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Authen Katinas

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Not Like Other Girls—*Victor/Victoria* Reviewed From a Trans Perspective

Authen Katinas¹

In the film *Victor/Victoria* (1982),² protagonist Victoria is a hungry and penniless singer who is barely getting by in 1930s England—until she meets Toddy. Toddy is a gay man and local performer who suggests a lucrative opportunity: that Victoria perform as a female impersonator, or rather, “a woman playing a man playing a woman.” Victoria accepts and creates a male persona called “Victor,” which jumpstarts her success and leads to her meeting King. King is a gangster who is intrigued by Victor and eventually discovers his/her secret, and so the two start a secret relationship together. The film ends when Victor publicly reveals that she is a woman in order to save King from financial ruin and to be with him long-term as Victoria.

As a nonbinary person, I naturally gravitate towards films about gender, but specifically films with a binary in the title that suggests a conflict of gender dialectics. I wasn’t familiar with the idea of female impersonators outside of drag queens/kings, especially in the Black Queer community, so I was interested to see how drag was shown in a white-centric 1930s setting. The film brings up quite a few issues regarding gender, but also regarding sexuality. In one scene, a cisgendered character named Norma displays all of the stereotypical “straight person” behaviours when talking to Toddy: suggesting she can turn him straight, that he is too attractive to be gay, and that his being gay is a waste. Because these ideas can be so common among the straight community it is helpful that the film shows this sort of situation and also shows Toddy responding to Norma in a successful way. I appreciate that, although the realities of being queer are shown in the film, homophobia and the suffering of queer people is not the focus—especially given the film’s setting (the 1930s) and time of creation (the 1980s). I also appreciate that the film avoids the amatonormative trope of the two main characters ending up together romantically—especially avoiding Toddy being “turned straight” by Victoria. Alternatively, it could have been a wonderful queer love story between a gay man and a trans man (Victor), which is very uncommon in media.

As a nonbinary person, however, I was disappointed that the film didn’t end with Victoria becoming Victor / becoming a man. I felt “trans-baited” because Victoria’s experiences and words are portrayed so uniquely as not only gender non-conforming but also as transgender. Victoria’s first exchange with King involves her saying that King doesn’t think Victor is a man because King is attracted to him, and King couldn’t possibly be attracted to a man. This could be a distinct trans experience, because part of why trans people make people uncomfortable is because trans people destabilize gender norms, which can in turn destabilize a person’s sexuality. King is clearly uncomfortable with the idea that he could be queer, which could also mean that King is uncomfortable with being seen as feminine. The

¹ Authen Katinas (also known as Athena) is an upper year Community Music student at Wilfrid Laurier University. They use any pronouns (they/she/he). This paper was originally submitted for GC480B: Women, LGBTQ+, Justice and Spirituality, Martin Luther University College, fall 2021.

² *Victor/Victoria*, directed by Blake Edwards (Santa Monica, CA: MGM/United Artists, 1982).

reason I bring up King's potential internalized misogyny is because of the film's focus on female impersonators. One manifestation of the male gaze could be men dressing up as women to perform sexually. Comparing King watching female impersonators for entertainment to his internalized misogyny and homophobia is fascinating. Sometimes I think that, when people struggle with their sexuality, they're actually struggling with their gender. For me as a nonbinary person, it's part joke and part truth that anyone who is attracted to me is automatically gay, because I'm neither binary gender. If a gay man is attracted to me, does that still make him homosexual? This could help explain in part why trans people are so hated by some people.

Although Victoria isn't a trans man, she is treated the way trans people are treated nonetheless. This is why anyone who is perceived as queer could face queerphobia, whether or not they actually are queer. King's obsession with proving that Victor is a woman by spying on her while she is in the bath reminds me of how trans people are subjected to personal questions or physical assaults so that strangers can figure out "what" they are. King's nosy behaviour is driven by his attraction to Victoria, but also by his need to validate his own sexuality and/or gender. This puts Victoria in a strange position of objectification, where her genitals either affirm or challenge King's sexual identity. Personally, I love the vagueness of being nonbinary because it doesn't disclose my original gender / "assigned gender at birth." Another common trans experience in relationships is how one partner's sexuality or transition affects the other partner's. I know many friends who have had relationships or marriages end when one person transitions. There is nothing wrong with a relationship ending, especially if it is to avoid compromising oneself, because "relationships are a two-way street," as King says. People can become uncomfortable with themselves because of how their partner's changes affect themselves—which seems to be the case with King.

I enjoy how the main characters are portrayed in the film, but it's unfortunate (and yet, effective) that it's at the expense of other characters. Norma is one of the only other cis women shown, and she is an unpleasant caricature of femininity. I imagine this is to further separate Norma from Victoria, especially because they are both King's love interests. Trans masculine people sometimes talk about this phenomenon, called "not like other girls," where one grows up thinking that they're better than other girls because they feel different. This phenomenon can be because a girl is neurodivergent, raised in a different ethnic culture, or because they're not a girl at all, but regardless, there can be misogyny there that needs to be challenged. As a kid, I thought I was "not like other girls," but after a lot of thought, I now know that me being nonbinary isn't because I'm better or that I "rose above" femininity. The way that Victoria is portrayed in contrast to the other female characters in the film reminds me of this "not like other girls" (which is of course influenced by her being the star protagonist in a story), which could send the message that Victoria becomes a "better woman" by becoming a man even partially. Victoria acknowledges this herself when she says that she benefits more in her career and in life from being a man.

In *Victor/Victoria*, trans women are often quickly disregarded or misrepresented in discussions about drag or female impersonations. The men who dress as women in this film who aren't a cis woman like Victoria are laughed at or are seen as "unconvincing." Two schools of thought coexist here: the idea of "passing" as a cisgender woman, and the idea of dressing up in femininity as a performance. Being a gender, passing as that gender, and dressing up as that gender are all ways to exist, but when passing becomes the only way to

experience gender, then trans people's lives suffer. Victoria's ability to blend in with the dominant society as a binary gender makes her a "good"-coded trans person—a more palatable anomaly. But what about nonbinary trans people, or androgynous cis people, or non-white trans people who are othered by white society at the intersection of race and trans-ness?

Early in the film, Victor tells King what kind of man she is: "one who doesn't have to prove it to myself or anyone." Some homophobia and transphobia can be jealousy—not jealousy of being queer itself, but jealousy of the departure from the norm, "emancipating" as Victoria says. Victoria and Toddy's duet number shows their strong friendship, but specifically their queer friendship and culture. The lyric "we're the kind of people other people would like to be" could represent the confidence and satisfaction that come from living as one's authentic queer self. I often get frustrated with people who don't easily experiment with sexuality and gender, but I must remember that if one isn't forced to question, or if one doesn't do it all at once, it can be very hard to do it one bit at a time (i.e., having a queer sexual encounter, thinking of oneself as the "opposite" sex). I try to have compassion for people like that as long as they aren't hurting others. But these people often remind me that they are not the anomalies—I am.