to lure in the background, both within and outside the diegesis, complicating the drag queens’ exploration of gender and sexuality in the film. This complex area of the main characters’ identity is worth delving into.

#### GENDER AND SEXUALITY

So far I have placed the three main characters in the gay and transgender subculture. However, there are some differences between the Tick (alias Mitzy), Adam (alias Felicia) and Bernadette when it comes to the construction of their gender and sex. These differences are worth looking into, since the exploration might give a fuller understanding of the terms to which the different characters belong. My starting point will be the different perceptions of gender and sexuality.

Gender is usually understood as the socially and culturally constructed roles of society, roles we understand as ‘masculine’, or ‘feminine’. The dichotomy is based on the biological sex we are born with, ‘man’ or ‘woman’. Being constructed, gender is seen as something flexible, whereas the sex is understood as something constant. Traditionally, gender and sex are supposed to match: a woman (sex) behaves in a feminine (gender) manner, whereas a man (sex) behaves in a masculine (gender)

manner. However, the sex/gender distinction is not always in sync, as seen in transgender individuals. Earlier the transsexual term was commonly used amongst those who were born with a sex that did not match their gender identity.

It was in the study of transsexuals that the distinction was made in the first place (Friedman 2006: 35). She writes:

Through the concept of gender, transsexuals and their supporters in the scientific and medical communities articulated a narrative that both legitimated sexual reassignment surgeries and made the experiences of transsexuals make sense. They argued that one of the important distinctions between biological sex and gender was that the former was open to intervention, the latter was entirely immutable (ibid.: 37).

In other words, originally gender and sexuality was understood differently than what I outlined first: It was the individual's sex that was changeable, not the gender. The sex was altered when gender and sex was not in sync. From this viewpoint sex could be constructed, whereas gender, when developed, was rigid and inflexible.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the second wave of the feminists adopted the gender-sex distinction formed by the then called transsexuals and their supporters. The feminists reversed the meaning of the terms. They argued that being born a woman, or a man for that matter was not the problem: it was the "...social norms and institutions..." (ibid.: 38) that caused "...the social and psychological differences between men and women (gender)..." (ibid.: 38). In other words, it was the gender that needed to change in order to gain equality between the two sexes. In the process, questions concerning sexuality were overlooked. As a result, sex came to be regarded as a "...fixed natural binary..." (ibid.: 38). The feminist's way of understanding gender and sexuality overshadowed the original meaning of the terms, and has continued to do so: The feminist gender/sex model is still the norm today.<sup>17</sup>

How, then, do the main characters of *Priscilla* fit into the gender/sexuality-distinction? It is clear from the start that all three are unconventional in questions regarding sexuality and gender. The first time we see Tick (alias Mitzy) and Adam (alias Felicia), they are doing a drag show. Sometimes it is hard to know which sex the person doing drag has. This is not the case here, where it is clear that they are men dressed up as women. Their sex (man) is not in sync with their expressed gender

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<sup>17</sup> None of the two sets of definitions above goes well with the definition of identity that I have outlined earlier in my thesis, to which gender and sexuality belong. I will continue the discussion of gender and sexuality when writing about Queer Theory, since the theory brought about new perspectives to the discussion.



(feminine). Dressing up in women's clothes on stage is not that provoking, more striking is it that they also do it off stage. Tick (alias Mitzy) and Adam (alias Felicia) can be defined as transvestites: "a person, typically a man, who derives pleasure from dressing in clothes appropriate to the opposite sex" (*The Oxford Dictionary of English* 2005, 2nd edition revised). The norms of society set the standard for which clothes that are considered 'appropriate', wearing trousers for women in Western societies today does not mean the same as it did a century ago. Also, the definition of a transvestite does not take gender play into consideration. In *Priscilla*, the characters seem not only to 'derive pleasure' from wearing dresses, they seem to be having a great deal of fun when doing so as well. Also, the shocking effect dressing 'over the top' has on the surroundings seems to be a motivator, especially for Adam (alias Felicia).

Bernadette differs from the two others, in the sense that she actually has had physical changes done to her body. We as viewers/listeners are made aware of this from the beginning, since her breasts are revealed the first time we see her in full body shot. Although she is also a drag artist, unlike the two others she is not presented to the viewer/listener that way: She is introduced as the grieving widow who has just lost her husband. In Bernadette's case the sex (man) has been changed to fit the gender (feminine). Bernadette therefore falls into the category that used to be called transsexualism. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, the definition of a transsexual is "a person born with the physical characteristics of one sex who emotionally and psychologically feels that they belong to the opposite sex" (*The Oxford Dictionary of English* 2005, 2nd edition revised). This is not necessarily the case, since it is possible to identify with the gender of the opposite sex without wanting to change the sex. What distinguishes the transsexual, is the desire to change the sexual organ and bodily traits of the born sex, so that the gendered identity and the outer body (sex) corresponds.

The definition describes a person wanting to do a sex change. But what happens when the individual has performed surgery? Is he or she still a transsexual? One could argue that now that the sexual organ is 'right', and the emotional, intellectual and psychological are in sync with the body, the individual ceases to be transsexual. However, this does not take into consideration the fact that at the present point, a perfect sex change still is not medically possible. Also, there are other aspects of the body that needs to be changed in order to 'become' the other sex. Issues

concerning hair and possible electrolysis treatment, a voice that needs to be trained and hormone treatment (Folgerø 2005: 43); these are continuous treatments. Tor Folgerø writes in “Kjønnsstadfestande kirurgi”:

Even though the sex change operation often becomes a central turning point in the life stories of the transsexuals, the body is for many continuously subject to ‘sexconfirmative renovation and maintenance’. The representational work to express the gendered self is a continuous process, where it is unclear when the process ends [my translation]<sup>18</sup> (ibid.: 43).

At some point in the movie Bernadette eats a bowl of hormones, the only time the viewer/listener is made aware of this aspect of her sex change. Even though she has had the operation, she is not finished with the ‘renovation and maintenance’ involved when changing one’s sex. Bernadette gets furious when addressed by her birth name (Ralph), symbolizing the body and the sex she has left behind. But that same body still fights against her in the struggle to be a woman, represented by the hormone pills. The film approaches the subject with humor: while Tick (alias Mitzy) eats his bowl of cereal for breakfast, while Bernadette eats her bowl of hormones, pills in different colors and shapes.

Whereas the actual sex change is the transitional focus for the transsexual, according to Folgerø’s study it is the visible traits of sex that create difficulties in every day life. He refers to his informant Rita: “That which in daily life creates difficulties for Rita’s wish to be recognized and seen as a ‘regular woman’ is tied to growth of facial hair, deep voice and masculine traits in the face [my translation]<sup>19</sup>” (ibid.: 50). In other words, the irony is that although the focus is on the change of the sexual organ, it is the visible characteristics of sex that complicates the lives of those wanting to cross over from man to woman, or vice versa<sup>20</sup>. Even after the operation, the body seems to be a constant reminder of the sex the individual was born with. Another example from the film is when Bernadette is drinking the local woman Shirley (June Marie Bennett) under the table. Before the woman passes out, she

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<sup>18</sup> The quote is originally in Norwegian: “Sjølv om kjønnsoperasjonen ofte blir eit sentralt vendepunkt i transseksuelle sine livsforteljingar, er kroppen for mange vedvarande gjenstand for ‘kjønnsstadfestande oppussings- og vedlikehaldsarbeid’. Representasjonsarbeidet for å uttrykke det kjønna sjølvet er ein konstant pågåande prosess der det er uklart når prosessen blir avslutta” (Folgerø 2005: 43).

<sup>19</sup> The original Norwegian quote is: “Det som i dagleglivet skapar vanskar for Rita sitt ønske om å bli gjenkjent og sett som ei ‘vanleg kvinne’ er knytt til skjeggvekst, djup stemme og maskuline trekk i ansiktet” (ibid.: 50).

<sup>20</sup> The two transformations, from man to woman, and from woman to man, are very different, and should be treated separately. However, in this case the process for the two is similar, which is why I generalize.

states: “All I see are female impersonators”. She takes Bernadette to be a man because of her masculine traits, and does not see her as a ‘proper’ woman.

A related term is also relevant when writing about Bernadette, namely transgender. Judith Halberstam writes:

Transgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds (Halberstam 2005: 49).

The quote underlines some of the elusiveness of the term. It is not a clear-cut category like ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, but seemingly a category that individuals might or might not feel like they belong to. Sandy Stone mentions a set individuals that possibly consider themselves transgender: “...transsexuals (pre, post, and no-op); transvestites; crossdressers; persons with ambiguous genitalia; persons who have chosen to perform ambiguous social genders; and persons who have chosen to perform no gender at all” (Stone 1999). According to this definition, all three of the main characters can belong to the ‘transgender’ category, but stating that they are transgender is nevertheless problematic, as the term involves self-definition. Since the term is never mentioned in the film, it is not completely accurate to place them there. Nevertheless, it is a term that does describe something about all three characters, and therefore I will continue to use it throughout the thesis.

In the case of Bernadette, she seems to embrace both the transgender- and the transsexual term. She is a ‘traditional’ transsexual in the sense that the disruption between the gender and sex became so strong that it made her do the sex change operation. At the same time, she plays on the ambiguity of her gender/sex: being a drag show artist, she even does it professionally. Traditionally the conflict between the transgender and the transsexual is more complicated. Wencke Mühleisen writes:

...the transgender (and the transvestite) lives of – or plays up to – *the ambiguity*, the confusion and the ‘failed’ imitation of the gender codes. The traditional understanding of the transsexual on the other hand lays in the fixed longing for unambiguous sex and gender recognition [my translation]<sup>21</sup> (Mühleisen 2003: 149).

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<sup>21</sup> The Norwegian quote is: “...den transkjønnete (og transvestiten), lever nettopp av – eller spiller opp til – *tvedydigheten*, forvirringen og den ‘mislykkede’ etterligningen av kjønnskodene. Den tradisjonelle oppfattelsen av den transseksuelle derimot ligger i den bastante lengselen etter entydig kjønns-gjenkjennelse” (Mühleisen 2003: 149).

Leaving the transsexual term behind gets complicated because of this conflict: The transsexual that strives for an alignment between gender and sexuality might not appreciate the transgender project of revealing the construction of gender codes. In the case of my reading of *Priscilla* this is not a problem, since Bernadette does not reveal any the distaste for the transgender, but share common ground with the group. Although I will refer to the transsexual when writing about Queer Theory, in the rest of my thesis I will leave the term, with all its implications<sup>22</sup> and complications, behind in advantage of the term transgender.

A transgender individual might have any kinds of sexual preferences: heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, bisexual or asexual. The characters in the movie differ on this area: Adam (alias Felicia) is gay, Tick (alias Mitzy) is seemingly bisexual, and Bernadette is straight, but since she used to be a 'he', the issue is more complicated than it seems. In other words, both through their appearance and in their love life the characters differ from the heterosexual norm. When investigating *Priscilla*, I wish to use a theory that has questions concerning gender and sexuality at its core, namely Queer Theory. I will show how the theory ties up with important themes in *Priscilla*, and why it therefore is constructive as an approach when doing readings of the film.

## QUEER THEORY

Queer Theory can be understood as a postmodern way of perceiving sexuality and gender. Ken Plummer writes how the postmodern condition has influenced sexuality:

... human sexualities become destabilized, decentered and de-essentialized; the sexual life is no longer seen as harboring an essential unitary core locatable within a clear framework ... with an essential truth waiting to be discovered: there are only fragments (Plummer 1996: xiv).

The three main characters of *Priscilla* have these kinds of 'sexualities': fluctuating, existing outside the normal framework when it comes to sexuality and gender. In challenging mainstream society's view on what sexuality and gender is, the idea of 'truth' is challenged. I will now show how the postmodern perspective is prominent in queer theory, and define some of its most important concepts in the process. I will

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<sup>22</sup> In Norway, transsexualism is considered a disease, for which one can be treated (Folgerø 2005: 43).

then look at how the theory is used within musicology. First, I will briefly take a closer look at how the theory developed.

Queer Theory was established in the beginning of the 1990s in the US. It was influenced by French poststructuralists, lesbian feminist theory, gay studies, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (Rosenberg 2002: 64). The release of *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Segwicks *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) represented the beginning of Queer Theory, together with conferences in the US in 1989-90 (ibid.: 65). The theory can be understood as both political and cultural:

...political, because it seeks to expose and problematise the means by which 'sexuality' is reduced to the definitions and relations of gender; cultural, because just about everything we might call Queer Theory concerns itself with the ways in which cultural texts – books, films, television, magazines, etc. – condition understandings of sexuality (Burston and Richardson 1994: 1).

In other words, Queer Theory challenges the norms regarding sexuality through the study of cultural texts, although the theory has also been used as methodological approach in sociological studies. Before delving further into the main issues addressed in Queer Theory, a closer look at the word the theory is named after seems appropriate.

Queer means “strange, odd,” or “a homosexual man” (*The Oxford Dictionary of English* 2005). Originally it was a derogatory term that gays then reclaimed and redefined. The exact content of this new meaning is difficult to pinpoint, since the concept avoids clear-cut definitions. Henning Bech writes how who and what is queer cannot be defined once and for all (Bech 2005: 152). Queer is not a term describing a particular type of people, like gays, lesbians or transgender. This is because “...queer is anti-identity oriented and non-essentialistic [my translation]”<sup>23</sup> (ibid.: 152), meaning that there is something borderless and ‘floating’ about the expression. However, there are some defining qualities: that which at any point is called ‘queer’ is contrasting the main norms of a society, placed outside the dominant ideologies of that society. Since these are changing, so is the meaning of queer. As the main characters of Priscilla all are breaking with the norm of today’s society in questions regarding sexuality and gender, they can at the present point be categorized as queer.

A central project within queer research is to study the majority and their norms, which queer scholars call ‘the heteronormative’. In “Homo and queer

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<sup>23</sup> The original quote: ”queer er anti-identitetsorientert og ikke-essentialistisk” (ibid.: 152).

research”<sup>24</sup> (2006) Heidi Eng underlines the importance not to equal heteronormativity with heterosexuality. She writes that heteronormativity can be understood as “...*particular forms* of heterosexuality that sets the norm and take precedence over other ways of living heterosexually [my translation]”<sup>25</sup> (Eng 2006: 148). In Queer Theory the breaking points with the heteronormative are studied and analyzed. That which is different and marginal is put in the centre. How does this influence the dominant ideologies and norms of a society? Bech writes that the queer researchers look at how the queer influence and shape society, partly through its own display, and partly because “...heteronormativity etc. constitutes itself through suppression and exclusion of the queer [my translation]”<sup>26</sup> (Bech 2005: 155). In other words, in Queer Theory that which is queer is seen as far more important for the dominant culture than those belonging to it are aware of.

When studying the heteronormative from a queer perspective, the concept of *queering* is important. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005) queering means “spoil or ruin”. Some of this meaning is activated when the word is used in Queer Theory. Eng writes that when using the queering expression “...queer research describes a process: Which *effect* that which is seen as queer has on the normative [my translation]”<sup>27</sup> (Eng 2006: 147). In other words, how does the queer influence the dominant ideologies and norms? Anybody breaking with the heteronormative is doing a queering act, also people living out unconventional forms of heterosexuality. Just as it is difficult to define the word queer, it can be difficult to spot the queering act. The queer is changing as society changes, and so is the queering behavior. The subversive is therefore just as difficult to define. The word means “seeking or intended to subvert an established system or institution...” (*The Oxford Dictionary of English* 2005, 2nd edition revised). Again, the subversive action is dependant on its context. What is subversive in one situation, might not be in another.

When applied to musicology, Queer Theory can be understood as “...a different way of listening, a queer sensibility” (Whiteley 2006: 1). Susanna Välimäki expands on this:

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<sup>24</sup> The original title: ”Homo- og queerforskning”.

<sup>25</sup> The original quote: “...*særskilte former* for heteroseksualitet som setter normen og har forrang til fordel for andre måter å leve heteroseksuelt på” (Eng 2006: 148).

<sup>26</sup> The original quote: “...heteronormativitet osv. konstituerer sig igennem undertrykkelse og eksklusjon av queer” (Bech 2005: 155).

<sup>27</sup> Original quote: “...beskriver queerforskningen en prosess: Hvilken *effekt* det som oppfattes som queer har på det normative” (Eng 2006: 147).

In music research, queer studies can be thought of as a specific mode of study, listening and interpretation: as a non-heterosexual and homosexually conscious and emphatic point of audition aiming to study, interpret and theorise manifold representations or constructions of unstable sexualities and transgressive genders in music of any kind (Välimäki 2007: 180).

Queer musicology aims to get a better understanding of how sexuality and gender is played out within the field of music, and does so from a point of view that stands outside heteronormativity. It seeks to investigate music and performance through queer eyes and ears, wanting to reveal that the ‘natural’ and ‘as a matter of truths’ are constructions, just like the obviously artificial. Queer musicology, then, seeks to reveal the construction of heteronormativity, of ‘true’ identities and their relation to ‘authentic’ musical expressions, simultaneously showing that the artificial can be more real than the supposedly real. Being aware of its artificiality, these expressions can be seen as more honest, than the supposedly ‘authentic’.

I have already referred to how pop music in particular opens up to investigations of identity and authenticity. In contrast to rock, it does not attempt to come across as ‘the real thing’. This makes it particularly susceptible to a queer approach. Hawkins writes:

...it is not by chance that gender ambivalence or destabilisation in pop representations communicates the politics of queer culture. This has important implications for the pop performance as a condition of bodily seduction and theatrical presence (Hawkins 2002: 13).

The relationship between pop and the queer will be central in my thesis, since the compiled music in *Priscilla* belongs to the pop genre. The music in itself, with its often ‘synthetic’ sound, goes well with a queer sentiment. Also, the relationship between the body and theatrical presence is central in the film, drag being a phenomenon that investigates the relationship between the two and pop music.

Drag, then, gives an interesting angle on the phenomenon of pop performance in relation to gender and sexuality. The role of music in drag will play an important role in my readings, since I wish to investigate both how the music of the show *and* the performance create the effect of drag. The music seems to open a space where investigation of sexuality and gender is allowed. Take away the stage and the music, and drag becomes more difficult to relate to for its audience, as revealed in the film. The concepts of *queering* and *subversion* are both important in the queer theorists’ understanding of drag, and will also play a role in my readings of the film. It is

therefore useful to turn to Butler's writing, since she discusses drag in relation to subversion.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler wrote about drag in a manner that created misunderstandings with regards to how she interpreted the phenomenon. In the book she writes how "...drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler 1999: 186). As a result many people thought she was under the impression that drag was a subversive act per definition. In *Bodies that matter* (1993) she clarifies this, and writes: "... there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and ... drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (Butler: 1993: 125). In other words, drag might be performed in a manner that strengthens heteronormativity, not challenge it, like in the films *Tootsie* (1982) and *Some like it hot* (1959) (ibid.: 126). In the preface to the 1999- edition of *Gender Trouble* Butler writes:

Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value (Butler 1999: xxii-xxiii).

According to Butler, then, nothing can be defined as subversive, the term must be understood within its context. This is also the case with drag. When the phenomenon does function in a subversive manner though, it reveals that the imitation of gender is an imitation without an original. Butler writes "...drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim of naturalness and originality" (Butler 1993: 125). If drag actually challenges the 'naturalness and originality' of heterosexuality is questioned by Toril Moi (1998), who suggests that drag is dependant on the contrast between performed gender and biological sex in order to be effective (Moi 1998).

Butler's refusal to define drag as subversive, can be seen as an illustration of how the theory avoids definite answers. Also, the theory seems to contain opposing views. Whiteley writes about how she sees queer politics as contradictory: On the one hand it "...is a way of defining the self so that homosexuality is no longer transgressive and, as such, marginal to normal, stable heterosexuality" (Whiteley 1997: xxix). Through putting the queer at the centre of queer research, it becomes



normalized and loses some of its queerness, maybe even all. At the same time, there is a rebellious side to queer politics (ibid.: xxix). As I see it, the more rebellious aspects of queer theory are visible in the queering concept. Still, not all actions breaking with the norm can be understood as queer. Eng writes:

Extremely put we can say that queer practice might create its own queer subcultures for a limited group, which by the main culture is interpreted as 'the other'. This can as a matter of fact strengthen the dichotomy between 'us and them': queer and straight, normal and not normal [my translation]<sup>28</sup> (Eng 2006: 147).

This is relevant for the discussion of *Priscilla*, since the film does describe a subculture defined by queer actions. Here as well, there is a rebellious side to the behavior of the queer main characters, but as I have already mentioned, there are several aspects of this film that are drawing it towards the centre, making it less queering than it may seem at first glance.

The time in which it came out might be one of these aspects. Mark Simpson claims: "It's a queer old world and getting jolly queerer all the time" (Simpson 1999:1). He writes "... the end result of this fascination with all things homosexual and the crossover of gayness into the mainstream is that heterosexuality has changed unrecognizably" (ibid.: 17). In other words, just like the queer theorists put the marginal at the centre, thereby transforming it into something more 'normal', Simpson suggests that something similar has happened in society in general: the marginal, or gay, has entered the mainstream and thereby changed it. This is also expressed in popular culture in general, and popular music more specifically. Hawkins writes that in his opinion: "... *queer pop* has seeped into almost all areas of mainstream pop, designating new understandings of gendered identity that are enabled by the dynamics of cultural production" (Hawkins 2007: 201). In itself, this changing of the heteronormative might be seen as positive, giving more room to explore areas of identity.

Related to the mainstreaming of the queer, and *Priscilla's* popularity, is the growth of interest regarding the drag phenomenon that happened about the same time. Lumby writes how there was a "...pop culture revival of drag in the United States" (Lumby 1998: 83). She continues: "Indeed, drag became so popular during this period

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<sup>28</sup> The original quote: "Spissformulert kan vi hevde at queer praksis kan skape egne skeive subkulturer for en begrenset gruppe som av hovedkulturen tolkes som 'de andre'. Dette kan faktisk forsterke dikotomien 'oss og de andre': skeiv og streit, normal og unormal" (Eng 2006: 147).

in the US that the mainstream glossy *New York* magazine put three drag divas on its cover and posed the question: ‘Is drag going straight?’” (ibid.: 83). However, even though drag became part of mainstream in a more visible way, others argue that it simultaneously turned more queer: “The ‘90s drag trend, though, stands at something of an angle to mainstream tradition of ‘straight’ drag and often incorporates queer and gender politics into performance” (ibid.: 84). This is an important aspect in *Priscilla*, as the main characters are performing in a manner that aligns with the new queer drag. The film’s producer Al Clark points to this when writing about how *Priscilla*’s costume designers understood contemporary drag: “But increasingly drag has become much more a confrontational performance art, with costumes that correspondingly take it into another dimension” (Clark 1995 :11). Probably, then, it was the new queer aspect of drag that triggered the mainstream’s interest in the 1990s. There were, however, downsides to queer popularity.

Halberstam writes that “...mainstream culture within postmodernism should be defined as the process by which subcultures are *both* recognized and absorbed...” (Halberstam 2005: 156). Like Simpson, she suggests there is a downside to the subcultural fascination: “...on the one hand, the mainstream recognition and acknowledgement of a subculture has the potential to alter the contours of dominant culture ... But on the other hand, most of the interest directed by mainstream media at subcultures is voyeuristic and predatory” (ibid.: 156-157). It is possible *Priscilla* gained popularity because of a voyeuristic interest with queer subculture that woke during the 1990s (Simpson 1999). Simpson writes that the fascination of the gay, the idealization of the ‘coming out’-myth (Simpson 1999: 13), and the “...climate of open fascination with sex...helped changed public attitudes toward homosexuality from fear and loathing to intrigue and curiosity” (ibid.: 12). The movie theatre is a proper place to engage in voyeuristic behavior, and thereby ease this curiosity. *Priscilla* is among other things also a ‘coming out’-movie, which might have made it appeal to a larger audience.

Kassabian also points to the change of attitude towards the subcultures during the 1990s, but according to her the development started already during the 1980s (Kassabian 2001: 146-147). She also writes about the counter reaction it triggered: the angry white male fighting for his patriarchal rights (Kassabian 2001: 147). She suggests that the two directions have their two equivalents within film music: the compiled popular music soundtrack is aligns with a sympathy towards, or

identification with, the subculture, the resisting groups ties up with the composed music and its consistent stereotypes. Since *Priscilla* has both types of music, it suggests that the film contains this conflict. Here, I do not mean in the obvious sense: The queer main characters undoubtedly meet representatives of the angry white patriarchal male. I am referring to ways in which the soundtrack leads the viewer/listener towards specific positions that actually supports dominant ideology, and therefore suppresses minorities the film sets out to support. However, as my readings will show, the border between the compiled and the composed blurs in the film, complicating the division that Kassabian outlines.

In *Priscilla* a common trait in subcultures is emphasized: Just as the mainstream takes up elements from the subcultural, subcultures incorporate parts of the mainstream. This is reflected in the choice of the compiled music in the film: Several of the songs were huge hits during the 1970s and 1980s. The way that the music is used changes its meaning, though: A song used in a drag show brings with its own history, but is also transformed by the context. It gives room for parody, irony and potentially also cruelty, as new meanings are created by the audiovisual chemistry. An aspect of music's strength is emphasized here. Anette Davison writes about music's power to lead the listener: "Music, and sometimes sound, seem to function as doorways into dreams or fantasy worlds..." (Davison 2007: 136). In this case, it opens up to a world where gender and sexuality can be explored in a way that the mainstream viewer/listener seems to be able to follow. The music linked with the visuals of the drag show makes the sound and image combination queer, though seemingly not more queer than the mainstream can handle.

The glamorization of the pop song and the artist, the parody and gender play that happens in a drag show is not only related to queering, it is also connected to another, older term, namely camp. To understand why music is taken from the mainstream and incorporated into the subculture, and how the meaning changes in this process, camp might be just as important as queer. I will therefore take a closer look at the concept, which is such an important one in *Priscilla*. Since the term is so strongly connected to identification with a particular kind of femininity, I will now bring the Diva into the discussion.

## CAMP AND THE DIVA

Why is camp such an important part of the gay and transgender community, as shown in *Priscilla*, and how does the concept relate to the queer and to the Diva? To get a better grasp of the term, I will start by taking a closer look at its meanings.

According to Richard Dyer “It [camp] clearly is a defining feature of the male gay subculture” (Dyer 2004: 176). Since *Priscilla* portrays a subculture that contains both the gay and transgender, this is also my focus in the paper. Dyer’s statement about camp’s position amongst the gay is relevant for the expanded version of the subculture that also contains the transgender. One could take this even one step further, and state that camp is an important aspect of queer subcultures in general. However, in this context it becomes problematic to include all queers, since different elements of camp are emphasized in different queer subcultures<sup>29</sup>. I will therefore focus on the elements of camp that are prominent in the particular queer subculture described in the film, consisting of gay and transgender queens. This focus also involves further investigation into what queer means, since the two have certain meeting points.

Like queer, camp is difficult to define. Cleto Fabio suggests they have other things in common as well: “Camp and queer ... share their clandestine, substantial inauthenticity, and their unstable and elusive status...” (Fabio 1999: 16). Neither the queer nor the camp support the notion that the ‘real’ exist. This involves a movement away from the idea of a true core, an attitude that is reflected in the concepts themselves: As Fabio points out, they both avoid the clear cut and definite. In “Queer Pleasures: The Bolero, Camp, and Almodóvar”, Vanessa Knights writes that camp in certain cases can provide “... a queer cultural space in which gender identities and sexual roles can be deconstructed and rearticulated” (Knights 2006: 94). This quotation shows how camp and queer move in a similar landscape, and at times overlap. It also ties both to the exploration of sexuality and gender, so prominent in *Priscilla*.

A characteristic of camp in particular, is its fascination with the fake: “...the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1994: 53). The drag shows in *Priscilla* express this sentiment, but also other scenes reveal this tendency. The main characters’ colorful clothes are the most obvious

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<sup>29</sup> Camp in lesbian subculture plays out in different ways than camp in the gay and transgender subculture.

example, but also their loud behavior and their theatrical gestures emphasize this aspect of camp. Tiina Rosenberg writes: “Camp aesthetics can be used as an artistic method, but also as an identity-political attitude. While kitsch is not necessarily queer, camp remains an exclusive queer tradition, and will not be colonized by heterosexual content [my translation]”<sup>30</sup> (Rosenberg 2002: 133) Rosenberg embraces camp as a part of a queer tradition, a tradition that refuses to let itself be changed to fit into the heterosexual norm. The clothes and the behavior of the characters can therefore be seen as a rebellion against the dominating ideology and norm of society. Camp is in other words something more than a mere aesthetic preference, although it is characterized by aesthetics. But must camp be exclusively queer, as Rosenberg claims? Camp does seem to be expressed in mainstream popular music and art as well, without having the political edge associated with the term.

Mühleisen writes how camp originated in homosexual culture, Oscar Wilde being “...an early representative” (Mühleisen 2003: 159). According to the writer, camp did not stay within the borders of the gay subculture, though. Mühleisen writes that since the 1960s, there have been two major developments: “ First, camp has become a more open public sensibility- and mainstream trend. Secondly, there exists a politicized camp and a radical drag, tied to the 1970s’ homosexual liberation movements and 1980s’ ‘queer politics’ [my translation]”<sup>31</sup> (ibid.: 160-161). This process resembles the mainstreaming of queer that happened during the 1990s. Like camp, the queer kept a more political version, next to the one that was taken up in mainstream society.

What then, about the main characters’ choice in music? Is it too, like their clothes and their behavior, influenced by camp, and if so is the case, what makes music camp? Dyer writes that “Anybody can be read as camp...” (Dyer 2004: 177), but that some people are more susceptible to it, the Diva being a good example of such a character. Hawkins presents popular music as more inviting to a camp interpretation: “...pop possesses a more flippant, glitzy and excessive quality that is consciously superficial and knowingly limpwristed” (Hawkins 2004: 17). Since pop

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<sup>30</sup> Original quote: “Campeestetik kan användas som konstnärlig metod, men också som identitetspolitisk attityd. Medan kitsch inte nödvändigtvis är queer i sig, förblir camp en exklusiv queer tradition och låter sig inte kolonialiseras av heterosexuellt innehåll” (Rosenberg 2002: 133).

<sup>31</sup> The original quote is: “ For det første har camp blitt en mer åpen offentlig sensibilitets- og mainstream-trend. For det andre eksisterer det en politisert camp og en radikal drag som henger sammen med 1970-tallets homoseksuelle frigjøringsbevegelser og 1980-tallets ‘queer politics’” (Mühleisen 2003: 160-161).

does not claim authenticity to begin with, it is suitable for those with a fascination for the artificial, and those who identify with the queer. Both the pop performance and the pop production plays a part, neither trying to mimic the 'authentic'. On the contrary, that which is sparkly, glittering and electronic is often preferred, making pop welcome to camp aesthetics.

In *Priscilla*, the compiled soundtrack consist of several genres from different decades, but the songs in the drag acts are all pop tunes, supporting the notion that pop in particular invites to camp. Some of the songs are disco hits, some are ballads, but all are well within the borders of mainstream pop. However, to define the music as camp is somewhat complicated, since this is one of many possible interpretations. The songs are in themselves smooth and sparkling, and the queer characters emphasize the camp aspect of the music in their performance, exaggerating it as they dress up as glimmering stars, miming the words. In this manner, the camp aspect of the songs are brought to the fore and easily recognized by the audience.

The music in the drag shows has a clear beat<sup>32</sup>, connecting it to the body and dance. Frith writes how the 'serious' music is associated with the mind, and the 'fun' music is associated with the body (Frith 1996: 124), a way of thinking that goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US and Europe. The point of view is still alive, used both to separate Western classical music from popular music, and to distinguish more 'serious' popular music, like jazz, from the polished pop (ibid.: 125). The latter music is stereotypically connected with mindless fun and physical pleasure, making it more suited to camp and drag shows.

Several of the tracks in *Priscilla* are from the 1970s and 1980s, bringing up another aspect of camp: "The recycling of images through the prism of camp sensibility invested in the past, whilst situated in the present, demonstrates the mutability and polyvalence of cultural signs" (Knights 2006: 104). In this case, new layers of meaning are added to the pop songs because of the new, subcultural context. This underlines that the meaning of music is a collaborative creation, something that surfaces when music meets an audience. Also, incorporating older songs points to another subcultural trait, the fascination and celebration of the popular that has now faded (Dickinson 2004: 176). Some of the songs in the film were huge hits when they came out, but in 1994 they were outdated. The choice of music may not only be seen

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<sup>32</sup> This is not true about the ballads 'I've never been to me' and 'Save the best for last'.

as a support with the underdog, as Kay Dickinson suggests (ibid.: 176), but also an identification with that which has lost its position.

The recycling of major mainstream hits in a gay and transgender setting is also an example of queering:

...the history of music becomes re-inscribed or re-interpreted from a queer point of audition. This strategy obeys rhetoric of queer inversion: instead of heterosexual history writing with heterosexual protagonists, there are homosexual ones. This rhetoric is also true of the music: mainstream musical styles are celebrated as queer music (Välämäki 2007: 181).

This is again an example of how the camp and the queer interconnect. In the drag shows, emphasizing the music's camp aspect becomes a way of making it one's own, thereby changing its meaning and turning it queer. The redefined music becomes something that ties the individuals of the community closer together; a part of what defines the subculture and its participants.

Susan Sontag writes how "Camp sees everything in quotation marks" (Sontag 1994: 56), related to camp's fascination with the artificial. This is relevant to the way gender and sexuality is presented in *Priscilla*: Man and woman, femininity and masculinity are terms that in a sense are put in quotation marks, through play with the gender- and sexuality terms. When the categorizations are presented in this way, they lose credibility, again linking camp to queer: like the latter, camp has a destabilizing effect. Dyer expands on what lays in the 'quotation': "...camp is a characteristically gay way of handling values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, theatricalisation and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable". (Dyer 2004: 176). Though he does not refer to drag in particular in this statement, I find that the quote is relevant, since the typical drag show is ironic, theatrical and makes fun of a often highly adored pop star.

Stephen Maddison's angle on camp behavior is similar, yet he describes it as something inbetween a defense mechanism and a fighting strategy. Also, he takes up another important aspect, namely camp's relation to the feminine: "... a performance mode for handling hostile cultural conditions and which often involves some level of female identification" (Maddison 2000: 5). Maddison does not consider the mainstreaming of camp that has happened during the last decades, but focuses on the political camp expression. The female identification that he writes about is obvious in the sense that the artists dress up as women, and mimic the singing of a female artist,

but it is also shown in the genres that the songs are chosen from. Why the strong link to the female? Again, one possible reason is the identification with the suppressed, here women in patriarchal society. In the drag show this is expressed as an imitation of the female performer who is at the centre of the stage and the masculine gaze, feared and dominated at the same time.

The choice of music is also colored by the identification with the feminine. Both the ballad and the danceable pop song is considered 'feminine' genres. However, it is important to underline that whatever connection the word 'feminine' has with musical genres is not constant:

... sonic gestures *become* codified, having gendered meanings ascribed to them over a period of time and generated through discursive networks, and those meanings are mutable according to the cultural, historical, and musical context of those gestures, and the subsequent context into which they are constantly reinscribed (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 2007: 10-11).

What music that is considered as 'feminine' or 'masculine' might be changing, but at the present point there is a link between the synthesizer, dance music and the feminine body, as opposed to the masculine intellect (ibid.: 12). Therefore, synthesizer-based music that welcomes dance is appropriate to camp.

McClary writes that the constructed connection between the feminine and dance music is the reason why "...dance music in general usually is dismissed by music critics, even by 'serious' rock critics (McClary 2002: 153). The dismissal is a probable reason why the music is taken up in the queer subculture to begin with, because of its sympathy for that which is rejected by the critical authority. Also, McClary points to another potential aspect of dance music that is worth bringing to the forth: "To the extent that the appeal is to physicality rather than abstract listening, dance music is often trivialized at the same time that its power to distract and arouse is regarded with anxiety" (ibid.: 153). One interpretation could therefore be that a rejection and fear of dance music is a rejection and fear of female sexuality. The queer subculture's embraces it, not sharing dominating patriarchal fear of female sexuality.

Camp's link to female identification is present throughout *Priscilla*. Not only do Adam (alias Felicia) and Tick (alias Mitzy) overdress as women both on and off



stage, they also imitate stereotypical female interaction<sup>33</sup>. In particular, identification with the Diva is prominent. “Why should a culture apparently founded on same-sex desire be so interested in forming an adoring relationship across sex difference?” Maddison asks when discussing the homosexual man’s interest in Judy Garland (Maddison 2000: 5). In order to understand why the often highly adored Diva becomes the chosen object to camp, I will take a closer look at this specific female role, and try to understand why the representatives of queer subculture in the film chooses to imitate her.

Wayne Koestenbaum writes in *The Queens Throat* that the Diva is more than a specific female role: “...a woman opera singer of great fame and brilliance...” (Koestenbaum 2001: 111). The Diva goes beyond that: “...it is also a pliant social institution, a framework for emotion, kind of conduct, expectation, or desire, that can move through a body that has nothing to do with opera...” (ibid.: 111). In other words, it is not necessary to be a Diva – an extraordinary operasinger traditionally, or the modern version, the pop star – in order to behave like one. The role is open to those who identify with it.

Koestenbaum describes how behaving like a Diva is such an important part of certain queer subcultures:

...the particulars of diva conduct to chart a method of moving the body through the world, a style that gay people, particularly queens, have found essential. It is a camp style of resistance and self-protection, a way of identifying with other queer people across invisibility and disgrace (ibid.: 85).

Diva conduct becomes a language, expressed through the body in a camp manner, that connects the queer with each other. The link Koestenbaum makes between mimicking the Diva, and camp style is worth delving further into. Koestenbaum writes: “The diva’s gayety is qualified, shadowed. She has reached merriment by passing through shame and despair” (ibid.: 97). He connects this to the double-faced aspect of gay subculture: “For divas and for gays, cheerfulness or gaiety is part of the profession” (ibid.: 98), suggesting that also for the gay, there is a shadow side to the apparent happiness. Here, camp is again revealed as a protection: when making the surface glimmer and shimmer, turning it into something artificial, it draws attention from

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<sup>33</sup> I do not include Bernadette here, since her relationship to the female and femininity is somewhat different.

what is behind it, making it possible to hide behind that sparkling surface, that staged smile.

Koestenbaum also makes a connection between the Diva and the queen: “The diva believes – and this may not be grandiose delusion but truth –that she and the queen are secret sharers, conversing in winks and nods” (ibid.: 107). Even though the Diva might mimic the queen, she is very much aware that she is not a real one: “The diva pretends to be royal, and at any moment her illusion might be shattered. She is a carnival queen, queen-for-a-day, an ordinary woman indulging in detailed drag of queenliness” (ibid.: 108). The homosexual queen resembles the Diva in the sense that he is a fake queen. Not only that, he is not even a ‘real’ woman (ibid.: 108). Why then behave in such a manner? Koestenbaum writes:

Queenliness has long functioned in gay culture as a shield against insult and disgrace: the queen pretends to be above scorn because he so often is scorned. A diva, too, may act like a star long before she becomes a star and long after she ceases to be a star (ibid.: 108).

Acting like a queen becomes yet another way of defending oneself, both for the Diva and the queer, leading to a stronger sense of identification between the two. Also, when the Diva attempts to behave like a queen, she is clearly acting, again making her a desired object to camp.

In the drag shows in *Priscilla*, the artists identify both with the actual singer of the song, but also with the role of the pop star, the modern version of the Diva. The pop Diva, like the original one, is elevated above her audience, both symbolically and physically: the artist is on stage, placed above the audience. The queer characters in *Priscilla* play out this aspect when performing, most clearly when Adam (alias Felicia) does drag on the top of the bus. The aspect of elevation makes the Diva a powerful figure.

Another Diva characteristic seems relevant in this context: the Diva as demonized. Koestenbaum writes:

Mythically, she is perverse, monstrous, abnormal, and ugly. Though divas have been firmly associated with queens and with the perpetuation of empire, they have been considered deviant figures, capable of ruining an empire with a roulade or a retort (ibid.: 104).

The drag artist also goes into this part of the type when imitating the Diva. He is not only imitating the looks and gestures of a striking woman, but also going into the role

of a female monster. The question is whether she actually is a monster, or if she is just seen as one. Perhaps this is a defense mechanism as well: The woman on stage, elevated above the crowd, becomes too powerful. In turning her into a monster, the onlookers can justify an attack, can justify dragging her down from her throne.

The monstrousness was a part of the actual performance of the opera Diva. McClary writes: “The excess that marks the utterances of a Lucia or a Salome as insane is thereby elevated to the status of an essential ingredient – a *sine qua non* – of interpretations by women opera stars, regardless of the specific role” (McClary 2002: 80). Traditionally the Diva had to touch upon madness in her performance, otherwise she would not be a proper one. This madness was during the nineteenth century tied to female sexuality out of control (McClary 2002), but similar themes go further back.

A mythical figure that comes to mind is the siren. The sirens of Greek mythology – half women, half birds – lured sailors into the dangerous rocky coast around the island in which they lived. They did this through beautiful singing, the music seducing the sailors, making them steer into the rocks (Creed 1993: 2). The story can be read as an expression of men’s fear of the seductive powers of women. Barbara Creed takes it even a step further, and writes that the siren is an example of what she calls the *femme castratrice*: the woman as a castrator (ibid.: 128). She writes: “The myth resounds with images of castration anxiety: jagged rocks, cannibalism, death and dismemberment” (ibid.: 128). Being tricked by the siren means losing control, losing one’s manliness, means being consumed. Perhaps the fear of the Diva comes from a similar place. Her singing seduces the audience, bringing them into a different space. She takes control, leaving the listener/viewers without any, and thereby becomes the powerful one. For patriarchal society she might therefore be interpreted as a threat.

The Diva’s voice takes the focus away from her flaws. Koestenbaum writes: “The beauty and magnitude of a diva’s voice resides, so the iconography suggests, in her deformity. Her voice is beautiful because she herself is not – and her ugliness is interpreted as a sign of moral and social deviance” (Koestenbaum 2001: 104). Just as the sirens were deformed, so is the Diva partly deformed. It is her singing that carries with it the power to lead the listener/viewer into territories where they are not in control, just as the song of the sirens did.

Davison writes that film music in general shares traits with the music of the sirens. In “Demystified, remystified, and seduced by the sirens: listening to David

Lynch's films" Davison writes that "...one of the classical functions of film music involves a Siren-like ensnaring of the spectator into an engagement with the fictional world of the film" (Davison 2007: 143). She writes that this is "presented self-reflexively" (ibid.: 143) in much of Lynch's work. There are some similarities between this aspect of Lynch's films and the drag shows in *Priscilla*. In both cases the audience of the show in question, and the viewer/listener of the film, is transported into a world of make-believe. In *Priscilla* it is the fictional aspect of gender and sexuality of the drag artist that is explored, whereas in Lynch's films the border between illusion and reality is questioned.

Davison finds that there are certain characteristics to film music that leads its audience into the unknown. She writes how "...music is foregrounded..." (ibid.: 143) in these cases. This happens in several ways: "First, via 'live' performances... Second, where the music and image are almost *too closely* synchronized, thus drawing one's attention..."(ibid.: 143). Also, there is a third manner in which music is put to the fore: "... simply by privileging music at the expense of other narrative elements" (ibid.: 144). In the drag show all these aspects are present, highlighting music's siren like qualities. Music is clearly in the center of the action, giving other narrative elements, like the image, a more secondary role. Also, the drag performances are not really 'live' in the sense that the music is playback, something both the audience and the viewer/listeners are very much aware of.

Some of the drag shows' effect rest on the shared knowledge that the performance is staged. The synchronization of the lyrics of the song and often exaggerated moving of the lips of the artist, is definitely something that draws attention. A demystification happens: we know that the artists are not singing. Davison writes: "...the practice of song dubbing holds within it the potential for its own undoing, or rather its demystification" (ibid.: 132). In the drag shows that is the point: to demystify the relationship between voice and song, between the body and performance. The drag artist does this by going into the role of the seductress, the siren, the Diva, and uses music as a tool to enter the role. From this point of view, one could say that the drag artist enters the role of the female as a castrator, or more specifically: the female interpreted as the castrator.

In *Priscilla*, the drag performance is usually safe, the exception being when Tick (alias Mitzy) gets a can of beer in the head after the introductory drag show of the film. The problems arise when the characters move off stage. The act becomes

less of a show when the music is absent, and their cross-dressing gets mixed reactions. Perhaps the times the main characters trigger aggression, they are tied to this monstrous Diva role, the siren: In these cases they threaten heteronormativity more directly, making homophobia surface. Adam (alias Felicia) is the main character that causes most turmoil. Acting more like a Diva in the making than a proper one, he does not seem to have gained insight about the strong reactions his behavior can cause, neither does he have the power to strike back when faced with open hostility.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to begin the close-readings of *Priscilla* with a scene that centers round Adam (alias Felicia). In this section I will start with the drag scene where the character does his own private drag show on top of the bus. It is striking both visually and aurally, and it is not coincidental that this scene was particularly important when the film was represented in the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics of 2000<sup>34</sup>. Since Adam (alias Felicia)'s show is actually done 'on the road', their bus being the stage, it is natural to draw upon texts written on the road movie.

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<sup>34</sup> During the parade of the ceremony, a camped version of *Priscilla* the bus enters, the bus wearing a bright red wig and eyelashes for the occasion. A drag queen sits on the wig, on the roof of the bus, The vehicle is fronted by drag queens cycling in sparkling high-heeled shoes similar to the one Adam (alias Felicia) sits in on top of the bus in the desert. The accompanying music is taken from another scene of the film: 'Finally' is played over the speakers. The film's connection to contemporary popular music is in other words highlighted, 'Finally' being the most recent of all the songs on the soundtrack. Excerpts from the ceremony is out on youtube, under the title 'Sydney 2000 CC – Icons, Minogue and 'On a Night Like This'. The address is <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSA4ux5g7P0> [Viewing date: 27.04.09]. The *Priscilla* shoes enter the screen after 4 min 40 sec.

## PRISCILLA IN THE READING

### DRAGGING ON THE ROOF OF A BUS: EXITING THE MAIN ROAD

The scene begins just after Tick (alias Mitzy) has driven off the main road, in order to make a short cut through the desert. Laderman writes how "...a fundamental aspect of the road movie's distinctive iconic features is the interstate highway system..."

(Laderman 2002: 14), the roads being important since so much of the action takes place here. Laderman writes that the highways "... symbolize the potential of venturing beyond the familiarity of home...", which also is the case in *Priscilla*. More specifically, when the queer characters leave the main route in favor of a less common one, they are inviting new experiences. Laderman writes: "To cross a state or country line is to leave the familiar behind, to venture into the new and unknown" (ibid.: 14). This is precisely what the main characters do when they choose the less traveled road, revealed already in the following scene, where Adam (alias Felicia) does drag on the roof of the bus<sup>35</sup>.

### OPERA ON THE ROAD

There are several differences between this scene and the other drag scenes in the film, music being an important one. Unlike the rest of the tracks in the drag shows, the excerpts do not belong to the popular music tradition, like, but are a part of the Western classical music, more specifically the opera. The short music sequence is taken from Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853). It is a joint and edited version of 'Follie! Follie! Deliro vano é questo' and 'Sempre libera', two arias appearing at the end of the first act of the opera. The recording in the film is of Joan Carden, backed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Even though this is the only compiled classical music excerpt in the film<sup>36</sup>, using opera in a drag show is not unconventional when looking at it from a broader perspective. Since opera to a larger extent is taken up in today's popular culture, the excerpts blend with the rest of the compiled tracks, suggesting that the choice of music really is not that experimental.

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<sup>35</sup> Most of the scene can be viewed on youtube, under the title 'Priscilla Bus-top Aria': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edcXsTBvQ8A&feature=related> [Viewing Date: 23.04.09].

<sup>36</sup> There is a similar scene starting at 55 min 30 sec, also using music from *La Traviata*. The excerpt is shorter, from 'Sempre libera' only, and there are no close-ups of the Adam (alias Felicia)-character on the roof of the bus, probably because the scene is done by a stand-in actor, the costume designer Tim Chappel (Clark 1995: 93).

Frith suggests that listening to Western classical music versus listening to popular music might not be that different: “The error in high cultural attitudes toward low music is the condescending assumption that pop listening describes a quite different sort of experience” (Frith 1996: 252). If these two types of music involves a similar kind of listening and experience, this can explain why the ‘high art’-genre opera has become a part of the popular. Seen in this light, there is no reason why the compiled soundtrack of the film should not have both classical and popular music. However, it is worth noticing that the opera excerpts from *La Traviata* are not a part of the *Priscilla* soundtrack CD, suggesting that the producers have not felt that the ‘Follie...’ and ‘Sempre...’ fitted with the rest of the compiled tracks, for whatever reasons, aesthetic or commercial.

Opera might be a part of popular culture and therefore mainstream society, but there is a special link between opera and queer subcultures. In ”’Anders als die anderen,’ or queering the song’, Anno Mungen writes:

Musical-theatrical performance, with its aural and visual aspects, offers diverse opportunities to play with gender identities and fulfill gendered dreams. As with the genre of opera, which was also constructed as a space for gender crossing (where men could perform as women and women largely as men), there is thus an implied opposition to the ‘real’ world that is largely ruled by the politics of definition and separation (Mungen 2006: 67).

The drag show is precisely musical-theatrical performance that opens to gender play, and can therefore be read as a modern, subcultural relative of the opera. Just as the traditional opera scene did not try to portray the current ‘reality’ that existed outside the theatre, so does the drag act seek to create a reality of its own. If interpreting the film as a musical, one could even suggest that the film as a whole strives to create a make-believe world, where everything is possible, even living out dreams regarding sexuality and gender, dreams that are considered taboo outside the context of musical-theatrical performance. Perhaps even more than the other drag show scenes in the film, Adam (alias Felicia) on the roof creates a promise of another possible reality.

The artist imitates the Diva, but in this case, it is not the modern version, the pop star: it is the traditional from the opera stage. Välimäki writes: “Of particular importance in the homosexual diva cult is the experience of social marginalization” (Välimäki 2007: 202). The Diva, like the homosexual man, has been controlled by patriarchal society, and marked as an outcast. McClary writes: “The proceedings are

controlled by a discourse organized in accordance with masculine interests – a discourse that offers up the female as spectacle while guaranteeing that she will not step out of line” (McClary 2002: 152). Although the female character of the opera, played by the Diva, might be admired, she must behave in a certain manner, for she cannot gain too much power. If she does, the character will be punished. Giving the Divas these roles could be understood as a way to keep the women from becoming too powerful. Even though they had the power to seduce their audience through their singing, the stage did not allow them to come out as victorious.

The storyline of *La Traviata* follows this structure. It is about a courtesan, Violetta, who wishes to turn her life round when she meets Alfredo. However, the past catches up with her, and tuberculosis, the sickness she thought she had overcome, returns and takes her life. The excerpts in *Priscilla* are from the end of first act, where Violetta’s dilemma with regards to the direction of her life is particularly clear: She is not certain whether she should leave her old life as a courtesan behind, or embrace it.

The use of these tracks in *Priscilla* is an example of a special kind of *quotation*, an *allusion*. Kassabian defines the terms in this manner: “*Quotation* is the importing of a song or musical text, in part or in whole, into a film’s score” (Kassabian 2001: 49), and an *allusion* is “...a quotation used to invoke another narrative (ibid.: 50). Here, the story of *la traviata*, meaning the fallen women, adds meaning to *Priscilla*, Adam (alias Felicia) acting out her role.

Since the words are in Italian, their meaning is not immediately recognizable to an English speaking audience. Nevertheless, the words are of great importance, revealing more about what kind of woman Adam (alias Felicia) identifies with and why.

From ‘Follie! Follie! Deliro vano é questo’:

Follie! Follie! Delirio vano è questo	Folly! Folly! This is mad delirium
Povera donna, sola,	A poor woman, alone,
abbandonata in questo popoloso deserto	lost in this crowded desert
Che appellano Parigi	known to men as Paris

From ‘Sempre libera:

A diletta sempre nuovi	Gaily in the world’s gay places
Dee volare il mio pensier.	Ever seeking newer joys.

In ‘Follie!...’ Violetta questions her old way of life, seeing it as madness. Paris is compared to a desert, linking it to the scene in *Priscilla*, where Adam (alias Felicia)



actually is in the desert. In the excerpt from 'Sempre libera' Violetta leaves her worries behind, celebrating the courageous, pleasure seeking part of her self. Adam (alias Felicia) shares this latter approach to the Violetta-character. While sitting in a silver shoe, he mimes the words of the arias in his tight silver costume and heavy make up, indicating that he, like Violetta is living a dangerous life on the outskirts of the norm.

Koestenbaum links the Violetta-character to the gay and transgender community in this manner: "The phobic logic that frames AIDS today and that framed TB and syphilis yesterday locks Violetta in a jam. By living for pleasure she commits suicide" (Koestenbaum 1993: 205). In order to understand why Koestenbaum makes the connection between AIDS, TB and syphilis, Linda and Michael Hutcheon's book *Opera: Desire, Disease, and Death* is useful.

The writers reveal a pattern, underlining that the choice of disease in opera is not coincidental, and that TB, syphilis and cholera "...do not get there by accident, and they have been represented by European and North American society in ways that are particularly powerful in conjunction to sexuality and death" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 1996: 19). That the heroine is carrier of these diseases can be understood as a way to control her: she is regarded as sinful, therefore she must be sick. Hutcheon and Hutcheon write about *La Bohème* (1896) and *La Traviata* as operas about "...overtly tubercular women, whose living, loving, and dying are inseparable not only from their disease but from their sexuality" (ibid.: 38). The explanation for the connection between TB and sexuality can be found in the historical context.

In medical texts from 1853 there is a clear link between the sickness and so-called excessive sexuality (ibid.: 38). Hutcheon and Hutcheon write: "Though one was thought to inherit a predisposition to the disease (called 'consumptive diathesis'), it could be brought out under certain conditions" (ibid.: 38). Fourteen causes for the sickness was outlined by Dr. James Copland, causes "...that became part of the 'code' or meaning of the disease itself: nostalgia, disappointed hopes and affections, depressing mental emotions, and premature or excessive sexual indulgence" (ibid.: 38). Not only was the sickness triggered by sexuality considered out of control, it also was thought to trigger sexual attractiveness (ibid.: 38). It would take another twenty-nine years before it was discovered that the sickness was in fact contagious, and caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (ibid.: 39).

When AIDS surfaced as a named disease in the beginning of the 1980s<sup>37</sup>, the responses it caused resembled those of TB, but also syphilis and cholera: "...in the social reactions to it as much as in its medical implications, AIDS recapitulates much of the history of infectious diseases in the West" (ibid.: 19). The queer fascination with the TB-struck heroine, then, is particularly strong because of the link between TB and AIDS, and Koestenbaum recognizes the similar reactions the diseases triggered. Hutcheon and Hutcheon point to similarities between TB and AIDS in this manner:

What the two illnesses share, beyond their artistic fruitfulness, is a similar set of medical associations: their victims are seen to be young, cut off in their prime; as chronic degenerative diseases, they are both diseases of emaciation; neither has many other external signs... (ibid.: 218)

The context of *Priscilla* is interesting in this sense, opening up to available interpretations with regards to Adam (alias Felicia). There are no indicators that he is physically ill in the film. Yet he might still identify with the young victim. Being the most self destructive of the three, he takes more risks, leading him a dangerous situation the others have to get him out of. One could suggest that he at some level identifies with Violetta's sickness, a sickness that is not visible to the surroundings.

Hutcheon and Hutcheon also point to differences between the two illnesses: "What makes the social construction of AIDS different from that of other diseases is its rapidity, its early politicization, and its self-consciousness" (ibid.: 27). This awareness within the gay community is present in the film as well, in the sense that there is a link between TB and AIDS in the scene: Adam (alias Felicia) mimes the words of the TB-sick Violetta, as he sits on top of a bus with the writing 'AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME' on its side. The sentence, written by an unknown aggressor in Broken Hill, represents the prejudiced society that associates them with sickness and sexuality, present even as the main characters drive through the desolated desert. Adam (alias Felicia)'s show can be interpreted as a rebellion against a society that sees them in this manner, but as I have suggested, there are indicators that he himself might identify with being sick.

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<sup>37</sup> Hutcheon and Hutcheon write when AIDS was named, and the process leading up to it: "On 10 December 1981 the first medical article related to it appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, with an accompanying editorial; the Centers for Disease Control's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* had reported the outbreak of *Pneumocystis* (an unusual form of pneumonia) on 5 June 1982; by the next July the disease had its current acronym, AIDS" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 1996: 197).

There is no other drag show like it in *Priscilla*, the reason not only being the music. The visual aspect is impressive: the stage of the show being a bus in motion, the surroundings being the void desert contrasted by a clear blue sky. The landscape is typical of the road movie. Laderman writes how an “...aspect of the road movie’s iconography related to these highways is the vast, open landscape bordered by seductive horizons” (Laderman 2002: 14). He continues: “These expansive spaces obviously recall the Western’s compelling articulation of the frontier, and more generally the shifting nature/culture divide” (ibid.: 14). The film is tied to America through its association with the frontier, even if it is in a somewhat ridiculed version: After all, the main characters are driving on a human made road, and therefore not breaking new ground, though perhaps they do so symbolically.

The contrast between culture and nature is clearly illustrated in the scene. It is after all Verdi that is being played through the speakers, in the middle of nowhere. Also, the bus in itself does not belong there. One might even see the characters themselves as cultural artifacts, dependant as they seem to be on that which belongs to the culture they come from. Clark writes how the film team wanted the queens to look like aliens in a lunar landscape- the desert (Clark 1995: 31), which in a strange way would make them at home in it. It is, however, clear that the queer characters, here represented by Adam (alias Felicia), are very much at odds with their environment. Laderman points to the important nature-culture conflict, when writing “... as American journey narratives reveal, the reified, romanticized image of the wilderness bears within it the contradiction between nature and culture; that is, the need to both conquer and celebrate the wilderness” (Laderman 2002: 8). This is also present in *Priscilla*. When the queer main characters drive through the desert, one of them doing a drag show to Western classical music, this can be interpreted as an act of cultural conquest.

Damien Riggs points to the dangers of ignoring how members of a minority can act as representatives of the majority. He writes: “... white queer politics are never entirely outside of oppression, and the threat of co-option *by* white queers is the implicit flipside to critiques of the co-option *of* white queers” (ibid.: 113). In the case of *Priscilla*, one could suggest that the queer main characters do at times represent dominant ideology, thereby siding with the colonizers of the land. Here the opera functions as a link to Western culture, opposing the Australian desert and also the

people who originally lived there, and still do: The Aboriginal Australians, an invisible audience in the scene.

#### PRISCILLA THE BUS

Another link to Western culture is the object that is the stage of the scene: the bus. The bus is original in the sense that it is not the usual vehicle of the road movie, the most common one being the car. Laderman writes about the popularity of the car and its ties to "...individualized nature of such traveling" (Laderman 2002: 13). He writes that: "Mass automobile culture – that is, individual automobiles available to the mass population – invokes the rugged individualist mythology of the Old West, yet extends this mythology as a compelling expression of postwar mobility" (ibid.: 13). When the queer main characters drive off, leaving Sydney and their friends behind, the soundtrack is Village People's 'Go West', both connecting the journey to American popular music, to the Old West, and therefore to conquest of the wilderness. Also, that they are going to drive through the country on their own, comments on individual mobility within the huge country.

Why, then, a bus? Would not a car be sufficient? One could argue that this is a film where the characters tend to exaggerate and camp things up, and an ordinary car just would neither be extravagant enough, nor spacious enough for all their dresses. The choice might also be a result of the associations a bus carry, and its connection to collective traveling. Perhaps then, the three main characters can be seen as members of a community, here a queer subculture, to a greater extent than the characters in the usual road movie. Although they are only three, they function as representatives of the gay and transgender community, not only in Australia, but also internationally, revealed in their behavior, choice of clothes, line of work, and taste of music.

Not only are the characters defined as members of the queer community, so is the bus. Laderman writes how characters in road movies often become attached to their vehicle: "Cars and motorcycles often evolve in the narrative as a kind of prosthetic limb or 'buddy' for the driver" (ibid.: 18). In this case, the characters form a relationship to a bus, creating a persona for it: It is a queen, and her name is Priscilla<sup>38</sup>. In making her into a member of their community, the bus becomes a safe haven in the changing surroundings. Stuart Aitken and Christopher Lukinbeal write:

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<sup>38</sup> The producer reveals a similar attitude when retelling how they found the right bus. He writes: "A bus has arrived outside to audition for the role of Priscilla..." (Clark 1995: 68).

“The bus – replete with drag wardrobes, bar and vanity dressers – encapsulates a classifying frame within which the protagonists’ gag identity is reified in contrast to the homophobic environment through which they pass” (Aitken and Lukinbeal 1997: 350). When they are in the bus, the characters do not have to censor themselves in any way, which they have to do when they interact with other characters and communities, Bob (Bill Hunter) being the only exception. He helps them when Priscilla the bus breaks down, and travels with them on the bus, a sign that he is accepted by the three, linked to his openness towards the queer.

According to Brophy, it is not necessarily positive that the bus is a safe zone. He does not interpret the bus as a ‘sister’, but dehumanizes it: “But a harder look at the bus can liken it to a silver grub, hollowed out and filled with the negative neurosis of the three queens” (ibid.: 48). Seen in this light, the bus changes from being positively charged, but even then, the bus is a place where the queer characters are allowed to be whatever they want, without having to fear that their behavior will have consequences. In this sense, the bus resembles the stage of the opera, or the drag show stage; spaces where the usual rules do not apply. When Adam (alias Felicia) does drag on the roof using opera music, he connects the bus to the opera stage, a space where gender crossing is a part of the tradition. To get a more accurate understanding of the scene, it is necessary to go into its details.

#### ADAM (ALIAS FELICIA) PERFORMS VIOLETTA

The scene begins with the word ‘follie’, sung by a dramatic soprano, leaving no doubt that the voice belongs to the classical tradition. The word is thrown out rather than sung, starting at  $c^2$  and moving down a third. The camera is first directed towards a clear blue sky, then moved towards a shimmering silver cloth. This is what Michel Chion calls visual microrhythm: “By visual microrhythms I mean rapid movements on the image’s surface caused by things such as curls of smoke, rain, snowflakes...” (Chion 1994: 16). Here, the glimmering sparks from the silver cloth is added in order to create an effect.

Being a scene driven by music, it is natural to turn to writings about the music video. Vernallis investigates visual microrhythms in this context, and writes: “...the microrhythm draws attention to fine details and slight imperfections in the timbres of the song” (Vernallis 2004: 180). Here the microrhythm directs the focus towards clear, sparkly percussion sounds with no melodic content. The sounds are added by

the film producers, an auditive film effect functioning as a musical counterpart to the visual effect. This emphasizes how infiltrated the visual and the aural are. The image takes on the character of the music, in the sense that the whole scene is centered round Adam (alias Felicia)'s performance. At the same time, the soundtrack is formed to fit the image: the percussion sounds are added to emphasize certain aspects on screen.

Why are the visual and aural sparkles added? A key to answering this question is camp. The sound editors are camping up the scene by adding these effects, taking away a realistic aspect and adding artificiality, glamour and fun, traits that are all related to camp. The sparkles are present in all the major drag show numbers of the film, except the 'Finally' drag show. Aurally and visually the drag on the roof-scene is connected to these other performances through the sparkly sounds and images, emphasizing the camp aspects of the audiovisual combination. Also, through changing the original soundtrack, the sound editors are pulling the music towards the composed, causing it to lead the audience towards a specific interpretation, to a greater extent than it would have without the effects. Like traditional composed, non-diegetic music, these effects are not audible to the characters within the filmatic universe. Through the added effects the producers make the link between opera and the queer subculture more obvious than it actually is, leading the audience towards a specific point of view, and therefore assimilating identifications.

This can be interpreted as problematic, because of these kinds of identifications' connection to dominant ideologies. Riggs claims that camp as a political expression is not above questions of ethnicity, and writes: "... camp, as represented in films such as *Priscilla* is not inherently political, where the term 'political' suggests subversive or critical (Riggs 2006: 113). Even though camp in *Priscilla* is used politically, it is done so from a white point of view (ibid.: 113). Camp, then, just like the use of the opera excerpts, can become something that ties the queer characters to a position of privilege, setting them apart and above the surroundings.

As 'follie' is sung a second time, we see a close up of Adam (alias Felicia)'s face, miming the word in an exaggerated manner. The camp aspect is present both in his gestures and his immediate appearance. Wearing black and silver make up, he has silver stars all over his face and a silver shawl wrapped around his head. In the background there is more silver cloth. After the repetition of 'follie' the strings are introduced, first violins playing a melodic theme, while the other strings accompany,

creating a syncopated rhythmic motive. Strings and vocals continue in a dialog harmonically grounded in F major, before the first and second violins settle on the dominant c note, dramatically vibrating. The vocals land on a c as well, entering a recitative part, holding the c until the word ‘Parigi’. The violas, cellos and basses still contribute with a motive, different both rhythmically and tonally, not being confined to F major. Starting on c, these instruments move upwards in three note motives, touching on each half note until they end on a <sup>b</sup> at the word ‘Parigi’. Here, all the instruments come to a halt.



Figure 1.1: Folly! Folly! This is mad delirium: Adam (alias Felicia) dragging on the roof.

Visually, the camera starts zooming out when the instruments and the vocal settle on the c, making more of Adam (alias Felicia) visible. The viewer/listener sees his whole body, as he sits in a silver chair, later to be revealed as a huge high-heeled shoe. The glittering silver cloth behind him is stretched onto sticks, making the construction look like a kite with too much cloth. The viewer/listener still does not know where Adam (alias Felicia) is, but it is indicated that he is in motion, since the cloth is flapping continuously. This sound is heard beneath the music, making the situation an integral part of the soundtrack.

With the text line ‘A diletta sempre nuovi’ (‘Gaily in the world’s gay places’) the music moves out of its standstill. The soprano is singing a clearly defined melody, accompanied not only by strings, but also by woodwinds, brass and cymbals. The music is placed in A<sup>b</sup> major, foreshadowed by the strings ending on that note in the previous passage, yet harmonically far away from the F major of the introductory

part. Also visually this is a turning point change: The viewer/listener sees the front of the bus with Adam (alias Felicia) on the roof, as they are driving through the desert landscape under a clear blue sky. This is the point when it becomes clear where he actually is, and the absurdity of the situation is revealed.

The musical changes are constructed, since the recitative part continues in the original version of 'Follie...', moving into C minor. In this sense, it is a suitable place to make the cut, since it harmonically is a turning point also in the original. The following part, beginning with 'A diletti sempre nuovi', is from 'Sempre libera', but not from its introduction: in the original, the excerpt in the film follows a dramatic point, where the music and vocals move to a halt after the dramatic  $c^3$  in the vocals. Like in 'Follie...' the sound editors have chosen a suitable place in 'Sempre libera' to make a cut. Also, because of the revelation of the setting, there is the distraction of the image; the co-creation that goes on audiovisually opens up to other realities. New interpretations emerge when sound and vision meet, interpretations that differ from those done when only listening, or only seeing (Chion 1994, Brown 1994, Larsen 2005).

The merging of the two tracks from *La Traviata* is another example of how the compiled music is changed in order to fit with the action on screen, giving the music traits of the composed. Together music and image build up to the point where the stage of Adam (alias Felicia)'s drag show is revealed. Also, after the viewer/listener knows what is going on, the music and image are edited in a controlled fashion, to create a certain effect. As the energetic excerpt from 'Sempre libera' is played, the camera follows the bus, first showing its front from an aerial point of view, the bus driving on the dusty road through the desert landscape, called the Moon Plane. The next shot shows the bus from a distance, in a parallel shot. These shots are emphasizing the movement of the bus through the landscape, and they are typical of the road movie.

Laderman writes about the characteristics of the traveling shot in this manner: "Road movie traveling shots ... attempts to convey a visceral sense of traveling at a hyperhuman, modernized speed. As such, the point of view is usually located with the driver, or the car itself (though aerial shots and parallel 'side-by-side' shots are fairly common)" (Laderman 2002: 15). In this scene, it is the two latter kinds of shots from the quote that are used. The shots are examples of the road movies' fascination with the nature the vehicle moves through. Also, the way the shots are edited in the scene



as a whole is typical of the road movie. Laderman writes: "...traveling shots are often freely and creatively intercut, an expression of the multiple and shifting perspectives of the car and/or the driver. Especially during actual driving sequences, a montage-style editing often predominates" (ibid.: 16). This is relevant in to the scene, and the film, in several ways: both when it comes to the importance of music, and its exploration gender and sexuality.

The montage-style editing opposes continuity editing, underlining one of the road movies central aspects: The focus on "...traveling for traveling's sake" (ibid.:16). This ties the editing style towards the music video, a genre that does not focus on telling linear stories either. Vernallis writes how the image of the genre must conform to music through letting go of "...qualities associated with objects and adopt those of sounds" (Vernallis 2004: 177). She continues: "The music-video image, like sound, foregrounds the experience of movement and of passing time" (ibid.: 177). In the driving sequences in particular this dominates the road movies, as it does in this scene in *Priscilla*. Even though the music is adjusted to the image as well, the scene would not work without its soundtrack, since the Verdi excerpts hold the shots together, creating coherence.

The shifting perspectives of the traveling shot can also be tied to the portrayal of the Adam (alias Felicia) characters' sexuality and gender. He expresses both the masculine and the feminine in ways that do not align with the stereotypically appropriate behavior of the male sex. The close up of his face reveals a man wearing heavy make up, miming the words of a woman. From this the viewer/listener is likely to believe that the performer is in drag. However, as his body is revealed one sees that he is not wearing a dress. Here he is breaking with the norm of the drag show, since drag is defined by cross-dressing. Still, he drags in other ways: the make up is culturally coded as feminine, and the tight, glittering silver costume can be interpreted as an expression of feminine glamour. Also, through miming the words sung by a woman, there is an identification with the female voice and therefore her body.

Adam (alias Felicia) is therefore without doubt playing out being a woman. Perhaps then, the usual definition of drag is too narrow, not bringing up the other ways in which it is possible to imitate the gender of the opposing sex. One could suggest that the drag show in this scene is actually more provoking than the traditional, since the drag artist in this case obviously is male. In taking on that which is culturally coded as feminine and leaving the obvious dress out of it, one could say

the contrast between the sex and the imitated gender becomes clearer, highlighting the focus on the imitative aspect of gender. According to Butler, when functioning as subversive, drag challenges the supposedly 'natural' and 'original' aspects of heterosexuality (Butler 1993:125). Toril Moi questions this, stating that drag is only efficient because of the contrast between the sex the artist is born with, and the gender she or he plays out (Moi 1998). In other words, according to Moi drag is only efficient because the biological sex is an original, which Butler claims it is not (Butler 1990).

In this case the artist makes no attempts camouflaging his male body. A relevant concept to employ in this context is androgyny. Robert Walser writes about androgyny in regard to heavy metal: "Androgyny in heavy metal is the adaptation by male performers of the elements of appearance that has been associated with women's function as objects of the male gaze" (Walser 1993: 124). He writes how the adaptation can have a liberating function on the performers: "Androgyny offers male performers (and vicariously, male fans) the chance to play with color, movement, flamboyance, and artifice, which can be a tremendous relief from the rigidity expected of them as men" (ibid.: 133). Adam (alias Felicia) expresses a similar playfulness through his camp performance, but androgyny in this case means toning down his act compared to other drag shows in the film. In one sense, Adam (alias Felicia)'s drag show can be seen as courageous because of the movement towards androgyny, since he is breaking with the norm of the drag show.

However, another aspect needs to be taken into the discussion. As I wrote in the introduction, the Australian desert is considered a male territory. Young writes how male pop stars in music videos "... have generally preferred to sing to the desert, ocean or sky rather than to an audience of adoring fans" (Young 2004: 174). The reason for this is that the stage is associated with the arts and homosexual men performing, and have therefore been avoided by Australian male pop stars (ibid.: 173-174). Seen in this light, Adam (alias Felicia) clearly breaks new ground when he does drag in the middle of the desert, dress or no dress. He challenges the norm of dominant Australian society, by bringing the show off the stage, where it belongs according to this culture, and into the desert, where it does not belong.

Even though he has no audience to his show, homophobia is present through the earlier mentioned writing on the side of the bus. Their 'sister' Priscilla has been marked, violated, and since the bus functions as an extended member of their

community, so have they. The words create a contrast, representing hostility, aggression and prejudice against the queer subculture described in the film. Even here, the main characters are reminded of reality, those that do not accept them, and from which constraints they wish to be freed. In this sense, Adam (alias Felicia)'s private *La Traviata* drag show can be understood as a rebellious act, a refusal to give into the judgment that the letters on the bus represent. At the same time this is a passive protest, since there are no one within the fictional universe to see his show. There is, however, a listening audience: the two other main characters inside the bus.

In "Trans Glam *Gender Magic in the Film Musical*" Lloyd Whitesell writes about the three archetypes the princess, the bride and the showgirl (Whitesell 2006:267). The courtesan Violetta is an example of the showgirl, just like Adam (alias Felicia). Whitesell writes: "Showgirls are lifted on globes, pillars, and skyscrapers, stacked on fountains, hung from chandeliers, and fixed to the wall in decorative patterns" (ibid.: 267). The character of Adam (alias Felicia) is placed in a high heeled silver shoe on top of a bus, exalted above the ground not only once, but twice. The Diva and the showgirl seem to share common ground, not only are they both literally above the ground and their audience, they are also alone, facing the danger of being demonized because of their power. Being interpreted as monstrous is also something Adam (alias Felicia) also experiences, particularly clear when he meets the miners.

#### MADNESS AND EUPHORIA ON THE ROOF

Whitesell writes how Adam (alias Felicia) expresses "camp hauteur" (ibid.: 274). 'Hauteur' has its opposite in 'euphoria', the prior linked to elevated self-importance, and the latter to exalted well-being. Although Adam (alias Felicia) expresses hauteur, using camp to turn himself into a showgirl and a Diva through the role of Violetta, he also expresses euphoria. There is something clearly joyful, although somewhat manic, about his performance, a mix expressed in the lyrics that contain both sentences like 'this is mad delirium' and 'ever seeking new joys'. The kite-like decoration, the height over the ground and the speed all give associations to flying, linking the scene to the state of euphoria.

The vocal performance in the short excerpt from 'Sempre libera' can be interpreted to indicate a similar mix between euphoria and madness. During four repetitions of 'dee volare', the melody line is particularly rich on chromatic steps, the four notes of each repetition moving downwards in half step intervals.

Between the last repetition of ‘dee volare’ and ‘il pensier’ (meaning ‘ever seeking newer joys’) the vocal –singing on ‘ah’—is rich on ornamentation, and can be interpreted as manic laughter. As Koestenbaum writes: “No one believes the operatic laughter: horrid, hollow” (Koestenbaum 1993: 206). McClary writes how male opera composers portrayed madness in women in a certain manner during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, giving one example from each century. She writes this about the way the mad women are presented: “...their dementia is delineated musically through repetitive, ornamental, or chromatic excess...” (McClary 2002: 81)<sup>39</sup>. Violetta seems to be portrayed in this manner here. She also carries another trait of the madwomen: being a courtesan, her behavior is tied to sexual excess. I have explored earlier in the reading, Hutcheon and Hutcheon point out how sexual excess also was connected to TB when the opera was written.

McClary writes about another aspect of the presentation of mad women: “...normative procedures representing reason are erected around them to serve as protective frames preventing ‘contagion’” (ibid.: 81). An example of this kind of framing would be the presence of a male spectator within the scene, representing “...the normal, the bars of reason that protect the spectator from the monster” (ibid.: 85). A man creates the image or sound of the mad woman, and together with the visible male audience in the scene there is a double framing of the female character.

In *La Traviata* the first framing is by Giuseppe Verdi, constructing the Violetta character in a manner that follows the operatic tradition of the portrayal of mad women. The second framing happens as the voice of Alfredo appears, functioning as an auditive barrier between the audience and the singing Violetta on stage. What then about *Priscilla*? In the drag scene on the roof Alfredo never sings, even though the music continues after ‘il pensier’: In *Priscilla* Violetta continues passages of manic laughter, even wilder and higher stretching. In this sense, a barrier between the music and the audience is taken away in the scene when comparing it to the opera. However, there is an audience within the fictional universe: Bernadette and Tick (alias Mitzy), who are inside the bus, seemingly involuntarily listening to the show.

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<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the rules are different in instrumental music. McClary writes: “When these same strategies appear in instrumental music, they are regarded as indications not of psychopathology but of genius” (McClary 1991: 82).

Several interpretations of the setting are available. The audience within the film is not the conventional male representing reason, but a woman that used to be a man, and a bisexual man that likes to dress up as women. One could say that the film queers the setup that McClary writes about, also since the director of the film also is unconventional, being gay. Neither the main characters nor the film maker seem to be afraid of the mad, TB-sick woman, which seems to be typical of the gay fascination with opera, if one is to believe Koestenbaum: “It kills her to sing, and it kills us to listen. She is contagious. From Violetta, we catch the opera bug” (Koestenbaum 1993: 206). The gay opera queen, in this case Adam (alias Felicia), is not frightened of getting infected, opposing him to the traditional male, as described by McClary. Since Adam (alias Felicia) is imitating Violetta’s singing, he takes on the role of the madwoman as well. There does not seem to be a functioning filter between his performance of Violetta, of the opera Diva and us as an audience.

However, perhaps the scene contains a different kind of framing, not concerned with mad women, but with sexuality, a framing that might make the film less queering than it seems at first. Both the performing character of the scene, and the audience inside the bus are played by heterosexual males. One could suggest that this creates a distance between the characters of the film and the audience, a distance that allows a mainstream audience to identify with the characters without being ‘infected’ by homosexuality and transgenderism. Also, since the gayness of the director is hidden, it is not likely to represent a danger to the heterosexual audience, and the queer framing of the film might go by unnoticed, even though it is there. McClary writes: “The mediating filter of masculinity creates something like the grilles that used to be put over the windows of asylums at the time when gentlefolk liked to witness the spectacle of insanity for entertainment” (McClary 2002: 89). In this case, it is the mediating filter of heterosexuality that creates the grilles between the characters of the fictional universe and the audience outside it, and the insanity is concerned with female hysteria expressed in the drag performer. McClary continues: “These grilles permitted voyeuristic access and yet ensured security” (ibid.: 89). Here lays one of the most pessimistic interpretation of this scene and of *Priscilla* in general: The drag queens and transgender presented as the mad women of today: terrifying in their unconventionality, contagious, and dangerous to the extent that they need to be ‘framed’ by heteronormativity in order to be watched by an audience that enjoys observing the weirdness of the Other.

The main characters do however represent more than just the Other. As I've mentioned they can also be seen to represent certain privileged parts of the mainstream, being white males of the Western world. As Riggs writes, belonging to a minority does not necessarily place anyone beyond being an oppressor (Riggs 2006). This is perhaps most clearly expressed and in the scene where the main characters meet the Aboriginal Australians in the desert. I now wish to turn to this sequence, in order to continue my exploration of music and identity in the setting of the Australian desert.

## THE DESERT CAMPFIRE

Laderman writes that during many important scenes in the road movie, the main characters are not physically in motion:

Most often the sense of some wilderness beyond culture becomes heightened in road movies with sundry detours, motels, diners, and gas stations. These various pit stops are often exploited for significant narrative developments (Laderman 2002: 15).

*Priscilla* is no different, and the scene sequence I will explore here is an example of significant action taking place as the main characters are stationary. The sequence holds two scenes, tied together by shared location. Unlike in the examples in the quote, the stop is not done voluntarily: The bus has broken down, and the drag artists are stranded in the desert. As organizer, Tick (alias Mitzy) pushes the two others to start rehearsing a number in the drag show they will perform in Alice Springs. As they are going through their dancer routine of 'I will survive', a man secretly observes them from behind the bus. They all scream when discovering each other, but the man, whose name is Alan (Alan Dargin), turns out to be friendly. He takes them to a gathering of people, Aboriginal Australians like himself.

## ABORIGINAL BLUES UNDER A FULL MOON

The first scene in the sequence begins with a fade in of guitar tunes and vocals, as the viewer/listener sees the full moon in the sky. The camera moves to a close-up of the guitars, before passing to people sitting around the campfire, moving to the music. This is diegetic music, coming from a given source in the film and being a part of the action. However, it does resemble non-diegetic music, in the sense that its function as

atmosphere creator is particularly important. The song is not well known, and whether the music is compiled or composed is uncertain<sup>40</sup>, again underlining it as an example where rigid categorizations regarding film music do not hold.

Three guitarists play a blues tune, moving through a three-chord pattern on acoustic guitar. One of the guitarists is singing as well, a simple melody moving within the range of an octave. The vocalist does not sound like a trained musician, singing out of pitch. Although blues traditionally has different criteria than other genres when it comes to pitch, the singing does not sound deliberate. Also, his voice is thin, and the words are not well articulated, making it difficult to understand the lyrics. The audible words are: "...be alright, just bein' alright, when I've been alright, meetin' you... by my side", indicating that it is a light love song. In this sense the lyrics are aligned with the guitar playing when it comes to the mood it triggers: One that makes its listeners at ease.

That the three musicians play blues might be seen as an expression of how contemporary Aboriginal Australians are influenced by a number of musical genres, like country rock among the elder and hard rock and reggae among the younger (Kibby and Neuenfeldt 1998: 70). The scene therefore accurately shows something about the Aboriginal Australians' music of today: they are influenced by genres outside that which is considered their tradition. Kibby and Neuenfeldt write:

Contemporary Aboriginal music might more usefully be seen in the global terms of groups at the margin appropriating the centre's practices, to take back cultural autonomy, or advance extra-musical agendas, in complex and often contradictory ways" (ibid.: 70)

Here there is a parallel to what happens when the queer subcultures adopt mainstream music and make it their own. In these cases, the groups create their own musical expression, based on mainstream music. However, the white audience listening to more modern Aboriginal Australian music ignores this aspect. The non-Aboriginal listener considers genres like hard rock and reggae as inauthentic when it comes to describing Aboriginality (ibid.: 70). The next scene in the sequence will reveal that the filmmakers of *Priscilla* shared this sentiment when making the film.

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<sup>40</sup> The song is not mentioned in the closing credits, separating it from compiled songs in the film.



Figure 1.2: Playing the Aboriginal Australian blues: Three musicians around the campfire.

The Aboriginal Australians' choice of genre in the campfire scene is worth noticing. Because blues originally was played by the poor black working class of the US, an identification with the suppressed is suggested, one that does not follow borders. It is an example of the American influence in Australia, also among the Aboriginal Australians. Another aspect of blues is also worth looking into: Symbolically there is a link between blues and the Australian white male. Blues is a genre that emphasizes traditional masculinity and the hardship of being the bluesman (Bennett 2005: 7), giving associations to the bushmen, both types contrasting queers starkly. When performing blues the musicians are more aligned with hegemonic Australian masculinity than the main-characters. The choice of music therefore points to a potential conflict between the Aboriginal Australians of the scene and the queer main characters.

The blues tune intertwines with the voices of the crowd, underlining its functions as a community creator. Andy Bennett writes: "Music...can bond displaced peoples, effectively bridging the geographic distance between them and providing a shared sense of collective identity articulated by a symbolic sense of community" (ibid.: 4). In this case music creates a shared sense of identity, but contrary to the quotation these displaced people are actually in their homeland. However, in a symbolic sense it does not exist anymore. When the British colonized Australia, they declared the land 'Terra Nullius', "... the 'land of no one'" (Riggs 2006: 18), meaning that "... the sovereignties of the more than two hundred Indigenous nations that



existed in Australia before colonisation were denied” (ibid.: 18). The Aboriginal Australians were left with no rights regarding their land.

Several short shots show the main characters and their new friend Alan walk towards the camp. One of the shots gives an overview of the site, revealing people sitting on the back of trucks or on the ground, around four small fires. As the musicians become aware of the newcomers, they stop playing abruptly in the middle of an instrumental passage. Kassabian writes: “Source music<sup>41</sup> rarely matches cues with the rest of the film” (Kassabian 2001: 44), and continues: “The narrative event must be extraordinary in order for source music to attend to it, and even then the music responds to the event rather than matching it” (ibid.: 44). This happens in the scene: The musicians stop playing when the main-characters appear. Their reaction creates a dramatic effect, the silence emphasizing the tension of the moment.

About simultaneously as the music halts, people stop talking, and move their attention towards the newcomers. The ‘otherness’ of the main characters seems to be evaluated by the crowd, and it is not clear whether or not they will be accepted. In addition to being white, the main characters stand out from the norm in their appearance, Adam (alias Felicia) in his yellow and black tights and red jacket, and Bernadette simply looking the way she does, like a man in drag, although she is actually now a woman. The Aboriginal Australians, so often representing the Other, are now in their own element (the desert) and also outnumber the white Australians, who on their hand are helplessly stranded in the Australian Outback. A rather terrified-looking Tick (alias Mitzy) says to Alan: “I think we just crashed a party”. Alan just laughs, saying: “No, you’ll be alright”. At the same time the musicians start playing another verse of the blues tune, and the crowd around the camp begin talking again.

The return of diegetic music can be interpreted as a way of depicting the Aboriginal Australians’ acceptance of the newcomers, the music connecting the main characters to the rest of the crowd. They are definitely still outsiders, though, sitting separated from the others. Tick (alias Mitzy) smiles and waves to Alan, who is standing together with some of his other friends. A connection between the two characters is suggested, and will be developed to some small extent in what follows.

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<sup>41</sup> According to Kassabian, the term ‘source music’ does resemble the diegetic music-term: “...both terms refer to music whose production is within the narrative world of the film” (Kassabian 2001: 43-44).

As the music ends, the main characters applaud loudly, giving their praise to the musicians. Tick (alias Mitzy) says it is their turn to entertain, again emphasizing the importance of music in the interaction between the rest of the crowd and the queer characters.

The main character's contribution to the entertainment around the campfire focuses on another aspect of music in relation to identity: its ability to open up to exploration of gender and sexuality. Bennett writes: "If popular music has become a central means for the framing of discourses concerning national culture and identity, then it carries a similar currency in relation to the construction of gender identities and gendered places" (Bennett 2005: 6). This becomes clear as the main characters do their show. Just like music binds together people that have their ethnicity in common, it also connects individuals that are outside the norm in questions concerning sexuality and gender. However, this does not mean that music necessarily connects two different kinds of minorities, like in this case, one defined by sexuality and gender, the other by ethnicity. This will be looked at more thoroughly in the following scene in the sequence.

## DRAG IN THE DESERT

Before starting the reading, I will introduce the soundtrack on its own, since it carries meanings worth having in mind when interpreting the scene.

### GLORIA GAYNOR'S 'I WILL SURVIVE'

'I will survive' is one of the best-known compiled songs in the film. The song is a part of mainstream popular culture canon, and has in addition to the queer subculture been specifically tied to feminist movements. It came out in 1978, performed by Gloria Gaynor and written by Freddie Perren og Dino Dekakis. The song became a huge hit both in the US and Europe, topping the charts on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1980 it received a Grammy Award for best Disco Song.

Belonging to the disco genre, 'I will survive' was popular in the gay community from the release. Gloria Gaynor was then already a "...disco diva..." with a strong position in the gay subculture (Brophy 2008: 40). The song also reveals a sentiment often present in tunes taken up into that community: "...the triumph and

liberation of the downtrodden” (Dickinson 2004: 176). During the beginning of the 1980s, the song became a gay anthem as AIDS became a part of the subculture’s reality. Brophy writes that the song had a “...part-elegiac part testimonial function as the track shifted from musically recalling a brighter area of wild abandon to lyrically expressing a rage for life in the face of a then-mysterious illness decimating a community” (ibid.: 40). In other words, there is a seriousness underlying the track’s incorporation in the queer communities, which is not present in the upbeat disco song’s immediate appearance.

According to Brophy, the use of ‘I will survive’ in *Priscilla* does not do it justice. He writes that the scene is: “...queasily mocking the song’s subcultural trajectory of pain and pathos” (ibid.: 41). Such an interpretation seems only to consider camp’s most easily recognizable traits, such as its emphasize on the artificial (Sontag 1994: 53), its exaggeration of glamour, and love for that which is considered feminine (Maddison 2000). The camp aspect of the campfire scene might be considered to be mocking, but this point of view does not take into consideration the love for the object or person that is being camped, as well as the more serious undertones of camp. It does not recognize that camp’s recycling of the object is a way to make it one’s own, neither that the focus on artificiality can have a political function. The queering of the object can be seen as a form of resistance towards the dominant ideology of society, and Brophy’s interpretation of the camp surface therefore in itself comes across as superficial.

I now wish to turn to the performance and investigate in closer detail what kinds of meanings that appear, as the song is recycled through the gay and transgender subculture. As the reading will reveal, the reshaping of the song also carries with it traits from the dominant ideologies of society, somewhat more hidden behind the colorful auditive and visual surface<sup>42</sup>.

#### THE CAMPFIRE SHOW

The scene begins as the viewer/listener sees an outdated red and white tape recorder with a 1950s design. It has been decorated with golden stars and shimmering white drops of either glass or plastic. Dickinson writes that the gay subculture has a “...partially for things that are maybe out of date, which have fallen by the wayside

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<sup>42</sup> The scene is out on youtube, with the heading ‘The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert – I will survive’: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DJC-ECU8IE> [Viewing Date: 12.04.09]

and this, again, shows support for the neglected underdog” (Dickinson 2004: 176). The tape recorder can be read as a symbol of this, being old and out of fashion. Also, the way the main characters have changed the object by decorating it in an exaggerated manner is a typical trait of the gay and transgender subculture. Again, this is an example of camp: the downgraded object is changed in alignment with camp aesthetics, and thereby new meanings are created<sup>43</sup>. The setting is worth noticing in relation to camp: the drag show takes place around a *campfire*. The filmmakers’ choice is probably not coincidental. As I wrote in the introduction, the word ‘camp’ used to mean homosexual male in Australia. In doing drag around the campfire, the whole setting is queered, and made into a playground for the drag queens.

A masculine hand with long fingernail turns on the tape recorder, the hand belonging to Tick (alias Mitzy). During the dramatic instrumental piano introduction of ‘I will survive’ the camera moves up his bright yellow flowery outfit, passes his fake breasts and stops at his face. As Gloria Gaynor starts singing ‘First I was afraid,’ Tick (alias Mitzy) turns his head and looks straight into the camera while miming the words. He wears a lot of make-up and a wig of flowers. His masculine facial traits stand out, the result being a strange mix between the masculine body and the exaggerated feminine appearance. This gets even more intense as he mimes the words of a woman, uttered by a female voice.

Earlier in the film, Tick (alias Mitzy) actually sings while practicing on this particular number. Why he chooses a tape recorder to play the original track now might be interpreted in several ways. Erik Steinskog writes: “The voice seems to break with the enchantment that drag gives visually, probably a reason why many drag shows, when trying to copy exact, use karaoke on the soundtrack [my translation]”<sup>44</sup> (Steinskog 2008: 165). In this case the exact copy is not sought after, for it is clear from the beginning that parody is central in the drag number, and that Tick (alias Mitzy) is not trying to be ‘real’ in his attempts to perform as a woman. However, it is clear that he and the others seek the magic that drag creates, and the use of the Gaynor soundtrack adds glamour to the show.

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<sup>43</sup> The bus is camped in a similar fashion, as Adam (alias Felicia) paints it lavender. The reason for the paint might be the ‘Aids fuckers go home’ message on its side, nevertheless Adam (alias Felicia) uses camp to deal with it. “Nothing brightens the day like a new frock,” he says, indicating the sisterly relationship with the bus.

<sup>44</sup> This quote is translated from Norwegian: “Stemmen synes å bryte den fortryllesen drag gir visuelt, en grunn, sannsynligvis, for hvorfor mange dragshows om man forsøker å etterligne eksakt, også er karaoke på lydsporet” (Steinskog 2008: 165).

Another interpretation of why Tick (alias Mitzy) does not sing here, is linked to the effect it has when a man mimes to the words of a woman: the contrast between the sound and image underlines the artificiality of the show, and challenges both gender and sexuality. Although she does not write specifically about the sound-image split, Butler's writing about drag is useful. According to Butler, drag highlights the performative nature of gender: "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*" (ibid.: 187). One powerful way of imitating gender, is to imitate the voice of the opposite sex, which this scene is an example of. Although drag might support the heteronormative in certain cases (Butler 1993), the queering aspect of drag dominates the scene; its ability to reveal the constructed aspect of gender and sexuality. Hawkins writes:

Implicit in drag, the act of mimicry accentuates the conflict between the body and its gendered representation. And, in a sense, it is the coupling of aural and visual codes that forms a substantial part of the pleasure derived from the musical sound (Hawkins 2004: 12).

In *Priscilla*, mimicry involves both lip sync and exaggerated bodily movements accompanying the music. Here the combination of music and image is one that results in a camp parody, seemingly lighthearted, but nonetheless with political undertones.

The fact that the act happens on a screen, adds another layer to the show, with regards to authenticity. Davison writes how lip-synching can lead to demystification (Davison 2007: 120). The reason is the split between sound and image: "...the apparent 'reality' of the diegesis is challenged through disengaging the causal link between sound and image. The result: It may *all* be an illusion" (ibid.: 134). In the case of the drag show, the play with illusion is central. The audience, neither those inside nor outside the diegesis, believes that the drag show is 'real' in the sense that the performers are actually singing, for it is obvious that they are not. Davison writes: "We watch (and listen!) as music – particularly sung performances – assists in luring film characters into seemingly unfathomable spaces" (ibid.: 143). In *Priscilla*, both the audience within the diegesis and the film audience are led to a space where it is allowed to play with gender and sexuality. The music transports the audience in this manner, the performer playing an important part in the process, acting out a role that resembles that of the siren, the seductress that uses music in order to get what she wants.

Glimmering percussion is added behind the beginning vocals, accompanied by sparkling silver raining down behind Tick (alias Mitzy). The same percussion sounds are added at the introduction of the second verse, and the first chorus, together with the glitter on screen. In other words, the camp aspect is made more obvious; the scene is made more glamorous and artificial through the added visual and aural effects. Just as in the scene with Adam (alias Felicia) dragging on the roof, the added sounds push the compiled song towards the composed, bringing with it assimilating identifications. The viewer/listener is thereby led towards a certain position, one that is more ideologically charged. The camp aspect so prominent in the scene might seem like just fun, parodic perhaps, revealing the construction of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that camp is the fighting strategy of the white queer specifically, and thereby it creates a distance between the main characters and the Aboriginal Australians. Riggs writes: “Whilst it may be true that camp challenges particular aspects of social order, as do queer politics and theory, they largely do so from the perspective of white queers, and with the agendas set by white queers” (Riggs 2006: 113). He writes that camp does not necessarily work in this manner, but in this scene camp has the main characters’ perspective. The campfire is ‘taken over’ as the queens perform, making them resemble the oppressors of the land. As the scene evolves, this aspect will become even clearer.

The first verse does not have a clear beat, and is carried forwards by the vocals. In the background electric guitar and saxophone move around the melody line of the vocal without any direction of their own. Also, the percussion only contributes with noise. The vocals have like the other instruments an uneven tempo, partly sung, partly spoken. They tell the story of an ‘I’-person that has been left by a ‘you’-person, and how the storyteller first was overwhelmed with fear. Then she turned the situation: “But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong, and I grew strong, and I learned how to get along”. The vocal expression changes at this point, Gaynor leaving the dreamy, airy way of singing towards the more forceful and direct. Tick (alias Mitzy)’s face changes as he mimes these words, exaggerating the mood the singer acts out. Simultaneously the camera starts zooming out, an example of image following sound.

As the second verse begins, the lyrics change their nature, turning from past time to present. The ‘you’-person of the past has reappeared, and the ‘I’-person tells the other off, stating how well she manages on her own. There is also a major

difference in instrumentation: With the second verse the beat begins, and the guitar starts playing a syncopated rhythm. The camera shows all three main characters in a full body shot, and they start dancing as the second verse is introduced, underlining precisely that it is a dancing track. The film version of the song is actually faster than the original: In the film the fourth note equals 121-122, whereas in the original it equals 116-117. This change links the song to the feminine, since faster beat associates the music more to the body and dance. Queer communities generally embrace the disco genre, an example of how the subcultures takes on that which is not respected. It speaks of the culture's celebration of the body and its identification with the feminine, disco being considered a feminine genre (McClary 2002).

The clothes of the characters are inspired by the 1970s as well. The queens are wearing bellbottoms, the outfits having bright colors and unusual patterns, being much wilder than what the clothes Adam (alias Felicia) wore on the roof. However, the androgynous aspect is present here as well, since they neither wear dresses nor long-haired wigs. Again, the location of the desert might explain why the feminine aspect is toned down, and the playful and humorous is emphasized. The landscape is coded as masculine, which might somewhat influences the choice of dressing down.



Figure 1.3: Aliens in the Desert: Drag around the campfire, in front of a 'live' audience.

During the second verse and into the chorus, the camera alters between showing the main characters and the audience, first showing the serious face of an old man, then a child starting to smile, and then Alan beginning to clap his hands together. The shots are not edited according to the beat of music, even though the

scene clearly is driven by its soundtrack. The images of the Aboriginal Australians show how the audience responds to the performance, revealing the movement from skepticism to embracement and even participation in the show. When the first chorus comes to an end, the shot reveals larger parts of the campsite, and most of the audience in the shot is clapping. As the bridge begins with its clear melodic line played by strings, a didgeridoo player joins the music, playing a rhythmic pattern that infiltrates with the rhythm of 'I will survive'.

#### ABORIGINALITY, MUSIC AND DRAG

Here the film falls into a stereotypical representation of Aboriginal Australians. Kibby and Neuenfeldt write how the didgeridoo "...has become the dominant symbol of Aboriginality" (Kibby and Neuenfeldt 1998: 67), and how this does not give an accurate picture of the instruments' position within the culture:

The didgeridoo's role as primary signifier of Aboriginality is a recent construct, at odds with the instrument's distribution through Aboriginal Australia, where its use was originally restricted to Arnhem Land, later spreading to the Kimberley and the Gulf' (ibid.: 66).

The strong link between the didgeridoo and Aboriginality is not one that comes from within the culture itself: it is created by white Australians, and has become a part of the film music language. Both the sound of the instrument and its look have played a role in the construction, and not only made it into "...the primary signifier of Aboriginality, but also an indicator of 'otherness', a signifier of a primitive spirituality and of an exotic landscape" (ibid.: 67). All these meanings are present in the drag scene. When adding the didgeridoo, the filmmakers probably wanted to make the Aboriginal Australians contribute in an authentic manner, through using an instrument tied to their heritage. Ironically the guitar playing in the beginning of the scene sequence is more 'authentic' in the sense that it reveals more about the Aboriginal Australians' way of expressing themselves musically today. As the scene develops, more problems regarding the presentation of Aboriginal Australians arise, as the following verse of 'I will survive' reveals.

Tick (alias Mitzy) notices the vigorous dancing of Alan, and states: "I've got an idea". In the next shot, which is also the beginning of another verse, Alan is revealed in a silver frock, wearing tacky jewelry and silver tights. This is an example of how the logic of music overrides that of the narrative linear logic: There is no time



for Alan to get into drag. Davison writes: “Whether sourced within the fictional world of the film or outside it, the continuity offered by music cues can assist in distracting the viewers from disjunction between shots” (Davison 2007: 124-125). This aspect is clear here, where there is an actual time jump between the shots. Because of music’s different relation to time, the viewer/listener does not react to the fact that Alan changes appearance from one second to the next. The scene is not a filmed ‘live’ drag show, but an edited one trespassing the 2 min 08 sec the track lasts. The music allows this to happen smoothly, revealing that the usual demands concerning storytelling are not present. In this sense, the scene is more similar to a music video in its structure, where the non-narrative dominates (Vernallis 2004: 3).

Alan seems highly enthusiastic about his participation in the drag show, smiling broadly and dancing with much energy, if somewhat uncoordinated, to the music. Just as the Aboriginal Australians are participating aurally in the show, one of them is now actually performing as well.

Though the Aboriginal man is played by noted musician Alan Dargin, another Aboriginal actor plays the didjeridu in this scene’s soundtrack. Dargin’s character joins in the performance in a baggy print frock, in an approximation of ‘drag’. The didjeridu is used in the same way as a cheap frock, as a sight gag to emphasise the clash of cultures, romanised into a difference in style that can be tolerated, or even accommodated (Kibby and Neuenfeldt: 69).

Although I do not understand the problem with Alan Dargin not playing the didjeridu, although he knows how to, the quote states something about the difficulty of using the instrument in a setting like this. Since the didjeridu has become a cliché, it does not really serve any purpose and becomes a visual and aural object without any real meaning to it. Also, Alan’s role in the drag show is problematic.

First, it is not his idea to join the show. That Alan obviously enjoys himself is clear, nevertheless the main characters are responsible of his participation. They get him to act in a certain manner, fitting with their perspective. Lumby has a more positive interpretation of the scene, pointing to the fact that Gaynor is black, and that it is Alan’s “... probable gay position that interest Tony/Mitzy” (Lumby 1998: 87). She continues: “The drag queens are gay but it’s their white skin which stands out in a group of Aboriginal people. This slippage disrupts any conventional us-them reading of the scene” (ibid.: 88). Lumby points to questions concerning ethnicity, but overlooks the consequences it has. Not only are the main characters white, they also become representatives of the white majority, as shown in the added ‘Aboriginality’

in the music. When incorporating Alan in their show, they embrace him in a white queer setting, which is problematic. Riggs writes how the representation of Alan in drag "... reads Indigenous experience *through* white queer experience (and thus in effect co-opts Indigenous experience into white queer experience)" (Riggs 2006: 11-12). Like with the music, the performance of Alan gets filtered through certain aesthetic preferences, in this case camp, and therefore might be read as an example of colonization. When Lumby writes "... the drag queens have their own claim to the status of the 'other'" (Lumby 1998: 87), she overlooks that the oppressed also can act as oppressors (Riggs 2006), in this case as colonizers of the desert.

The third verse does not only introduce Alan as a drag artist, it also contains further participation aurally from what is supposed to be the audience. The sound of clapsticks appears, the traditional Aboriginal Australian instruments hitting every fourth note. Just like the didgeridu, clapsticks have come to symbolize Aboriginality to the world outside their culture, not reflecting Aboriginal Australian music of today. Also, the regular fourth note is not even reflecting 'tribal' Aboriginal Australian music, where the beat usually is non-metrical (Kibby and Neuenfeldt 1998: 66). Again, the filmmakers have used musical clichés in their attempt to join the two minorities.

In cinematic representations of Aboriginality, various conventions of presentation act as musical and social shorthands, glossing over the complexity of contemporary Aboriginality and limiting Aboriginal cultural production to circulation of commodified images or sounds (ibid.: 68)

There is no doubt that the drag queens are 'fake' in the sense that they are dressed up in an 'over the top' manner, somewhat resembling women, but not quite. In this sense the make-believe is 'real' since it is easily recognizable, perhaps most clearly shown by the fact that Tick (alias Mitzy) is pretending to sing 'I will survive', while the audience in and outside the diegesis hears Gloria Gaynor's voice. The presentation of the Aboriginal Australians does not contain the same awareness of construction, since they are presented in a stereotypical way aurally, one which is supposed to represent 'authentic' Aboriginality.

No one actually plays clapsticks in the crowd, and the sound of the instrument has been added in post-production. Similarly, traditional Aboriginal Australian chanting is added in the fourth verse, the voices singing on the dominant e note of the song, but no one in the crowd are actually filmed while singing. This underlines even

further how constructed the supposed 'Aboriginality' of the soundtrack is. The musicians in the beginning of the sequence actually did play blues, again revealing that this scene more accurately showed what 'Aboriginality' means today. It is as if the focus of the filmmakers shifts as the drag show begins: they let the queens take over and in doing so, the Aboriginal Australians are left with no power, reduced to stereotypes both visually and aurally.

To understand why the Aboriginal Australians are portrayed in this manner, I wish to make a jump from Australia to America. When addressing the Western film genre, Gorbman writes how the Hollywood Indian after 1950 was presented "...either as bloodthirsty marauders or romanticized noble savages" (Gorbman 2000: 235), and how these two types had their own musical signature: the violent one represented most commonly by a tom-tom rhythmic drumming, and the noble one "...typically featuring modal melody played legato by a flute or string, accompanied by sweet pastoral harmonies" (ibid.: 235). The Aboriginal Australians in the film are not presented as savages, but they are romanticized and represented through musical codes that have less to do with their culture and more to do with the white interpretation of the Other.

When explaining why stereotypes regarding the representation of the Indian developed, Gorbman writes:

Part of the answer is that they<sup>45</sup> descend from a Euro-American all-purpose shorthand for representing primitive or exotic people. Musical representations of Turks, Chinese, Scots and generic peasants since the late eighteenth century have tended towards pentatonicism, rhythmic repetitiveness, and open fourths or fifths (ibid.: 236).

The Australian filmmakers have adopted some of these Euro-American techniques in representing the Other. The rhythmic repetitiveness is distinct in the way the Aboriginal Australians supposedly contribute to the music: the clapsticks and vocals are performed in manners that emphasize the rhythm, and the rhythmic patterns stay the same throughout the musical number. The open fifth is also used: Aboriginal Australian chanting is one of the dominant notes of the song. The stereotypical way that Aboriginality is presented in the film is in other words part of a long tradition, rooted in Western musical tradition and its representation of the Other.

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<sup>45</sup> She is here referring to musical stereotypes.

In 'I will survive', the creators of the film have mixed old techniques for representing the Other with popular music. The track therefore glides away from being compiled and move towards the composed, leading to assimilating identifications, with its ideological implications. The viewer/listener is lead towards a specific position regarding Aboriginality, and the more open interpretations and identifications that usually are available when popular music tracks are used on film are therefore not present. However, the track still opens up to exploration of gender and sexuality. This creates a contradiction: The track both challenges and follows the dominant ideology, a result of the mix between the Disco song and more traditional film music.

The aural result of the combination is that the film version of 'I will survive' resembles a world music track, making the genre relevant to my reading. Marit Lie writes how "...the myth of the universal language of music and its global communicative potential [my translation]"<sup>46</sup> grew stronger in the beginning of the 1990s (Lie 1995: 37). The tendency of romanticizing the Other is clear: difference in itself becomes highly valued and "...the idea of the liberating in the multicultural meeting appears as sheer revelation [my translation]"<sup>47</sup> (ibid.: 37). The scene in *Priscilla* describes precisely this sentiment: the meeting between the white queer main characters and the Aboriginal Australians is described as almost euphoric, both parties being allowed to 'be themselves', celebrating what makes them different in relation to the mainstream. Although it starts out reluctantly, as the drag show evolve all problems that might arise in a culture clash like this one are ignored within the fictional world of the film.

Lie writes how production companies "...reshape others' cultures and traditions according to own aesthetic preferences... [my translation]"<sup>48</sup> (ibid.: 39), something that also happens in the film, as the Aboriginal instruments and voices are added as spice to the song. Lie continues in her description of the production companies: "They change something outside the culture's own control, thereby representing a form of hegemony and exploitation similar to the old colonial

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<sup>46</sup> The original quote is in Norwegian: "...myten om musikkens universelle språk og dens globale kommunikative potensiale" (Lie 1995: 37).

<sup>47</sup> "... tanken om det frigjørende i det multikulturelle møtet fortoner seg som rene åpenbaringen" (ibid.: 37).

<sup>48</sup> "... omskaper andres kulturer og tradisjoner til egne estetiske preferanser..." (ibid.: 39).

structures [my translation]”<sup>49</sup> (ibid.: 39). This is precisely what the makers of *Priscilla* have done on the soundtrack: using bits and pieces from Aboriginal culture, shaping it so it goes well with the ‘I will survive’ track. The result is that the very culture they romanticize gets exploited, which is in alignment with the way colonizers exploited the Aboriginal Australians.

Moving into a new chorus the song fades out. Visually, the image fades at the same time as the volume of the song is lowered, the last image of the show framing Tick (alias Mitzy) in front, while the other three characters in drag are dancing behind him. The next image is an overview shot of the camp, taken some time before sunrise. People are still dancing around the campfire, together with the four drag artist. The viewer/listener is given the impression that they have been dancing the whole night, again an example of how music masks time jumps. Because of its parallel to the music video, I find Vernallis’ writing useful once again: “The relations of music, image, and lyrics raise questions of cause and effect, and the lack of clear causes may partly explain why music videos seem strange” (Vernallis 2004: xiv). In this scene, the usual sense of time and narration is being challenged, opening up for the exploration of other cause and effect relations, like those concerning sexuality and gender.

The original ‘I will survive’ is considerably longer than the film version, lasting 3 min 16 sec. The reason why the song ending in the film does not feel premature, is probably the track’s repetitiveness melodically and harmonically: Harmonically the song follows a loop that goes through the verses, the choruses and even the bridge:

Am // Dm // G // G7 // Cmaj7 // Fmaj7 // Bm7(5) // Esus / E / Esus / E

Also, the melody is the same in the verse and in the choruses, with slight changes: the last word of each verse ending on a b, whereas the ‘hey, hey’ that follows the last sentence of the chorus ends on a. The string melody of the bridge part is distinctively its own, although it moves over the same harmonic landscape as the rest of the song. Its repetitiveness makes it hard to miss what seems to be the central point of the ‘I’-person: the faith in oneself, and the certainty that one will get by no matter what, even when rejected.

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<sup>49</sup> “De forandrer på noe utenfor kulturens egen kontroll, og dermed representerer de en egen form for hegemoni og utnyttning på linje med de gamle koloniale struktuer” (ibid.: 39).

It is clear that the film producers wanted to emphasize this part of 'I will survive', and make a scene where the suppressed individual stands up for him and herself. In this case the 'I' can be seen as a more general symbol of minorities standing together. The film creators lead the viewer/listener of the film towards a particular interpretation of the scene: The camp drag show context opens up to exploration and celebration of sexuality and gender. In writing about Madonna, Hawkins comments on how camp can be an important political statement: "...when camp is played out through drag, it symbolizes a radical statement that pertains to survival within rigid social structures and systems" (Hawkins 2004: 13). In the scene, the show does challenge heteronormativity, and therefore comes across as queer. The problem arise when film makers, most likely with good intentions, fall back onto stereotypical presentations of the Aboriginal Australians.

The assumption that representatives of two minorities necessarily will bond does not take into consideration the distinctive positions of those minorities in society. Riggs writes "... rather than simply presuming that shared ground exist, it is important that white people acknowledge the differences that shape our experiences (through privilege) as distinct from those of Indigenous people" (Riggs 2006: 13). It seems this was not taken into consideration when the scene was made. The scene therefore splits in its relation to dominant Australian society: At the same time as the scene challenges norms regarding sexuality and gender, it is also another example of suppression of the Aboriginal Australians and their culture, as I have shown in my reading of the scene.

Again I find it useful to turn to the road movie. As in the scene with drag on the roof, the scene sequence as a whole holds tension between culture and nature, giving rise to issues concerning conquest of the wilderness. The fascination of nature in the road movie causes in some cases, like this one, exoticism. Laderman writes: "This exoticism generally appears in the visionary longings of the protagonists, who idealize the 'primitive' cultures as a kind of 'dark continent' destination, an antidote to the materialistic Western industrial culture they are rebelling against" (Laderman 2002: 21). In this case, the Aboriginal Australians' reaction to the drag show indicates an idealization of their culture, resembling that of the noble savage of the Western movies. Unlike the white majority the main characters meet on their journey, the Aboriginal Australians are open to play with gender and sexuality. Laderman continues: "These conservative subtextual attitudes regarding ethnicity and gender

should be understood within the more ubiquitous political subtext underlying the road movie's white line fever: American expansion and imperialism (ibid.: 22). *Priscilla* shares this trait with other road movies, although the film takes place in Australia and therefore has an Australian twist.

I have so far discussed the white queer main characters' exploration of gender and sexuality in setting of the Australian desert, and investigated how they might be representatives of the colonizing power, at the same time as they are rebelling against norms of the white Australian majority. I will stay in the desert also during the last scene sequence, and turn to a scene where the white working class male is portrayed. Contrasting the campfire drag act, there can be no doubt that the main characters play out the oppressed party in this scene. However, this time the oppressed ones are given the chance to stand up for themselves.

#### DRAG SHOW WITHOUT MUSIC :

##### ADAM (ALIAS FELICIA) MEETS THE MINERS<sup>50</sup>

The main characters have reached Coober Pedy, a small miners' village in the middle of the desert. Their new traveling companion Bob warns them that they must be careful, stating: "This is a pretty tough little town. They get up in the morning, they go down in a hole, blow things up and they come up again." In the evening Bernadette and Tick (alias Mitzy) go to a restaurant, while Adam (alias Felicia) stays at their motel room, not bothering to join them. Bob is meeting up with some of the miners in an old drive-in. Adam (alias Felicia) gets bored, but then he remembers that he has drugs hidden in a little candy box. He dresses up as a woman and goes out.

The sequence I will investigate starts shortly after, beginning with an overview shot of the village, 1 hour 3 min 53 sec out in the film. A humming of male voices grows stronger as the camera focuses on the remains of a kangaroo, barbequed over a fire. The men seem to be enjoying themselves, drinking beer, laughing and talking in an energetic manner. The next shot shows legs in high heels walking towards the crowd, the sound of the shoes meeting the rocky ground intertwining with

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<sup>50</sup> When Oscar Wilde visited North America in 1882, he met up with miners from Leadville, and an unlikely positive relation between the writer and the miners occurred ([www.literarytraveler.com/authors/wilde\\_west.aspx](http://www.literarytraveler.com/authors/wilde_west.aspx)) [Date of reading: 11.04.1009]. This meeting does not in any way resemble the meeting between Adam (alias Felicia) and the miners in the film.

the voices of the crowd, emphasizing auditive as well as visually the arrival of a new character. In the far background of the soundscape a rhythm fades in. It has an industrial feel, giving associations to factory sounds. The rhythm consists of a metallic beat, followed by a rattling sound similar to air through a valve, the two sounds hitting every second note in a tempo of approximately 90 bpm. The rhythm pauses, then starts again several times. Both the number of times the rhythmic motive is repeated and the pause between the musical sounds varies. There are also a number of other 'clanking' sounds in the background, not following any rhythmic pattern whatsoever. The irregularity in the soundscape adds a sense of unpredictability to the scene. These are non-diegetic musical sounds, meant for the audience and unavailable to the characters within the narrative.

As Adam (alias Felicia) walks into the crowd, the chattering is replaced by random muttering. However, the factory rhythm is still present, still far in the background. It highlights the uneasiness that surfaces among the miners, as Adam (alias Felicia) arrives at the scene. Also, the sound of crickets intertwine with the other sounds, functioning as a reminder of the nature surrounding them, and becoming more audible, as the sound of the voices become less dominant. The moment resembles the one where the queer main characters enter the crowd of Aboriginal Australians. In both cases, the outsider(s) walk into a clearly defined, seemingly homogenous group, causing it to react with silence and staring. In both cases it is unclear what precisely makes the group respond. In the campfire scene the whiteness of the characters is the most obvious element of difference, but also their general appearance stand out; their colorful clothes and the fact that Bernadette looks like a cross-dresser, although she is not. In this scene it is Adam's feminine personae Felicia that makes him an outsider: The men think that he actually is a woman, the only one in the crowd. Another difference between the scenes is the fact that Adam (alias Felicia) is without his traveling companions, making him more vulnerable.

In the campfire scene the awkward moment of silence passes as the musicians start playing their blues again. The music seemingly embraces the newcomers into the group, at least to a certain extent. In the drive-in scene, the tension is not resolved in such a manner. There is no music within the diegesis that can bridge differences between the characters, another aspect of why Adam (alias Felicia) is more vulnerable here. The non-diegetic music functions differently, being descriptive of the action on screen in a particular manner. Kassabian uses Earle Hagen's category *dramatic*



*scoring*, which is similar to non-diegetic music, being music "... not produced within the narrative world of the film" (Kassabian 2001: 45). She writes: "Dramatic scoring maximally matches the visual events on the screen" (ibid.: 45), and continues: "Rather than being organized as a reaction to other events in the film, dramatic scoring moves concurrently with the action" (ibid.: 45). In the drive-in scene, the underlying rhythm and the other random factory sounds describe the mood of the miners in the meeting with Adam (alias Felicia): Since the sounds and rhythmic patterns are associated with the industrial, they are symbolically linked to the miners. The mood is constant through the introductory part of the scene, and therefore the rhythm does not stop, although the men turn silent. Therefore the musical element do not create any sense of release, as is the case with the music in the campfire scene. Here, the industrial rhythmic soundscape is rather disturbing.

#### VIEWING THE 'WOMAN'

Adam (alias Felicia) challenges the silence and the staring of the miners, asking: "What are you all looking at?" The more assertive of the men, Frank (Ken Radley), moves out of the crowd towards Adam (alias Felicia), saying "I'm sorry, we did not mean to stare. We don't usually get women down here." All the while the rhythmic motive keeps repeating itself. The volume is still low, resembling an itch; not really in one's consciousness, nevertheless annoying. Kassabian writes: "The general consensus among composers seems to be that music as background to dialogue should be simple, subtle, and soft, but that the possibilities depend to a large extent on the importance of the dialogue to the film" (ibid.: 55). Here, the musical rhythm is simple, subtle because it is low, but it is not soft per se: The sounds are hard and cold, but being so far in the background of the soundscape, they do not disturb the dialogue.

Why do the miners freeze in this manner? Even when the miners think Adam (alias Felicia) is a woman they are acting strangely towards him, responding in a manner that involves both fear and attraction. Laura Mulvey writes: "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 2009: 19-20). Here this happens in the diegesis: the audience within the scene, the miners, stop talking, staring at Adam (alias Felicia). Walser writes: "Western constructions of masculinity often include conflicting imperatives regarding assertive, spectacular display, and

rigid self-control” (Walser 1993: 108). The miners act in this manner: When Adam (alias Felicia) arrives they turn silent, suddenly controlling themselves. Frank acts out the assertive side of the pattern, behaving in a way that reveals that he wants to impress Adam (alias Felicia). He seemed far more relaxed before the arrival of the main character.

Mulvey delves further into the role of the woman on film: “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (Mulvey 2009: 20). In this case, there is a rift between the characters within the film and the audience outside, separating the scene from the tradition Mulvey describes. There are two different perspectives available here: The audience of *Priscilla* knows that Adam (alias Felicia) is a man in drag, whereas the on-lookers inside the diegesis are still unaware of this. The result is that the two audiences interpret the situation according to what they know, and therefore read the situation differently.

The term *the gaze* is useful in this context. Slavoj Žižek writes: “One of the commonplaces of deconstructionist feminism concerns the link between gaze and power: the one who ‘sees’, whose point of view organizes and dominates the field of vision, is also the bearer of power...” (Žižek 1994: 73). In this case, the male gaze dominates the scene within the diegesis, therefore also holding the power. Žižek suggests that the gaze in film is dominated by the male in general: “... the power relation in cinema is determined by the fact that the male gaze controls the field of vision, whereas the status of woman is that of the privileged object of the male gaze” (ibid.: 73). Adam (alias Felicia) is this kind of spectacle in the scene, being in the centre of the attention. Mulvey goes into what it means to be ‘the privileged object’: “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 2009: 19). In other words, the object of desire is not real, but a result of the dreams the man has about the woman involved. The fantasy aspect is clear in this scene, since it is surprising that Adam (alias Felicia) is not seen as the man he resembles, even when wearing women’s clothes and make up. Another type of gaze is available to the audience that is viewing the film, namely the queer gaze. The viewer/listener knows that Adam (alias Felicia) is dressed up, and therefore do not project the same fantasy onto the main character.

Throughout the film the perspective shifts between the male and the queer gaze, both inside and outside the diegesis. However, only writing about the gaze seems like an oversimplification in a thesis that has an audiovisual approach. As earlier discussed, sound shapes vision and vision shapes sound, together creating new meanings (Chion 1994, Brown 1994, Larsen 2005). When discussing which gaze is chosen, one must therefore also take into consideration the soundtrack. In the scene with the miners, the sounds are seemingly reflecting their emotions, in addition to being indicators of what the audience is supposed to feel: uneasiness. One could suggest that the sound of the scene follows the male gaze of the miners, not the queer gaze available to the audience. However, the sounds can also be interpreted to represent what happens when Adam (alias Felicia) is without his own music: He is feeling discomfort, being in an unpredictable place. Although he acts as if he is in control at this point, the soundtrack suggests otherwise.

To get a further understand of why there is so much underlying tension in the scene, the myth of the Australian bushman is useful. There are similarities between the bushmen and the miners: they are both groups of men used to male companionship and hard labor, and seemingly alienated from women. Young writes this about the bushman type: “The image was of men who depended upon each other – mates – and women were largely absent from that image” (Young 2004: 174). The same can be said about the miners: Frank says that women are not usually a part of the setting. The miners seem much more at ease in each other’s company than together with Adam (alias Felicia), and therefore there is another level of intimacy within the group when it consists of mates only.

When Frank approaches Adam (alias Felicia), he stands out as someone who dares to do what the others do not, he stands out as leader of the group, a hero. As he answers Adam (alias Felicia), he takes the position of someone who talks on behalf of the miners. Biddle and Jarman-Ivens write: “... first, the most exalted varieties of masculinity are typically ‘heroic’ masculinities ... and second, those exalted brands of masculinity are themselves held up as heroes of gendered operations” (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 2007: 13). According to the two authors, this creates the construction of a figure that is focused on himself and his goals, not the well-being of others: “... those figures exalted as heroes (certainly by Western cultures) are characterized by their ‘drive’, their ‘single-mindedness,’ but not (typically) by their commitment to the ‘Good of others’” (ibid.: 13). Frank is fitting this description, being assertive and

knowing what he wants, Adam (alias Felicia) having attracted his attention. As the rest of the sequence reveals, Frank also has the less flattering characteristics, not being particularly compassionate, nor open-minded.



Figure 1.4: The 'hero' and his aim: Frank approaches Adam (alias Felicia).

As Adam (alias Felicia) points out Bob in the crowd, Frank's face becomes hard, and he asks "You know that bloke, do you?" Walser writes: "Women are presented as essentially mysterious and dangerous; they harm simply by being, for their attractiveness threatens to disrupt both male self-control and the collective strength of male bonding" (Walser 1993: 118). This tendency is revealed here; the arrival of Adam (alias Felicia) brings up issues concerning rivalry between the men within the group, something that did not seem to be present before the main character arrived. The companionship between the mates is threatened, as are their self-control, revealed in Frank's reaction.

The soundtrack also points to this: A new musical theme enters the soundscape, as Frank asks about Bob. It consists of a two notes theme, c to d, that is followed by a drum sound, and ended by the same two notes that introduced the theme. The notes have a sharp, hard sound, again giving associations to the industrial. Rhythmically it is not tied to the earlier beat pattern, and the musical theme is also louder and therefore more present aurally. Together with Frank's disapproval, the theme intensifies the scene. It is as if Frank feels threatened by Bob, and the musical sounds reflect his emotions. In this sense, the theme seems more specifically tied to Frank, than to the rest of the group. The rhythmic pattern earlier in the scene functions

as a more general indicator of the mood in the group. Davison writes how music can engage the viewer: "...by encouraging a *symbolic identification* with a space within the fictional world of the diegesis,...such as that occupied by a particular character" (Davison 2007: 125). She writes how this might happen both diegetically and non-diegetically, "...with music sourced outside of the diegesis used to underline or express a character's emotional response to a situation, or event..." (ibid.: 125). This is the case here, the musical theme reflecting Frank's emotions, and thereby highlight them to the audience.

Kassabian looks further into the identification that happens in these cases between the viewer/listener and the music on screen.

Scores in the classical Hollywood tradition, whether or not they particularly use the symphonic musical materials of that tradition, track perceivers into assimilating identifications. While not every score uses the same musical materials or scoring techniques to achieve these identifications, the end result is still the same. We are quite tightly tracked into identification with a single subject position that does not challenge dominant ideologies (Kassabian 2001: 138).

In this case, the instrumentation is outside the symphonic tradition in Hollywood film music, but nevertheless that tradition is reflected in the musical sounds of the scene. According to Kassabian, the result is that the viewer/listener is led into a certain position within the diegesis, one that is in sync with dominant norms. Here, this would mean that the musical sounds are in sync with patriarchal constructions in Australian society, represented by the miners in general and Frank more specifically. This point of view does not take into consideration that the music of the scene can represent chaos: the unpredictable world that reveals itself when Adam (alias Felicia) does drag without his music. Seen in this light, the disturbing musical sounds can cause the audience to identify with Adam (alias Felicia) and the situation he is in, to feel his discomfort in the situation.

As Adam (alias Felicia) answers "no" to Frank's question whether he knows Bob, the new melodic theme ends, and Frank seems to relax again. However, the underlying rhythmic pattern of industrial sounds is still there, causing the underlying uneasy mood of the scene to continue. Adam (alias Felicia) asks "so, who's gonna show me the sights?" and Frank answers "be my pleasure." As Felicia alias Adam raises his glass towards Frank the camera focuses on his muscular arms. Auditively a sharp, short metal sound cuts through the soundscape. It has a hard attack that decays fast, and the sound has a lot of reverb, making the soundscape seemingly expand. As

the camera turns to Frank's face, the viewer/listener realizes that Frank now has figured out that Adam (alias Felicia) is a man. The cutting sound is another example of how sound and music can be interpreted to represent Frank's emotions, showing his point of view through the musical sounds. Frank's reaction has direct implications for Adam (alias Felicia), and in this sense the cutting sound also represents the main character's reaction: fear.

#### FRANK'S NEW GAZE

As Frank figures out what the audience has known all the time, something happens to his gaze, which dictates his following actions, but also changes his interpretation of the conversation with Adam (alias Felicia) so far. A new perspective becomes available to him, which Halberstam calls the *transgender gaze*. She writes: "The transgender gaze becomes difficult to track because it depends on complex relations in time and space between seeing and not seeing, appearing and disappearing, knowing and not knowing" (Halberstam 2005: 78). When a transgendered character is exposed to an unknowingly audience as a man or a woman, the viewer/listeners must shift their perspective as well, they must "...reorient themselves in relation to the film's past in order to read the film's present and prepare themselves for the film's future" (ibid.: 78). Even though the setting Halberstam describes in this case takes place within the fictional world of *Priscilla* and not in the audience, the dynamics are the same. The miners must reinterpret the past, which changes the present situation, and directs the following. The term transgender gaze can be seen as problematic, though, since it involves perspective that the queer might not identify with. The term queer gaze seems more accurate with regards to *Priscilla*.

Halberstam writes how there are several ways in which problems regarding temporality, visibility and transgenderism are treated in film, the one laying closest to this scene being the mode she calls 'rewind' (ibid.: 78). Here, the character is first presented "... as 'properly' gendered, as passing in other words, and as properly located within a linear narrative; her exposure as transgender constitutes the film's narrative climax, and spells out both her own decline and the unraveling of cinematic time" (ibid.: 78). After the 'truth' about the transgender has been revealed, the viewer must 'rewind' and "...reorganize the narrative logic" (ibid.: 78). As Frank realizes that Adam (alias Felicia) is a man, and that he therefore has been hitting on one, he reacts with repulsion and violence, hitting the beer out of the hand of the queer main

character. Frank's revelation also dictates the rest of the scene, which takes a new direction after Adam (alias Felicia) no longer is seen as a woman.

The reorientation of 'reality' is also reflected in the soundscape. Classical instruments are introduced for the first time in the scene. Just as Frank is about to hit Adam (alias Felicia)'s beer out of his hand, the strings enter, laying on a c<sup>#</sup>, while drums are hit once. There is a lot of added reverb to the drum sound, creating a big space. The strings and the dramatic drum boom reflect the increasing tension between Adam (alias Felicia) and Frank, but also between the queer character and the rest of the group, since Frank acts as a representative of the miners. Being louder and more familiar to the audience as musical signs of danger, the classical instruments bring the suspense in the scene to the fore. The tension, so far represented by the industrial-sounding rhythmic pattern and musical theme, is now impossible to ignore. The strings give associations to the horror genre, a connection not only made in the soundscape: Adam (alias Felicia) is linked to the monstrous in the eyes of the miners, interestingly both when he is seen as a woman, and revealed as a transvestite.

As Adam (alias Felicia) throws a beer in Frank's face and runs off, the industrial rhythm from earlier returns, as does the musical theme. They are now both loud and infiltrated in each other. Drums are also a part of the rhythm and glockenspiel is added, repeating a fast, frantic pattern, erratic in the sense that it is atonal. It is as if the soundscape reflects the chaos that follows the revelation of Adam (alias Felicia) as a man, the sounds reflecting the queer perspective now available to the miners that chase the main character, but also Adam (alias Felicia)'s inner turmoil, as he is exposed. Frank is still confused, shouting "get her" to the others in the group, who choose to follow him as he sprints after the queer main character.

A new shot shows Adam (alias Felicia) running past what looks like the back of the drive-in screen, shouting maniacally: "Come on boys, who wants to see my map of Tasmania", being followed by a number of miners. Auditively the glockenspiel is being replaced by a choir, singing 'ah's' on the c note every second fourth note. Drums are also a part of this rhythm. The drums and the singing give associations to stereotypical tribal music in film, for example in connection to sacrifice, intensifying the chase even further.

## BERNADETTE'S WOUND

The next scene in the sequence shows Bernadette and Tick (alias Mitzy) having dinner at a restaurant. It is the third time the viewer/listener follows their conversation, the film having shifted between the point of view of Adam (alias Felicia) and the two other characters for several minutes before the drive-in scene starts. Bernadette and Tick (alias Mitzy) have reached the most serious part of the conversation, where Bernadette tells about her relationship to her parents: "So I never got a chance to tell my parents what a wonderful childhood I'd had. They never spoke to me again after I'd had ... the chop". This is perhaps the one place in the film where Bernadette reveals most vulnerability, the matter of how her parents reacted to her sex change being difficult for her. Being about transphobia, the conversation seems appropriate following Frank's reaction when realizing Adam (alias Felicia) is a man.

In the background of the soundscape there is a rhythm, a beat on every fourth note hit in turn by two metal sounds. The rhythm has the same tempo, about 123 bpm, as the one played when Adam (alias Felicia) is followed by the miners, auditively bridging the chase to the dinner scene. The question is whether this rhythm is supposed to reflect Bernadette's feelings or not. The sounds are tied to the miners, Frank and the chase of Adam (alias Felicia), and therefore they do not seem appropriate as indicators of Bernadette's vulnerability with regards to her sexuality. Possibly, then, the rhythm only works as an aural bridge between the scene before, and the scene that comes afterwards. However, if one chooses to interpret the previous musical sounds as indicators of Adam (alias Felicia)'s inner turbulence, a thematic link to this scene is created: Here another main character, Bernadette, is revealing her inner pain. In both cases, the inner turmoil is caused by the main characters' queerness with regards to gender and sexuality.

Bernadette's openness makes Tick (alias Mitzy) want to tell his secret, that he has a son. Just as Tick (alias Mitzy) takes Bernadette's hand and says: "I think ... I have something to tell you", the conversation is interrupted by the hysterical panting laughter of Adam (alias Felicia). As this character appears on screen, there is an abrupt change aurally: The drums return together with the choir, which sings a long 'ah' on the c note. The industrial, frantic soundscape from the beginning of the chasing scene returns, as Adam (alias Felicia) runs past the window, followed by a tail of miners. The underlying tension, represented by the rhythm behind Bernadette and Tick (alias Mitzy)'s conversation, has exploded and the result is a chaotic,



confused and erratic soundscape. Bernadette is the first one to react, muttering ‘oh shit’ before rising quickly, Tick (alias Mitzy) following.

#### THE CHASE ENDS

The next shot shows Adam (alias Felicia) being followed by the miners into a waste area consisting of car wrecks and car parts. Auditively the new setting is introduced by another booming bang from the drums, followed by the choir now singing the ‘ah’s on an e<sup>b</sup> on every second beat, over the industrial sounds that have been present during the whole chase. Finally these sounds find their direct visual counterparts in the metal pieces laying spread around in the waste area. The musical sounds have foreshadowed this place, which turns out to be the end of the chase and the final place of confrontation.

Finally Adam (alias Felicia) stops laughing, as he runs into a metal wall, the collision creating a crashing sound which also ends the rhythmic music with the choir singing. There are still some spare metal sounds far in the background though, as Adam (alias Felicia) says: “All right you fellows, lets not forget how to treat a lady”. Frank answers: “You fucking freak!” and hits him in the face, so that Adam (alias Felicia) collides with the metal wall once again. This time the crashing sound has a long reverb that stays beneath the following conversation. The metal sounds die with the reverb. In other words, there is a change in the auditive landscape, a change that gives an eerie feeling. A synthesizer fades in as the crash fades out, first far in the background. It plays slow, low notes, the sound resembling that of a cello.

When calling Adam (alias Felicia) a freak, Frank alienates himself from the main character. Hawkins writes: “By stigmatizing gender fluidity as perverse, and positioning it in opposition to hegemonic masculinity, homophobia seeks to polarize male sexuality, becoming a regulator for what is acceptable or unacceptable” (Hawkins 2007: 204). Frank sees Adam (alias Felicia)’s behavior as precisely unacceptable, and responds in a homophobic way. Also, he gets the group with him, both in the chase of Adam (alias Felicia), and in using violence. Because of homophobia, and transphobia, the queer main character becomes the Other, and therefore he can be punished.

Frank interprets Adam (alias Felicia)’s behavior as a threat, which can be linked to the need for patriarchal domination. Walser writes: “Both homosexuality and symbolic crossing of gender boundaries threaten patriarchal control, and they thus

conflated in the service of rhetoric that strives to maintain difference and power” (Walser 1993: 130). In this case, both homosexuality and symbolic gender crossing became highlighted as Adam (alias Felicia) was revealed as a man. Frank acts out patriarchal impulses, desperately trying to regain power by using aggression and violence. He needs to reclaim his position as a leader, as a hero.

Here it is useful to return to the myth of the bushman. Ward writes: “...above all, [the bushman] will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even when he thinks they may be in the wrong” (Ward 1965: 2). There are, however, no indicators that the miners think Frank is in the wrongdoing by reacting as he does. This can be understood in the light of the homophobia which is a part of the stereotypical bushman myth, a homophobia which can be interpreted a result of homosexual undertones between the mates: “...there is a strong undercurrent of implied, but rarely foregrounded, homosexuality in the figure of the bushmen” (Young 2004: 174). These tendencies can be linked to the lack of women in the community (Young 2004, Ward 1965), a theme that goes back through history to the original bushmen of Australia.

In his exploration of the bushman, Ward writes about the convicts and ex-convicts that first came to Australia:

The deprivation of female companionship had very important effects on the behaviour and outlook of bush-workers. Among the convicts, especially those incarcerated at Norfolk Island and other penal stations, sodomy had been very common, as it must be wherever large numbers of men are segregated for long periods (Ward 1965: 89).

The word ‘sodomy’ jumps out of the passage, revealing its age. Homosexual relationships were still illegal in Australia when Ward wrote his book. The quote is nevertheless interesting with regards to the historical background of the bushman: Homosexual relations were not uncommon amongst the convicts that first came to Australia, those who came to be the first bushmen. Like the environment they came from, there was a lack of women in the bush, and the tradition of homosexuality continued. However, it changed character as time passed, the reason being that unlike the prisons, there were actually women in Australia.

The relationships between the early bushmen and the Aboriginal Australian women were not considered to be proper. Ward writes: “As with sodomy, most contemporary writers thought it good to say nothing of sexual relations between pastoral workers ... and the native women...” (ibid.: 90). This is telling of how the

Aboriginal Australian women were not seen as equal individuals to the white working males, nor to white 'proper' women. Aboriginal women and prostitutes seem to fall in the same category in Ward's writing, reduced to sexual objects, incapable of giving the white working males what they needed. Ward continues: "It may be suggested that one important, though indirect, result of the absence of good women was to generate the cult of mateship in its more restricted and personal sense" (ibid.: 92). The use of 'good women' in the quote reflects a colonial way of thinking, where the Aboriginal Australians are seen as lesser beings. It might be that the bushmen themselves saw the women in the bush in this manner, though. Therefore the argument cannot be dismissed as a reason for why the mateship between the men became so close, even if it is colored by the colonist viewpoint.

According to Ward, unfulfilled relationships with women led to intensification of the already strong mate connections that the tough life in the outback had created (ibid.: 93). A tradition of having one's own special mate developed. This 'special one' seems to be a stand-in for a traditional wife that could not be found in the bush:

Perhaps, as habit of freedom and independence increased his self respect, the typical bushman, blessed ignorant of psychological theory, appeased this spiritual hunger by a sublimated homosexual relationship with a mate, or a number of mates, of his own sex (ibid.: 93).

These relations did not involve sex between the mates, since this became far less common when women were around, according to Ward (ibid.: 92). In other words, there seems to be a split here: between the spiritual relationship to the mate(s) and the sexual to the woman, inviting to objectification of the female body.

Since homosexual desire between the mates was not acknowledged, it led to a counter reaction: that of homophobia. Ward writes: "On the conscious level bushmen naturally denied this 'soft' side of their nature by protesting, perhaps too much, their masculinity" (ibid.: 93). Perhaps the homosexual relationships between the convicts and ex-convicts that first came to Australia were not consciously acknowledged either. Whether or not this is true, it does seem that as time passed homosexuality became taboo within the group of mates, making the subject infested and the reaction against homosexuality explosive.

## THE *FEMME FATALE* AND THE *FEMME CASTRATRICE*

When Adam (alias Felicia) walks into the crowd of miners, he seems to be a representative of the kind of women the miners – as modern versions of the bushmen – are interested in only sexually. The queer main character takes on the role of the seducer, the *femme fatale*, which Creed links to the phallic woman: "... Like the castrated woman she, too, is another manifestation of female sexuality in relation to phallus. Her image is also informed by the workings of patriarchal ideology" (Creed 1993: 157). In *Priscilla*, the *femme fatale* does not hide a gun in her purse, she hides that 'she' is actually a 'he'. There is in other words a queering of the *femme fatale* term here, something that is not welcomed by the miners. When the secret is revealed, Adam (alias Felicia) is punished, for he has broken the rules of patriarchy. Although Walser is writing about women in heavy metal video, the quote is relevant to the setting: "...the presence of women as sex objects stabilizes the potential troubling homoeroticism suggested by male display" (Walser 1993: 116). In this case, Frank's display turns out to be directed towards a man. What was a stabilizing element turns out to be precisely the opposite, an element that highlights homoerotic undertones.

This brings the homophobic tendencies of the miners to the surface. No one objects to Frank's behavior as he realizes that Adam (alias Felicia) is a man, which might be seen as strange, for when do the others understand this? Nothing is said of the matter before the chase, and still a number of the miners follow Frank when he orders them to. One interpretation is that Frank carries the point of view for the group, and when he sees the queer angle, that Adam (alias Felicia) is a man, the rest of the group somehow realizes the same thing. Another interpretation is that the others do what they are told no matter what, because of the strong loyalty bond between the mates, and because Frank is a leading figure. As Adam (alias Felicia) lays on the ground after being hit, Frank tells two of his mates to hold the queer character down and spread his legs. Adam (alias Felicia) does not have a chance fighting the two others, disoriented by Frank's punch. He mutters 'please', but is ignored. There is an almost excited chattering among the miners at this point, starkly contrasting Adam (alias Felicia)'s despair.

Then Bob cries out "Frank, stop! What the fuck do you think you're doing!" revealing his disagreement with the miners. He breaks the unwritten rules of the group, and challenges the mateship when objecting. In siding with Adam (alias Felicia), he is no longer a part of the group, but one of the outsiders, a queer. For the

viewer/listener of the film, Bob's reaction comes as no surprise, since he has shown friendliness towards the main characters, and even a romantic interest in Bernadette. To the group and Frank, however, Bob's behavior comes as more of a shock, adding a new layer of tension to the scene.

As Bob objects, the volume of the synthesized cello introduced earlier is turned up. The low, long notes can be interpreted to reflect the hatred and hostility the scene reveals. Bob chases off the men that are holding Adam (alias Felicia) down, and tells Frank to leave "the little bugger" alone. All the while the music plays in the background, emphasizing the emotional intensity of the scene. This is a musical cliché from the Hollywood film music tradition, effective because the meaning is so well known to the audience. Interestingly it is after the loyalty bond between the mates has been challenged that the low notes stand out and become audible. It is as if the music does not reflect the inner life of Adam (alias Felicia), but that of the group around him and the mood of the scene in a more general sense. The alienation that goes on between Adam (alias Felicia) and the soundtrack emphasize the fact that the character is out of sync with the setting.

Frank does not respond well to Bob's critique, saying "put the faggot down and get the fuck out of there, or you'll be next". Again Frank depersonalizes Adam (alias Felicia), as he full of contempt uses the derogatory term 'faggot'. Also, he threatens to rape Bob as well if he does not withdraw from the situation. The strong reaction against Bob is not only a result of the threat against the values of the group, nor a result of Bob's queer position in relation to the miners. When standing up for Adam (alias Felicia), Bob also challenges Frank as a leader, and as a hero.

Žižek writes that the hero is "...immoral, yet ethical – that is to say, he violates (or rather, suspends the validity of) existing explicit moral norms in the name of a higher ethics of life, historical Necessity..." (Žižek 1994: 67). When Frank hits Adam (alias Felicia) and gets the others to hold him down in order to rape him, he is breaking with moral norms because of a 'historical necessity': he needs to regain his position as a man, as a leader. For the same reason, he reacts aggressively when Bob protests to what is going on. Also, Frank is protecting values tied to the bushman myth, and therefore also the group, which might be another reason why he reacts as he does. Jarman-Ivens and Biddle interpret Žižek's hero as "...an uncompromisingly self-serving figure, one who strives for his own preeminence" (Jarman-Ivens and Biddle 2007: 13). This hero is not necessarily open-minded and generous, and if

threatened he will be more concerned with saving himself than others. These are traits that fit well with Frank.

The hero's behavior can be read in light of how the Western masculinities are constructed. Jarman-Ivens and Biddle writes: "... normative ('heroic') masculinities *per se* is entirely and only committed to the project of sustaining its own normativity and 'natural' status as synonymous with the white, middle-class, male body" (Jarman-Ivens and Biddle 2007: 14). Frank is willing to rape in order to prove that he is a proper man. The irony is, of course, that raping Adam (alias Felicia) would be having sex with a man – a homosexual act, precisely what Frank is afraid of. It therefore comes across as an irrational thing to do. Perhaps then, that he chooses rape as a way to punish can be seen as an outlet for subconscious homosexual impulses. The homoerotic undertones amongst the mates have surfaced, and because of the contradiction between these desires and the homophobic conscious, the result is violent. Bob, in siding with Adam (alias Felicia), shows openness towards gender fluidity that the others do not have. He is not a defender of the 'normal' and the 'natural', which is probably another reason why Frank sees him as an enemy when he sides with Adam (alias Felicia).

As Frank screams "Get out of there!" at Bob, a sound resembling metal being hit aborts the synthesizer notes. As Bernadette's voice appears, there is a change in the auditive landscape: it turns silent. The dramatic low notes of the synth disappear, symbolizing the change of mood. Bernadette verbally attacks Frank head on, fearless and poisonous<sup>51</sup>, well aware that the presence of his mates makes Frank desperate to prove himself as 'a man'. Since the musical sounds of the scene are rooted in Hollywood film music, the lack of music as Bernadette makes her entrance seems appropriate. Being a queer character, she is outside the language of traditional film music.

When Bernadette appears, Frank removes his focus from Bob and Adam (alias Felicia). Bob calls out "Bernadette, please", making Frank smile condescendingly and say: "The whole circus is in town." This time he picks up the gender fluidity expressed in the queer main character immediately, perhaps because the queer gaze now is available to him. Somewhat Bernadette's entrance takes away some of his rage and awakens his arrogance. He starts walking towards Bernadette, saying

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<sup>51</sup> Bernadette says : "Stop flexing your muscles, you big pile of budgie turd. I'm sure your mates will be much more impressed if you go back to the pub and fuck a couple of pigs on the bar".

“Come on, Bernadette. Come and fuck me”, clearly not seeing her as a threat whatsoever. As the two walk towards each other the strings return, resting on the tone of a while the volume rises. The music reflects the tension in the scene, as the characters move towards each other. Escalating cymbals accompany the movement on screen, as Bernadette grabs Frank’s shirt and plants her knee in his crouch twice. As he falls to the ground, the music fades and Bernadette walks away, seemingly untouched by the incident, stating: “There. Now you’re fucked.”

Bernadette acts out the *femme castratrice*- type in this scene. According to Creed, there are two types of castrating woman: the castrating female psychotic, and the castrating women driven by revenge (Creed 1993: 123). Bernadette belongs to the latter, which Creed defines in this manner: “Usually the heroine takes revenge because either she – or a friend – has been raped and/or murdered by a single male or a group of men” (ibid.: 123). Obviously the theme is less extreme in the film, since Creed here is talking about horror films. Adam (alias Felicia) is not actually raped; Bob and Bernadette stop it before things get out of hand. Nevertheless, there is a link between the horror revenge films and this scene, both thematically and musically. Bernadette confrontation with Frank is linked to castration, since she kicks him in the crouch, making him fall over. Her violence is regarded as justified within the diegesis of the film, and has no precautions. This is a common trait in the revenge films: “As with most other films in this subgenre, the women are not punished; rather, they are shown to be justified in their action” (ibid.: 123). After the incident, no-one gives Bernadette any trouble, despite the fact that she is surrounded by Frank’s mates.

Bernadette being transgender adds another layer to the meaning. There is a queering of the *femme castratrice* term here, its meaning being challenged as Bernadette plays it out. She might be a woman now, but the fact that she used to be a man is interesting in the sense that Bernadette embodies both the castrated man and the castrating woman. One could say that this makes her more powerful than the usual *femme castratrice*, since Bernadette knows both sides.

As I wrote earlier in the thesis, the *femme castratrice* can be linked to the siren, which again can be tied to the Diva and the drag artist. In this sense, the Adam (alias Felicia) also carries certain traits of the *femme castratrice*. However, without the support of music he seemingly loses connection to the type, unlike Bernadette: She manages to live out the Diva, the siren and the *femme castratrice* without her own soundtrack playing in the background. When Adam (alias Felicia) dresses up as a

woman he challenges heteronormative gender and sexuality, just like in the drag performance. However, without the buffer of music and the playfulness of the show, the challenge becomes too severe, and he is incapable of handling the consequences his actions have. Thankfully, Bernadette appears as the powerful *femme castratrice*-helper.



## CONCLUSION

The scene sequence where Adam (alias Felicia) meets the miners holds the conflict that is present in the whole film; that between the dominant ideology and the outcast, a conflict that reveals itself in the soundtrack. The relationship between the majority and minority is not clear, as I have shown in my readings. Even though the film sympathizes with the main characters, patriarchal society has a grip on the film. The music is a strong indicator of this conflict, not only because of the way composed music is used, but also because of the narrative that accompanies the music.

Kassabian writes how those belonging to minorities during the 1980s and 1990s developed a stronger sense of pride in regards to their differences: “Along lines of sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity, and disability, lived cultures have learned to frown on assimilation in the past two decades” (Kassabian 2001: 147). As a result of their stronger stance in society, an opposition formed: “...the men’s movement, the growth of right-wing militias, ‘angry white men,’ attacks on affirmative action, the rise of anti-gay crimes...” (ibid.: 147). These groups and actions “...look to protect an identity formation as old as the U.S Constitution: liberal pluralist in discourse, materially white, property-owning, heterosexual, and male” (ibid.: 148). Although the American focus is clear here, the quote is also relevant to Australia and *Priscilla*, since the miners in the film can be seen as representatives of groups that are particularly hostile towards minorities, in this case the queer. As I have shown, the homophobic dynamics of the miners can be traced much further back than to the 1980s, nevertheless these tendencies are forced to the surface as homosexuality becomes visible in the surroundings.

Kassabian writes how this conflict is reflected in the different kinds of film music, the compiled and the composed: “The struggles between these competing visions of identity, I suspect, are intimately tied to the prevalence of score that offer both assimilating and affiliating identifications on the contemporary film musical landscape” (Kassabian: 2001: 148). *Priscilla* fits into Kassabian’s description, since the conflicting relationship between the queer subculture and dominant ideologies in the film is not fully resolved.

In my judgment, there are incidents where the film creators have not fully dealt with the notion that the queer can act as representatives of patriarchal dominant society. Pamela Robertson writes: “Queer and camp representations, though non-

normative in terms of sex and gender, are still consistently defined through categories of racial difference...” (Robertson 1997: 280). In *Priscilla* this is revealed through the interaction between sound and music in some of the scenes, perhaps most clearly when the drag artists do their act in front of the Aboriginal Australians. The soundtrack in this scene is compiled, and according to Kassabian it is therefore supposed to open up a wider set of identifications and positions outside dominant society. However, like I have shown, the changes done to ‘I will survive’ move the music towards the composed. The result is that the compiled, edited track leads to assimilating identifications with regards to ethnicity, simultaneously opening up exploration of gender and sexuality. Kassabian’s division between compiled and composed, assimilating and affiliating identifications does not hold in this context, and the borders between the different categories breaks down.

Techniques from the Hollywood film music tradition are implemented to achieve certain effects during the campfire scene. Musical codes associated with the Other separate the main characters from Aboriginal Australians, and these codes are ideologically charged. *Priscilla* also treats its feminine characters in a similar manner, as the feminine Other. Gorbman writes: “Just as the feminine other in Hollywood cinema appears as a binary set – as either madonna/wife (accompanied by violins) or the vamp/whore (introduced by a sultry jazz saxophone or clarinet) – Hollywood Indians are manifested either as bloodthirsty marabouts or romanticized noble savages” (Gorbman 2000: 235). There is a particularly obvious example of the Madonna/whore split in *Priscilla*. Bob’s Filipino wife Cynthia (Julia Cortez) is presented as the Hollywood whore when ‘performing’ in a pub, shooting ping-pong balls out of her vagina over a cheering crowd of males<sup>52</sup>. As she enters the scene she is accompanied by precisely the ‘sultry jazz saxophone’ that Gorbman writes about. The scene can be interpreted as disturbing in its stereotypical presentation of women, and in particular Filipino women: The character is presented as a woman who is unrestrained sexually. At the same time, the scene can be understood as a parody of female representation on film. Perhaps the point is not to ridicule Cynthia, but the audience: Maybe the parody is targeted towards the male gaze that sees the woman in this manner.

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<sup>52</sup> The scene can be viewed on youtube. It has been titled ‘Priscilla queen of the desert ping pong balls’: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDu9gbuKpKc&feature=Playlist&p=E43FF2CD591353CF&playnext=1&playnext\\_from=PL&index=48](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDu9gbuKpKc&feature=Playlist&p=E43FF2CD591353CF&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=48) [Viewing date 20.04.09]. Cynthia’s show starts 1 min 20 sec out in this scene sequence.

Mulvey writes how popular culture has adopted a link between the active and the masculine, that can be traced back to Freud: “The ‘convention’ cited by Freud (active/masculine) structures most popular narratives, whether film, folk-tale or myth..., where his metaphoric usage is acted out literally in the story” (Mulvey 2009: 34). This has consequences in terms of what kind of gaze that is available: “...the ‘grammar’ of the story places the reader, listener or spectator *with* the hero” (ibid.: 32). As a result, the woman gets used to identify away from her own sex in a manner that might resemble the process involved in a drag show, only internalized in this case. Mulvey writes: “...as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identifications is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*” (ibid.: 35). The author underlines that even though women are used to these kinds of identifications, they are not necessarily done easily (ibid.: 35).

When Cynthia performs, both the male and the queer gaze are available. Within the diegesis these two gazes have their two groups: The male gaze is linked to the male audience in the bar, that previously in the scene did not respond to the main characters’ drag show whatsoever, but immediately start clapping and shouting as Cynthia enters the stage. The main characters are looking at Cynthia’s show with the queer gaze. Bernadette and Tick (alias Mitzy) are staring at the show in horror, while Adam (alias Felicia) laughs hysterically. The question is, who is he actually laughing at, Cynthia or the males that get a kick out of watching her show?

The audience of the film can choose between the two tracks of identification in the scene. According to Mulvey’s argument, even women that do not consider themselves queer should have an easier time taking on the queer gaze, being more used to identifying away from their main position. In this case, the queer gaze might get ignored though, since the portrayal of Cynthia can be considered stereotypical and cruel. For ‘straight’ men it is more difficult to shift focus to begin with, the male gaze being the perspective they are used to. Since the male gaze is parodied here, that path of identification might be experienced as an unpleasant one, but nonetheless it might be preferred over the queer.

The scene with Cynthia’s show is an example of how the feminine Other is not idealized in the film. Aboriginal Australians representation however, builds on a romanticized view of the Other, and resembles that of the noble Indian in the Hollywood western. The film’s presentation of both women and Aboriginal Australians, then, is equally built on stereotypes. Robertson writes:

...by privileging the Aboriginal people, and portraying them as singing and dancing natives, naturally and automatically tolerant, the film ultimately represents a stereotype as egregious as the grotesque Filipino. The Aboriginal characters are not so much united with the white drag queens but excising *for* them (Robertson 1997: 280).

There is, however, differences between the representation of the feminine Other and the Exotic one, which Robertson overlooks. As I have shown, women are represented in a manner that can be interpreted as stereotypical, but there are aspects of irony and parody that opens to other interpretations. Perhaps it is the male gaze that sees the woman in this manner that really is being made fun of, and not the women in themselves. Contrasting, the parodying distance is not present in the portrayal of the Aboriginal Australian. Even if the Aboriginal Australians are presented in a more positive way than the female characters, one could suggest that they are exploited to a greater extent, in the sense that they are used as contrasting, stereotypical Others the queer main characters are defined against.

The world music genre, which 'I will survive' sounds like after post-production, romanticizes the Other in a manner that resembles the Hollywood film music presentation of the noble Indian. Frith writes:

...in the context of the denunciation of Western pop artifice and decadence, the authentic itself becomes the exotic (and vice versa). This move is familiar enough from the long European Romance celebration of the native (the peasant and the African) as more real (because more natural) than the civilized Westerner (Frith 2000: 308).

In *Priscilla*, pop artifice and decadence is celebrated throughout, as is the inauthentic. It therefore seems strange that the film has a similar link between the authentic and the exotic as the one Frith describes above. Much of *Priscilla* evolves around questioning the authentic. Nevertheless, the Aboriginal Australian is presented as exotic, both aurally and visually. It is also tied to the authentic and real, in the sense that the Aboriginal Australians in the campfire sequence embrace the queer characters and their drag show, unlike most other people that the main characters meet on their journey. The link between the exotic and the authentic in *Priscilla* comes across as a contradiction, since the romanticism of the Other aligns the film with the dominant ideology that it seeks to challenge. The awareness of construction in relation to identity is absent when it comes to how Aboriginality is presented in the film. I wish to return to Davison's observation on how music can lead its listeners into fantasy and

dream realms (Davison 2007: 136). Music can, as in the case with the Aboriginal Australians, also lead its participants and listeners towards rigid positions within old 'realities', defined by dominant ideologies. Perhaps it is too much to ask for, though, that the film is supposed to reveal the construction of Aboriginality as well, next to its exploration of gender and sexuality, areas where the film does manage to challenge preconceived notions.

When Adam (alias Felicia) performs his drag act on the bus roof, music allows investigations of identity, and in that sense opens up to a fantasy world. Aitken and Lukinbeal write: "For Felicia, riding the vast open spaces in a giant slipper atop the bus with the wind blowing out fifty feet of silk behind him represents a transformation into Cinderella and Diva" (Aitken and Lukinbeal). Through the camp drag performance, Adam (alias Felicia) manages to become someone else, to enter into his own dream world. Opera, with its historical link to homosexuality and the Diva type (Välimäki 2007: 177), is a fitting genre when wanting to explore that particular feminine type. Välimäki writes that the link between opera and the queer is strong in more general terms: "...opera can be seen as an allegorical, larger-than-life mirror of the homosexual experience of being on the outside of society" (ibid.: 202). When doing drag to opera, Adam (alias Felicia) becomes a part of this larger-than-life mirrored version of queer life, perhaps one reason for the euphoric undertones of the scene.

Adam (alias Felicia)'s performance on the roof is no doubt queer, but that does not mean that it only represents queer culture. I wrote earlier how both queer and camp can be linked to the expression of main society: Simpson writes how the queer was incorporated into mainstream during the 1990s (Simpson 1999), and according to Mühleisen camp has also been mainstreamed, starting thirty years earlier (Mühleisen 2003: 160). Next to the more mainstream version of camp, there is the political one, connected to gay liberation movements of the 1970s and to queer politics (ibid.: 160-161). Interestingly, *Priscilla* seemingly touches upon both the mainstream camp and the one that associates with radical drag and the liberation movements. The scene where Adam (alias Felicia) does drag on the moving bus can be seen as an example of this.

A consequence of this mainstreaming, is that neither the queer nor the camp are above issues regarding dominance, and that queer characters can in fact in some ways represent mainstream, even when dressed in drag. Since the drag show scene is

in motion, on top of a vehicle, the scene is closely tied to the road movie genre, to which *Priscilla* belongs. Conquest of nature through culture, a theme often present in road movies (Laderman 2002: 8), becomes one of the available interpretations. This is emphasized since the music in the scene belongs to Western classical music, music that is a part of the colonizer's cultural heritage. Also, as I showed in my reading of the scene, Adam (alias Felicia)'s performance can be understood as a representation of the modern mad woman, a spectacle created to satisfy the voyeuristic impulses of the audience, framed by the heteronormative, so that it will not become threatening to the masses.

When writing about drag's revival during the mid-1990s, Lumby summarizes an interview with the manager of Yogoona's Dazzling Fancy Dress Hire in Sydney (Lumby 1997: 84). He told how drag was spreading, not only confined in the usual queer subcultures associated with it – the queer and the lesbian (ibid.: 84). According to the interviewer, "...*Priscilla* had spawned a rash of 'burly blokes' seeking frocks" (ibid.: 84). That the film actually might have caused more openness towards cross-dressing and drag is a good thing. The question is whether it would have managed to go so mainstream if it was more critical of dominant society.

Both the fact that *Priscilla* was represented during the closing ceremony of the Sidney Olympics of 2000, and the popularity of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert - the Musical* in Australia are indicators that the film has become a part of mainstream Australian identity. When the queer becomes incorporated in the mainstream to such an extent, it might lose its ability to challenge the heteronormative, or perhaps more precisely, the queer aspects that do not resonate well with the mainstream are simply ignored by it. Robertson writes: "Most reviews and commentaries in the Australian press ignored the specific content of the film – in terms either of the film's genre, its queer content, or its politics – in favor of its characterization as an *Australian* film (Robertson 1997: 273). The film's gayness was ignored, even though the fact that it was both "...gay *and* Australian..." (ibid.: 273) made the film pioneering in the first place. At the same time the film was taken into queer subcultures on an international scale.

In many ways, this two-sidedness is telling of *Priscilla*. The film seems to have two lives: one in the subculture it describes, and one in mainstream popular culture. *Priscilla* in itself holds the conflict between the queer and the dominant norms of society. The audiovisual readings have shown that sometimes there are

simultaneously challenging and aligning aspects with regards to mainstream society. It might be that it was precisely this mix that made the film so popular in the first place. If it had been queer all the way, a larger audience might not have been able to relate to the film.

## I WILL SURVIVE

*By Freddie Perren and Dino Fekaris*

At first I was afraid  
I was petrified  
Kept thinking I could never live  
Without you by my side  
But then I spent so many nights  
Thinking how you did me wrong  
And I grew strong  
And I learned how to get along

And so you're back  
From outer space  
I just walked in to find you here  
With that sad look upon your face  
I should have changed that stupid lock  
I should have made you leave your key  
If I've have known for just one second  
You'd be back to bother me

Go on now go  
Walk out the door  
Just turn around now  
'Cause you're not welcome anymore  
Weren't you the one who tried to break me with goodbye  
Did you think I'd crumble?  
Did you think I'd lay down and die?  
Oh no, not I

I will survive  
Oh, as long as I know how to love  
I know I'll stay alive  
I've got all my life to live  
I've got all my love to give  
And I'll survive



I will survive, hey hey

It took all the strength I had  
Not to fall apart  
Kept trying hard to mend  
The pieces of my broken heart  
And I spent oh so many nights  
Just feeling sorry for myself  
I used to cry  
But now I hold my head up high

And you see me  
Somebody new  
I'm not that chained up little person  
Still in love with you  
And so you felt like dropping in  
And just expect me to be free  
But now I'm saving all my loving  
For someone who's loving me

Go on now go  
Walk out the door  
Just turn around now  
'Cause you're not welcome anymore  
Weren't you the one who tried to break me with goodbye  
Did you think I'd crumble?  
Did you think I'd lay down and die?  
Oh no, not I

I will survive  
Oh, as long as I know how to love  
I know I'll stay alive  
I've got all my life to live  
I've got all my love to give  
And I'll survive  
I will survive, oh

Go on now go  
Walk out the door  
Just turn around now  
'Cause you're not welcome anymore  
Weren't you the one who tried to break me with goodbye  
Did you think I'd crumble?  
Did you think I'd lay down and die?  
Oh no, not I

I will survive  
Oh, as long as I know how to love  
I know I'll stay alive  
I've got all my life to live  
I've got all my love to give  
And I'll survive  
I will survive  
I will survive...

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