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Hortense Belhôte discovers the secrets of painting masterpieces. Queer and camp footprints as a means of a new manifestation and categorization of works in arte.tv

Joyful queer

Hortense Belhôte is a French actress, performer, art historian and a lesbian, a fact she neither hides nor exposes in any exaggerated manner. In a series of short film essays (up to 4 minutes) entitled *Please do not touch! (Merci de ne pas toucher!)*, broadcast since February 2021 on the German-French ARTE.TV channel, she interprets ten masterpieces of world painting in the spirit of queer theory and camp aesthetics (*Venus with a Mirror* by Diego Velázquez, *Olympia* by Édouard Manet, *The Origin of the World* by Gustave Courbet, *The Milkmaid* by Johannes Vermeer, Titian's *Diana and Callisto*, Ruben's *Hercules and Omphale*, *The Faithful Thomas* by Caravaggio, Paolo Veronese's *Leda and Swan*, Michelangelo's *Original Sin* and *St. Sebastian* by Perugino). The artist emphasizes that she does not intend to revise earlier works, often sanctified by the Christian tradition, but rather to play with the convention of film, smuggling in sexual allusions which she makes – if not the main – then at least certainly an inspiring message, enriching various interpretations with elements of humour, scandal or joy, flowing more from the belief that everything may look different, because it comes from a non-identity nucleus (normatively-permanent and well-established, queer-like unstable and fluctuating):

[...] at some point in my life, I decided to combine my professional activities and create a programme that would bring a bit of freshness to the musty walls of temples or museums. It struck me as I noticed that there are issues that are older than we all think: feminism, sexuality, masturbation, polyamory are not new and contemporary issues. By combining them with the history of antiquity, I desire to show that even at that time everything was fluid, blurry, ambiguous and at the same time heterogeneous (Belhôte 2021: 22).

She adds that the masters must reappear, or appear in a new space, because the idea of the programme is based on the rule of perversity – actors/extras (gays, lesbians, drags, bisexuals, gender-fluid, transvestites) taking part in the film production create a living museum of art (posing human bodies similar to the picture in question), and the past is embodied here and now in the form of their underslung,

or overly bent – in the spirit of camp – bodies. It seems that the definition of queering coined by Inga Iwasiów in her book *Gender for the Intermediate* is the closest to the French art historian:

[...] queer is an affirmation of otherness at its source, in the glare of the spotlight, pride in being the Other, replacing the fearful disclosure, pointing to the universal uniqueness of human condition, depriving colonizers and voyeurs of their privileges [...] queer are all those for whom the stigma organizes their lives, but who do not accept closing themselves in terms of one or another normality and they want to take advantage of the fact that the categories are open (Iwasiów 2004: 91).

Belhôte is the author of the screenplays for all the outstanding episodes. On the set, she gathered a group that identifies themselves with the method of queering masterpieces, i.e. via seeking oppressiveness and stigmatizing the Others, sexual freedom, unhampered by neither gender division nor even less by dependence on political and social conditions. To fully understand the intentions of the French art historian it is worth not only leaning over the primary meaning of the word “queer”, but above all about recalling the findings of researchers dealing with the broader theory of queer. The word that appeared in the 16th century meant strange, peculiar, eccentric, comic, extraordinary, unusual, controversial, excessive, inflated. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, it was associated with sexual deviation. It was used to define the effeminate men or those who had sex with people of the same sex. Nowadays, as Sebastian Jagielski points out, queer stands for:

[...] non-normative expression of all sexual queers – gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, drags – over the binary hetero/homo divisions, thus questioning all activities established on the basis of a stable, illiquid identity, being the result of a social contract (Jagielski 2012: 263).

Queers are therefore all those who represent a sexuality different from that founded on heterosexual procreative monogamy. Also, the heterosexuals who consciously do not design their sex life as delineated by society standards. It should therefore be emphasized that queer theory allows for the variety and multiplicity of sexuality: fluid, unstable and fuzzy. And it does not come down to sharp divisions between heterosexuality or homosexuality, but is rather based on their various shades. Queer theory opposes all oppressive practices excluding from society people who do not define themselves clearly as normative.

From lesbian-gay to queer studies

The origins of the queer theory should be sought primarily in the lesbian and gay studies founded upon the essentialist model, which assumed that the homosexual identity is based on the desire of the same sex members, in this way putting them onto the process of oppression and stigmatization. In the 1980's the 20th-century model has been superseded by the essentialist constructionists, who preached the idea that sex and sexuality are constituted by socio-cultural factors. Their findings have led to the constituting of the queer theory. Queer is therefore to destabilize

normative identity, proving they were established as a result of performing actions (constructing, producing, counterfeiting and manufacturing through reproductions and permissible rituals).

Joanna Mizielińska in her publication *Gender, Body, Sexuality: From Feminism towards Queer Theory* complements that the performativity of the word “is never a single act, but always repeats standards in order to achieve a certain goal – to materialize the ideal of gender, masculinity or femininity” (Mizielińska 2006: 116). The author cites Judith Butler’s discoveries in the book *Entangled in Gender*. She points out that the American researcher and philosopher introduces the term “to quote” (after Jacques Derrida) and uses it interchangeably with repetition, claiming that “quoting” is inherently connected with performative practices, enhancing their effectiveness and credibility.

In a landmark essay *Notes on Kampa*, Susan Sontag, an American author, essayist, defender of human rights, invariably concludes that these social constructs, taking into account the multitude of sexual practices, contests the monolithic heteronormativity by blasting it off from the core by behaviours that do not correlate with the purity of that manifestation (non-monogamy, BDSM relationships or sex for money). According to the researcher of the queer theory, it successfully resists patriarchal and heteronormative attitudes of societies. It accepts the fluidity and instability of gender and identity. It challenges strongly the emphasis on monogamy. Sontag sees in it a sign of oppressiveness and inclusiveness:

[...] queer is oriented towards the homosexual perspective, it reflects on the status of the Other, opposes gender arbitrariness. It also looks for traces of homosexual character in literary texts, works of art, and films that would openly demonstrate belonging to non-normative communities (Sontag 1979: 308).

Sebastian Jagielski, analyzing the book *The Art of Life Differently: Establishing Queer Time and Space* by Grzegorz Stepniak, reflects on the understanding of queer functioning in the 21st century. He asks whether it is only about defending the right to live in harmony with one’s non-normative sexuality, or whether the problem of queer identity should be considered in a broader perspective than just sexuality and gender. He suggests reflection on the stigmatization of groups identified with the queer theory due to their social, racial and ethnic affiliation. This greatly widens the scope of the theory and allows artists for in-depth reflection that goes beyond sexual normativity. In this way, the subjects of research are not only gays or lesbians, but heterosexuals who have never experienced sexual contact or those who intentionally, for religious or ideological reasons, reject their sexuality, understood as the desire and satisfaction of an erotic drive towards people of the opposite sex.

The structural and intertextual queer/camp

So how to understand queer/camp reading of works of art by Hortense Belhôte? Is it just about tracking down the sexual undertones in works that, as shown and discussed in the programme, often imply things in an unobvious and veiled way, or rather about a kind of artistic expression which reminds one of the poetics

of the camp expressed in the studies already expressed in Susan Sontag's studies? The researcher characterizes it as:

[...] a kind of aestheticism, seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, describing reality in terms of artificiality, stylization, excess, theatricality and excess. Camp is anything that perceptually absorbs structure, human behavior. The texture itself is more interesting than the trivial content (Sontag 1979: 309).

Camp is therefore part of the homosexual sensitivity. Also – the kind of expression that the non-normative can share with the hetero. Jack Babuscio lists four characteristics of camp as a kind of gay demonstration: irony, aestheticism, theatricality along with a sense of humour. They are all present in Hortense Belhôte's film essays. In the context of camp-related considerations it is worth recalling Sebastian Jagielski's findings that singled out categories of existence in the work (an essay film) by a queer/camp artist, and therefore also of the author of the *Please do not touch!* series:

- 1) the creator of the film work is a non-normative person and his or her views influence the recognition of their identity and the decoding of the work according to the queer theory (the Belhôte case);
- 2) the creator's identity may be, however not necessarily, homosexual;
- 3) a queer artist can be considered normative creator, yet in his or her works (film, literature, painting) appear topics, themes, undertones, and references to the queer theory;
- 4) it is possible to read every work (film, literary, painting) in a queer style, regardless of the author's sexual identity, provided that the text invites us to formulate questions about the structure of non-normative desire contained in it (Belhôte case);

In his text, "The theory of queer and Polish cinema", Jagielski emphasizes that:

[...] the same themes of forms, genres and styles keep returning in classic queer films [...], and their structure was based on *campa*, that is, on exaggerated aestheticism, theatrical gesture, visual excess and glamour. Queer are all those forms that depart from documentarism and realism (Jagielski 2012: 264).

The French art historian repeats in interviews that her approach to the art of masters is a game with a subtext that not everyone has to understand or accept. Such a declaration justifies the spacious choice of a film essay that Phillip Lopate placed in the hybrid category field. He points out, however, that this heterogeneous, and therefore fluid and difficult to define a genre, does not exist without words. The mere sequence of film shots does not constitute the essence of the essay, concludes the French linguist and philosopher:

[...] a film essay must contain words, both in spoken form and in the form of written comments, or even subtitles. I cannot unequivocally accept a clean, silent stream of images as an element that would constitute an essay discourse (Lopate 2017: 111).

Belhôte brilliantly understands that distinctive film essay feature is the word which completes the picture; for this reason, her intriguing and fully viewer-absorbing presence in front of the camera is not merely a narrative strategy in the traditional sense. The performer provides reliable knowledge about the history of paintings and the circumstances of their creation. She introduces, however, which is more interesting, as it broadens the essay film genre – meta-narratives, so she also talks about the process of constitution of film work, which, in the continuum of tracking relationship between texts, gains a new dimension. Following French structuralists, she treats images and film as texts that must be decoded in order to ascribe to them a new meaning; for this reason the series of essays *Please do not touch!* absorbs elements that have been taken over, also intentionally, from other borrowed discourses. According to Maciej Michalski, the analyzed formulas are unlimitedly open and programmatically left ajar. In such manner, they constitute a hybrid work that can exist only once, without the ambitions of repetition or reproduction. Consequently, it fits in with queer openness.

Hortense Belhôte, as I have already mentioned, is a lesbian, so she clearly defines her sexual identity. And the type of her narrative strategy fits in with the textual analysis of the works and the non-normative desire embedded in them. The hybrid species, selected by her, i.e. the essay film, also highlights the multitude of queer interpretations by absorption of various discourses, structuring them and reaching out for the turning points at the junction of acquisition of distinctive features from other stylistic and linguistic works, developed e.g. on the basis of literary studies. It is worth noting that Belhôte, as the programme host, somehow imposing her non-normative sexuality upon it, affects many senses (the camp strategy), causing the effect of an unstable and fluid identity through gaze, excess and free mixing of genre conventions – both in terms of language and image.

In fact, the idea she pursues is one: a complete shift in the queer education process from ignoring what does not fit in the social constructs of sexuality. According to the French art historian, joy, unrestrained fun, crossing moral boundaries and exposing the sphere of taboos are the key to queering masterpieces. Taken with a pinch of salt, often with irony and faith in fluidity and instability of the ultimate identity and the ultimately defined status, the works of the masters come alive again. They become defenseless against the arguments of a person who is in the know and who puts them in a new context, one that cannot be ignored.

Hortense Belhôte takes up Michelangelo's frescoes from the Sistine Chapel. In this way, she enters the space of the sacred with its campy excess of form and content. She narrates at a fruit and vegetable store wearing a blue tracksuit suggesting heavenly references. It blends into the space of a grocery store that may resemble the Eden. A multitude of shapes, forms and colours. An excess that overwhelms. She reminds that in 1512, Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with frescoes referring to scenes from the Old Testament, a total of 336 characters: muscular torsos, firm buttocks and shamelessly exposed genitals. The artist focused on anatomy, forgetting the pious message of the client. A few years later, his student painted blindfolds in places that might stumble. Belhôte asks: should we respect art or also decency? On her lips it does not sound

ironic and provocative. After the renovation of the Sistine Chapel in the 1980s, the sashes disappeared. Anatomy has returned to its correct proportions. As a result, censorship had disappeared, but there appeared room for queer speculation.

Belhôte looks at the scene of the original sin. She sees what others may not notice, seduced by the importance of the moment. Adam and Eve right before submitting to the will of the great serpent, and they are naked. The great mother keeps her head at the level of Adam's genitals. Belhôte jokingly asks: what were they doing before they saw the snake? She suggests oral intercourse, yet without irony, with a humorous point. So, one might think, was the Paradise filled with unsavory sexuality? Only knowing the truth prompted the first adult parents to return to the path of shame, but afterwards, they only cover their faces. They are still naked.

At this moment, the French historian looks with undisguised delight at the young man standing next to her in a paradise greengrocer's. He is naked, with a loincloth on. It's the androgynous type. Actually, you cannot tell. Could he be a woman? Evidently, everything sexual is fluid and indefinite. Both now and in 1512. Another fresco shows a drunk Noah. The naked old man is lying on the grass. His sons also dressed the way Adam was, with appetizing buttocks, try to cover their father with a transparent blue ribbon that reveals more than it covers. What is their real intention? Maybe it's not the father's nudity. It's a moment perhaps, in which the brothers include the excessive sensitivity and furtively look at each other. Perhaps in this look they reveal their homoerotic potential and conceal their erotic identity in a camouflaged way. Just look above. The stage is watched by young men holding garlands of acorns (an artifact with timeless erotic connotations). The conclusion of the programme performed by Belhôte makes us laugh: we were all born naked, but clothing does not change anything. It awakens more lust and makes us, perhaps, sexually evolve. It depends on who's watching. The programme is crowned with a contemporary scene – a performance: imitating the scene of original sin. Hortense as Eve, the androgynous type as Adam, and the saleswoman in a slim skirt with a snakeskin pattern on a ladder as the Evil one. The excess, the irony and the non-obvious sexuality that provocatively encourages her to look at the work of an artist of the popes. Aren't we hiding something by any chance?

Belhôte descends from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to the ground, about 20 meters down. She analyzes a different picture. This time, she takes on the work of Gustav Courbet, a French realist. In 1866, he painted *The Origin of the World*. It was commissioned by a Turkish collector of erotic paintings, and the one who posed to him was a French dancer, with whom he maintained well-paid relationships. It would be nothing strange, if not the content of the image. Courbet, as befits a realist, presented the model in a brief perspective. In fact, her hairy vagina is her strongest human resource. He forgot about her head, breasts, arms, stomach – Belhôte remarks amused, throwing off her clothes in the depilation room. Again, excess and exaggeration in queer terms. Hortense spins a tale about nudity, lying at the couch in an oppressive circumstance. It is an allusion to one of the subsequent owners of the canvas, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacane. The half-naked Hortense does not show her genitals. They are always covered with the lush hair of a dark-skinned beautician. It was not until 1996 that Courbet's painting found its way to the Orsay

Museum in Paris and aroused a wave of criticism. Funnily enough, because at the time it was created, it did not offend anyone. Hortense concludes with her courage and perversity: a naked woman is never your mother. Queer-camp appeal is obvious here. A portrait of a female vagina arouses curiosity through excess hair and sexual tension. We are dealing with the intersection of different visualities: the object we look at, thanks to Hortense's argumentation, acquires the features of queer desire. Is the model after the sexual act, before or maybe in the process of masturbating? With Courbet having devoted so much time and talent to this, the topic is worthwhile.

Queer interpretation of the message seems obvious. Everything is fluid, out of focus and can change at any moment. Depending on the look, which reveals desire and the will to touch, contrary to the title of the series *Please do not touch!* In view of different shades of human eroticism, we adopt the perspective of a camp voyeur as Hortense does. The essay ends with a posed scene – a performance: Hortense in the pose of Courbet's model with the vagina covered with the lush hair of a beautician as an extravagant *mise-en-scène* is also a manifestation of erotic tension. Irony and camp inflection in the service of art. And the problem of the excess of colours (pink gloves and wax) provokes an explosion of non-normative behaviour. The beautician covering the vagina of Hortense sees her up close. Her gaze may suggest a non-normative identity or be just a product of offense and camp associations, or a gay sensibility.

The *Please do not touch!* series is an important contribution to the contemporary analysis of works of art. Placing masterpieces in a space that concerns mundane, human activities is a queer provocation. Irony awakens at the intersection of objective and individual perspectives, while the excess and theatricality serves to understand the non-normative, fluid, homosexual and heterosexual identities. It is really worth immersing yourself in this world inscribed in the post-modernist style.

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Abstract

Hortense Belhôte, a French art historian, asks questions about the possibilities and limits of queering masterpieces of world painting. Her series of film essays entitled *Please do not touch! (Merci de ne pas toucher!)* is an attempt to read works, often sanctified by the Christian tradition, by tracing sexual artifacts and allusions, often hidden, in the paintings of heterosexual and homosexual artists. Queering art, according to Belhôte, is a game of hidden/uncovered with elements of camp aesthetics: irony, humor, theatricality and aestheticism. The author of the series plays with the film convention and brings the authors of works from Parnassus to contemporary reality: a laundry, a mechanical workshop, a beauty salon, in order to create a living museum played by non-normative people (they theatrically reproduce the compositions of images).

**Hortense Belhôte odkrywa tajemnice arcydzieł malarstwa.
Queerowe i kampowe tropy jako sposób nowej manifestacji
i organizacji dzieł sztuki w arte.tv****Streszczenie**

Hortense Belhôte, francuska historyczka sztuki, stawia pytania o możliwości i granice queerowania arcydzieł światowego malarstwa. Jej cykl filmowych esejów zatytułowany *Prosimy nie dotykać! (Merci de ne pas toucher)* jest próbą odczytania dzieł, niejednokrotnie uświęconych chrześcijańską tradycją, poprzez tropienie seksualnych artefaktów oraz aluzji, często ukrytych, w obrazach artystów hetero- i homoseksualnych. Queerowanie sztuki to według Belhôte zabawa w ukryte / odkryte z elementami kampowej estetyki: ironii, humoru, teatralności i estetyzmu. Autorka cyklu bawi się konwencją filmową i sprowadza autorów dzieł z parnasu do współczesnej rzeczywistości: pralni, zakładu mechanicznego, gabinetu kosmetycznego, by stworzyć żywe muzeum odgrywane przez osoby nienormatywne (teatralnie odwzorowują one kompozycje obrazów).

Key words: *Please don't touch!*, film essay, queer, camp, Hortense Belhôte

Słowa kluczowe: *Proszę, nie dotykać!*, esej filmowy, queer, kamp, Hortense Belhôte

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