



Queering the (Camera) Matrix: Male Body Aesthetics in Erwin Olaf's and Ruven Afanador's Photography

Abstract: In the following paper, the author approaches some of the visual work of two contemporary photographers – Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador – in an attempt to see how their work renounces traditional views on masculinity. The photographs chosen for this analysis appear to be a peculiar play with social conventions and expectations related to gender and sexuality. In their work, both Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador seem to disrupt and reject the economy of heterosexual desire in favour of a much freer – and unconstrained by propriety – expression of corporeality and sensuality. As a result of such a spectacle of re-creation, the body is redefined not only as a means of expressing performativity (or, the surface onto which it is inscribed), but above all as a medium of becoming which functions as a reservoir of ever-changing meanings.

Keywords: photography, Erwin Olaf, Ruven Afanador, male body aesthetics, queer, masculinity

The human body seems troublesome: people tend to perceive it not exactly for what it is, and what it does (can we even see the body as it materialises, without judgment on what it should look like according to some arbitrary suppositions informed by our own desires and/or social propriety?); they cannot see the body, for what they see is an embodiment of their own ideologies inscribed onto it, in opposition to which the presence of any body is judged. We know that one's relationship with one's own body is problematic and based on multiple illusions, which starts with the mirror stage and is only reinforced later in life through id-ego-superego triad of conflicts. The affective and ideological load always makes the body detached from itself – it transforms the body into a nexus of acquired meanings. Thus, the body becomes a platform of cultural (re)negotiations of meaning which is either contained within the disciplinary regime,¹

1. By the disciplinary regime it is meant the kind of control which societies and their social structures inflict upon individuals to mould a certain type of human who conforms to their arbitrarily imposed expectations. The hypothesis best expounded by Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

or it tries to exceed such boundaries of propriety pushing for a freer expression of one's body. Since the body is always perceived relationally, neutrality or indifference is rarely a reaction which accompanies seeing a body: we can feel repulsed by some bodies – like the deceased body or abject body, or aroused by others – the erotic body. Sometimes even a mere suggestion at eroticism makes a more conservative viewer cringe at what they catch sight of, let alone seeing a depiction of exposed genitals (or some other erogenous zones). But it all boils down to a response to a particular type of body and its desirability, which is either an expression of our individual taste or an imposition of social norms, or sometimes a subconscious merger of both. In this paper, I will focus on two contemporary, and highly talented, photographers – Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador² – as they play with the representation(s) of the male body which transgresses the heteronormative matrix of desire(ability).

Both Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador not only document the specificities and idiosyncrasies of certain non-normative cultures but, above all, they play with their conventions and expectations, sometimes to the extent of physically engaging themselves in their creation. This can be seen in Olaf's self-portraits where he "refuses the 'supertourist' stance of documentary photography insist[ing] instead on [...] double investment [...] as both photographer and as erotic participant"³ in the same way as Mapplethorpe did in his works. However, this quality does not apply to most of Ruven Afanador's work. Contrary to Robert Mapplethorpe or Rick Castro, whose depictions of sadomasochistic (sex) culture were quite naturalistic, both Olaf and Afanador tend to use highly stylised frames. Even if Erwin Olaf does tackle the subject of sadomasochistic desire in his series *Chessmen*, it is executed in less naturalistic manner – with attention to framing the scene in a way that, rather than documenting, is playing with, or is building on, certain representations of the (sub)culture in question. If one were to look for similarity in capturing the subject-matter and arranging clear backgrounds, Peter Hujar would probably come to mind as a predecessor of aesthetics employed by Olaf and Afanador. In subsequent sections of this paper, I will focus separately on Erwin Olaf and then Ruven Afanador and proceed to compare their approach to representation of the male form in photography on the basis of a selection of their photographs.

2. The reader will find the links to both Erwin Olaf's and Ruven Afanador's photographs in the footnotes to this text.

3. Richard Meyer, "Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography," *Qui Parle*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1990): 65–66.

Erwin Olaf

Stricken with emphysema and believed by his doctors not to be likely to reach the age of 60 (he is 61 as of 2020), Olaf's appreciation of what there is to be observed is probably even greater. As he himself states in *The New York Times*' interview, "knowing you are one of the weak animals in the herd [...] It's a huge advantage that you are aware that you have to live now and not tomorrow."⁴ With this heightened sense of urgency resulting in appreciation of the reality before him, Olaf tends to endow his works with the tone of finality (as in, for example, "The Kite" from 2018): an attempt at making every single one of his photographs attain the greatest level of abstraction and distance only surpassed by an appearance of an extremely familiar object in the frame – the leaning so conspicuous in his recent photographs (including the portraits of the Dutch royal family).

Olaf's work starts in the late 1980s with the series *Chessmen*⁵ – highly symbolic and stylised shots exploring the terrain of deformity, domination and submission as well as fragility of life (especially in the photograph titled "XVII," 1988). The figures portrayed are, in most cases, stripped of (conventional) clothing, and even though there are some elements of sadomasochist culture incorporated in these representations, one does not get the same impression from these as one would get from Mapplethorpe's photographs of the same subject matter. Here, the sadomasochistic undertone – also underscored by the use of Roman armour and antlers – is but a means for a broader commentary on the imagery associated with either domination or submission, and not an end in itself. There seems not to be a consistent pattern of submission: in one photograph ("VI") the Rubenesque female body of a warrior is embraced in a submissive pose by both a male and a female who epitomise more modern expectations of the human body – disciplined and contained. On another occasion, the same figure rides a lean male who assumes the role of a horse in the photograph numbered "XI," but, yet in another photograph, it is the male sitting in a small chariot that forces the Rubenesque female into submission. In this series (*Chessmen*), Erwin Olaf bends social expectations concerning the male body probably most strikingly in his self-portrait from 1989.⁶ Dressed in a leather bodice with lace frills attached to its

4. Nina Siegal, "A Photographer Who Makes You Ask, 'What Has Happened Here?'" *The New York Times*, February 16–17 (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/arts/design/erwin-olaf-photography.html> (5.12.2020).

5. Publications of his photography include: *Chessmen* (1988), *Silver* (2003), *Erwin Olaf: Volume I* (2008), *Erwin Olaf: Volume II* (2014), *Erwin Olaf: Works 1984–2012* (2013), and the most recent *Erwin Olaf: I am* (2019) which comes with four different covers.

6. The photograph "Self-Portrait: Thirty Years Old" (1989) can be accessed on Olaf's official website: https://www.erwinolaf.com/art/squares_1983_2018 (5.12.2020).

bottom edges, strings of beads and make-up, he probably does not represent what most viewers would consider to be a conventional male of that period. The play with social expectations climaxes with his exposed – standing out from an opening in the bodice – and fully erected penis that draws the viewer’s attention to the fact that it is not a mere cross-dressing, or trying to pass as a woman (albeit with no breasts, the fact also exposed and highlighted through the appearance of an opening in the upper part of the bodice), but a performative, and transgressive in nature, act which exceeds the binarism of conventional gender norms. It is a feminised male body that, although dressed in attire typically assumed to be within the realm of feminine material expression, flaunts its erected penis with pride, and not shame as the heterosexual matrix of desire would dictate.

Another example of breaking, and playing with, gender expectations can be found in the series *Rouge* (2005), which depicts football players, not the usual kind though.⁷ Football – traditionally a domain of masculine competitiveness – is undoubtedly a realm of no trespasses (at least not intentional and in the open, probably with some occasional lapses in performance), a place where homosocial relations (as envisaged and theorised by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*) bloom behind the curtain, in the locker-rooms, but whose expression on the field should be curtailed according to heterosexual directives. Using a ball as well as a suggestive title for the series of three generically titled photographs of players (“Player 1,” “Player 2,” “Player 3”) Erwin Olaf plays with our preconceptions of a football player, for what one finds in these photographs is three silhouettes of rather skinny and twinkish constitution which is far from what one would anticipate from a trained sportsman customarily built of solid muscles. To make it even more subversive, the very subjects of these photographs are wearing unusual – as for a football match – attire. The garments they have on are characteristic of queer culture and unequivocally hint at the sexual scene: jockstraps and long socks. But that is not the only subversive framework of reference incorporated in this series, because, besides being dressed in queer sexual culture’s insignia, we find a face with stage make-up on along with poses which remind one of the art of camp (if not drag, especially in the case of the photograph where the player holds the ball tightly between their elbow and their body). This reference to performativity encapsulated in drag is further emphasised in the installation accompanying the series – here we see a sexualised male body once again wearing jockstraps and long socks, but instead of trainers, there are stilettos on their feet; the waist, on the other hand, is bound by the corset. What Erwin Olaf could be said to try to accomplish in the photo-

7. The photographs and the video accompanying the series can be accessed on Olaf’s website: https://www.erwinolaf.com/art/rouge_2005 (accessed 5.12.2020).

graphs mentioned above is performing an act of resistance to preconceived social roles imposed on gendered subjects, in the spirit of Butler's performativity which holds it that "the surface politics of the body implies a corollary redescription of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of presence and absence on the body's surface, the construction of the gendered body through a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absence."⁸ To this end, he engages, and rearranges, different attributes of femininity and masculinity with an emphasis on disrupting the hegemonic status of heterosexual masculinity and its expression in its matrix of controlled desire.

Ruven Afanador

Afanador's career has two main trajectories: the one correlated with his commercial collaborations (comprising most of his professional work) and, on the other hand, a more personal and avant-garde directionality of his creative activity.⁹ With portraits taken of such celebrities as Oprah Winfrey, Kim Kardashian, or even writer Margaret Atwood, his standing has been established as one of the leading photographers of the last decade or two. Here, I shall focus mainly on the non-commercial part of Afanador's visual production, although some of its characteristic elements are undoubtedly visible in his commercial work too – yet probably to a lesser extent.

An example of such surfacing of Afanador's intimate and subversive sensitivity is discernible in, for example, the way he captures Gabriel Moginot's corsets. In Afanador's photographs, this particular piece of garment is worn on male bodies, which makes its subversive usage undeniable, for what the photographer is presumably aiming at here is exposing the constructive nature of gender. Such photographs embody what Judith Butler proposed in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, and through Afanador's embodiments, Butler's gender performativity becomes even more tangible. The most oppressive form of male-gendered outlook comes, one should expect, in the modern "suit-ization" of the male body which begs to be freed from the constraints of business blandness so prevalent since the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁰ To liberate the man's wardrobe, Afanador puts the male body in corset – a piece of garment traditionally associated with disciplining the female

8. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 416.

9. To date, there has been four major publications of his work: *Torero* (2001), *Sombra* (2004), *Mil Besos* (2009), and *Angel Gitano* (2013).

10. An example of such queering of the modern suit has been performed by, for instance, Billy Porter on the red carpet (at the Golden Globes or the Oscars) for years now.

figure. In his photographs, corset is employed to “queerify” our expectations of what the male body can be bound by and how it can perform and (re)adjust its physical dimensions. But it also accentuates the fact that our bodies are only a departure point for a performance which utilises social conventions, yet sieves them through our personal tastes, and through the process of deconstruction and a subsequent play on and with them, our bodies can be (re)constructed for a personalised representation of one’s (dis)identity, an ongoing process of becoming which never finds a telos, because there is none.

Playing with representation(s) and “queerifying”¹¹ the masculine form through the use of corset is also present in other Afanador’s photographs, for instance in the *Angel Gitano* series where the photographer co-works with male gypsy Flamenco dancers in an effort to represent their unique lifestyle, with a queer twist. In one of the photographs from this series, we are faced with a male silhouette (of Gabriel Moginot) dressed in a corset and a long skirt.¹² Even though the pose could be rendered as feminised or camp, the model retains some of their traditional masculinity through wearing a moustache, bending thus the viewer’s expectations of homogenous masculine/feminine divide. As depicted in Afanador’s photographs, femininity and masculinity are bent so that they become abstract notions, and only elements of their representations are (re)used and tailored for individual embodiments which are frozen in time to give a sense of coherent identification. What lies at the heart of representation is not solidifying identity, but capturing a given stage of an incessant process of becoming (queer), of exceeding the boundaries of corporeality and normative directives. Both elements – the masculine and the feminine – are inscribed onto the male body for an unrepressed representation of a gendered corporeality. These representations do not strive to pass as one or the other, quite the contrary, they play with our expectations and inhabit the zone of indeterminacy, intermittently questioning our choice of identification of the subject, exposing its arbitrary and oppressive nature as the constitutive subjugation of the body to the disciplining regime of the heterosexual matrix of desire(ability).

Another aspect of Afanador’s work which exposes the performative nature of gender is signalled in some of the photographs from the *Torero* series, which represents the sensualities of young toreros. There is one picture in particular –

11. Not to use the word “feminising,” which would imply a process of imposing social constructions of femininity on the male body. What the photographs analysed in this article do is not a mere mimicking or “masquerading” of female embodiments, but employing features socially construed as feminine with a goal of “queerifying” the male bodies’ expression, with no intention of passing as a woman.

12. The picture can be accessed on Afanador’s website: <http://ruvenafanador.com/m/index.php?portfolio/55> (page 4/19; accessed 25.01.2020).

the one of a young bullfighter dressed in a tight bodice and regular sport shorts.¹³ What is relevant to gender politics and representation in this picture is the subject's pose, which reminds one of a movement classically made by women to tantalise a driver to give them a lift, but here, at the same time, it objectifies and eroticises the male body in the same manner as it would the female figure. However, the greatest subversion of the audience's preconceptions pertaining to gendered bodies comes in one of the photographs included in *Sombra* – the male body being framed in a vulnerable pose which deprives the figure of their phallus (the embodiment of masculinity and the power which comes with “wielding” one).¹⁴ In *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler elucidates the process in the following fashion:

The symbolic marks the body by sex through threatening that body, through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat, a castration, a privation of some bodily part: this must be the masculine body that will lose the member it refuses to submit to the symbolic inscription; without symbolic inscription, that body will be negated [...] [W]omen are always already punished, castrated, and that their relation to the phallic norm will be penis envy. And this must have happened first, since men are said to look over and see this figure of castration and fear any identification there. Becoming like her, becoming her, that is the fear of castration and, hence, the fear of falling into penis envy as well. The symbolic position that marks a sex as masculine is one through which the masculine sex is said to “have” the phallus; it is one that compels through the threat of punishment, that is, the threat of feminization, an imaginary and, hence, inadequate identification.¹⁵

Set in a pose which gives the impression of wide hips and curves the body at the same time,¹⁶ the model assumes the female attributes to some extent – not in the sense of imitation, but rather an expansion and diversification of the male body's aesthetics, renouncing in this way the logic of heterosexual binarism of genders. What one would expect from the male subject within the patriarchal order is covering the penis to avoid its exposure as a mere organ, and not a phallus; but, in the case of Afanador's photograph, we deal with the body imitating its lack for the purpose of exposing the sensitive point in representations of male bodies. The subject of the photograph embarks on the territory known only to eunuchs – it plays

13. The picture can be accessed on Afanador's website: <http://ruvenafanador.com/m/index.php?/portfolio/80> (page 8/17; accessed 25.01.2020).

14. The picture can be accessed on Afanador's website: <http://ruvenafanador.com/m/index.php?/portfolio/70> (page 9/21; accessed 25.01.2020).

15. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 101.

16. See also the photograph of Chad White, taken by Afanador, where the model is wearing lace underwear, turned with his back to the audience, he exposes his face in the mirror, which plays on the trope of narcissism, but, at the same time, is also a direct reflection on and reference to the photograph discussed here.

with the politics of power through its subversive, and empowering renunciation (as in drawing the gaze to other bodily parts which, with no penis in sight, become feminised at first glance by the male gaze and therefore deemed innocuous). This is probably why the patriarchal culture, which feeds on mythologizing the phallus (the nexus of its power), cannot stand having the organ associated with its dominance exposed to the public, and in public – the hypothesis explored by Peter Lehman in his book *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*. To retain its powers, the patriarchal and heterosexual censorship has to perpetuate the taboo which dictates that the phallus be kept hidden from the public sight. Such an explanation would definitely account for the widespread reluctance of the public to be exposed to the male nude in contemporary cultural productions,¹⁷ as opposed to the exposed female body which does not arouse such threatening feelings. Exposing the penis, on some level, demystifies the phallus, making it vulnerable and subject to scrutiny – the state of confrontation which is probably unbearable for patriarchy's own mythical self-actualisation. Within the patriarchal social and political domain, the male body cannot be sexualised or objectified, for it would belie its superior status as the one holding the ultimate authority; hence, every act of exposing the male nude is deemed transgressive in nature.

Conclusion

Photographs are aimed at capturing moments and experiences, yet their coming into being imposes certain restrictions on genuine representation if such representation is possible at all. We need to remember that what we see in photographs, such as those captured by Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador, is a certain take at feasible and recognisable grid of social identities and their reconfiguration(s) within the public sphere – sometimes the level of recognisability is limited only to particular subcultures which can decode given sets of symbols and tropes. What is more, photographic representations are confined by their two-dimensionality, and since images are frozen moments, they are, as Susan Sontag claims in *On Photography*, evocative and thought-provoking, but in themselves they do not convey complete and independent meaning entities, only signposts and some variations on them. Such representations might give rise to certain trajectories of thought,

17. One could just think about a quite recent movie – *Outlaw King* (dir. David Mackenzie, 2018) – with Chris Pine fully exposed to the public. Similar scene of female nudity would not evoke such objections, yet with having the male body revealed, surprisingly, it led to quite an uproar among those who believe that the male body cannot be seen without the veil of dignified symbolism or pathos.

but do not imprint universal and independent renditions of given phenomena in our minds.

Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador are contemporary photographers of great artistic sensitivity of not only capturing, but also enhancing the human body with something that goes beyond mere documentation. It could probably be queried whether their vision is more of an imposition of their own sensibilities on the raw material, that is, the body, which they accordingly mould through the lens of their eyes, and, by extension, also through the lens of their camera, or whether they use their insightful look for amplifying some characteristic features which they discern in their subjects. Both of them are in all probability more interested in envisaging potentialities of queer bodies rather than documenting certain subcultures and their bodily practices, although some of their photographs may bear the mark of being revisionist as in Erwin Olaf's *Chessmen* series (yet with a certain twist of performative playfulness and distancing). The queer gaze, which does not shun such non-normative exposures and vulnerabilities, engages in the (re)negotiations of the visibility and status of the body in the public sphere, for the nude does not appear mimetic (has nothing to imitate) but performative in nature. Inhabiting temporal and spatial realities, bodies, such as those employed by Erwin Olaf or Ruven Afanador – undisciplined, raw, transgressive, but also sublime – inhabit the now-and-here as lived and performed experiences (caught in the moment or being reconstructed), yet they can also point to some potentialities of expression hitherto concealed or unexplored as they unravel in front of our eyes as certain stages of the spectacle of becoming which endows the subject with some sort of agency in the endeavour of self-discovery.¹⁸

As instances of broader endeavour of queering the camera matrix, the photographs taken by Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador epitomise what it means to transcend the boundaries of the hegemonic heterosexual matrix of desire(ability), and, in doing so, they break with repressive directives of this realm. In terms of their aesthetics, Ruven Afanador's works bring elements of ephemeral and sometimes a hint of grotesque (see *Mil Besos*); Erwin Olaf's photographs, on the other hand, present unique and highly concentrated moments saturated with evocative and monumentalising tendencies at the same time. They are as awe-inspiring as they are immersive. It is especially in the pictures taken by Erwin Olaf – thanks to their

18. In an effort to revitalize queer studies, the notion of becoming has recently been employed by, for example, Mikko Tuhkanen in "Performing as Becoming" (where he juxtaposes Butler's conceptualisations of performativity with Braidotti's emphasis on transformation and radical "metamorphoses," adding insights from Deleuze, among others) – see also a volume edited by Tuhkanen and E. L. McCallum, *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* – or John Ike Sewell in "'Becoming Rather Than Being': Queer's Double-Edged Discourse as Deconstructive Practice" (with its accentuation on queer as being deconstructive practice).

unsurpassed perfectionism and attention to detail as well as a sense of a distanced yet engaging perspective – that one is enabled to step aside and reflect on the representation(s) in question. The male gaze, theorised by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” does not apply to these authors’ photographs, for they are informed by free-floating, transcending and fluid sensitivities and sensualities – in other words, they are informed by the indiscriminating and unrepressed queer gaze. Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* that “pleasure passes through the image,”¹⁹ and that is exactly the quality both Erwin Olaf and Ruven Afanador invest in their photographs, which become catalysts for (re)negotiations of queer erotic desire(s) and fantasies.

19. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 118.

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