

**HOW VLADIMIR PUTIN BECAME A GAY ICON:  
A REPARATIVE READING OF QUEER POLITICAL  
ICONOGRAPHY**

By

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## Abstract

My thesis focuses on recent forms of queer political iconography and its relation to the tradition of such iconography. I take to analyze “drag Putin” as a recent iconographical phenomenon which has been widely (re)produced in gay prides, public protests, media, and social networks by different LGBTQ/queer groups around the world that seek to confront the homophobic politics of Vladimir Putin. However, the ambiguous character of drag Putin has been raising conflicting emotions, opinions and evaluations within queer communities that follow from differently perceived strategies of the visual politics of this image. Hence, I set my research direction to examine, first, the iconographical strategies of drag Putin and its relation to the previous forms of queer political iconography (especially the iconography of ACT UP) and, second, the hermeneutical conflicts that shape different perceptions of drag Putin. I also determine my orientation to “reparative reading” (as theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) as the guiding mode of my interpretational work that can take into account all the complexities and ambiguities of queer political iconographies, and explain the functioning of those iconographies without falling into “paranoid” theories or interpretations. Reparative reading shows that the political load of drag Putin is based on the critical incorporation of Putin’s image into the iconography of queer movements and culture, which simultaneously is supported by critical intimacies, the pleasure of critique and the sexualization of Putin within gay culture. At the end of the thesis, I suggest the term “queer reparative picturing” that defines this and other visual reparative practices of queer communities, and opens up a field of possible research on visual politics in queer political organization.

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## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract .....   | ii        |
| Acknowledgements .....   | iii       |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1   Power and Political Imagery .....</b>                                   | <b>6</b>  |
| 1.1. Performative Power: Citationality without the Lures .....                         | 6         |
| 1.2. Resignifying Power: Laying the Layers .....                                       | 11        |
| 1.3. Affective Power: Circulations that Stick.....                                     | 13        |
| <b>Chapter 2   Looking at the Tradition: the Political Iconography of ACT UP .....</b> | <b>18</b> |
| 2.1. Before ACT UP: Respectability and Revolution .....                                | 18        |
| 2.2. ACT UP's Productive Negativity: Resignifying Monsters .....                       | 21        |
| 2.3. Iconographical Archive of Queer Paranoia: How to Read it Differently.....         | 27        |
| <b>Chapter 3   Drag Putin: from Enemy to Gay Icon .....</b>                            | <b>33</b> |
| 3.1. Drag Putin as Parasitic Critique .....  | 33        |
| 3.2. Paranoid Readings: Camp, Drag, and Shame .....                                    | 37        |
| 3.3. Reparative Readings: Incorporation, Pleasure, and Critical Intimacies .....       | 40        |
| 3.4. Queer Reparative Picturing .....  | 44        |
| <b>Conclusion.....</b>   | <b>50</b> |
| Appendix .....   | 53        |
| Bibliography.....  | 55        |

## Introduction

In 2013, a federal law banning “the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” (Russian LGBT Network 2013) in public was adopted in Russia. It was unanimously approved by the Parliament and strongly supported by President Vladimir Putin. Threatening lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people with fines and detention, the “gay propaganda law” seems to have been enacted to constrain the visibility of LGBT groups, to silence their voices and experiences, and to push away their identities to the margins of society. As a result, this criminalization of LGBT freedom of expression has made the times for LGBT groups in Russia dangerous and has triggered and legitimized a wave of open and public violence against them as well (Luhn 2013). Despite international pressure from different European governments and many non-governmental human rights organizations, Putin still defends the law and rejects the criticism.

In response to that, all around Europe and in Russia queer movements<sup>1</sup> organize themselves by utilizing various forms of politics to protest against Putin’s homophobic politics. One of those forms which interests me here is the visual politics that the movements are using by critically constructing their political iconography.

Queer political iconography could be described as imagery produced and used by queer movements or persons in direct action, street politics, and digital space for political purposes. The movements that are protesting against Putin’s homophobic politics provide a recent example of such iconography: the “drag Putin” image (fig. 1). Drag Putin anonymously emerged on the Internet just after the “gay propaganda law” was adopted in order to criticize Putin as the face, the “brand” of Russian homophobic politics. Now this image and its constantly proliferating variations are being (re)produced in gay prides, public protests, media, and social networks.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using “queer movements” as a term that includes all social movements or groups organizing themselves on the basis of non-heterosexual sexualities.

However, the drag Putin phenomenon interests me mostly because of its ambiguous character that raises conflicting emotions, opinions and evaluations within queer communities. By stimulating public discussions whether it is a case of transphobia or, on the contrary, a subversion of homophobia and gender roles (Williams 2014), this image and its interpretations pose relevant questions for academic analysis. These and other conflicting viewpoints of drag Putin follow from differently perceived strategies of the visual politics of this image. While those who understand this image as transphobic emphasize the strategy of shaming that seems problematic to them, another group perceives drag Putin as the strategy of dragging/camping that subverts and “denaturalizes” the homophobic regime of Putin (Williams 2014). In order to go the core of this conflict while simultaneously keeping a critical distance from these two overly simplistic interpretations and exploring other more complex ways of understanding it, I take the following question to be **the most important aim** of this paper: What visual strategies lie behind recent forms of queer political iconography and how do they relate to the tradition of such iconography?

Since my aim comprises of two aspects, I will first analyse the pictorial variations of drag Putin that have been widely used in political protests of LGBTQ/queer movements around the world. To address the second aspect, and to provide the historical context of queer political iconography in which drag Putin might be perceived, I will direct my attention to the ACT UP movement’s political iconography (throughout the 1980s and 1990s) and explore how this queer movement used the faces of its political opponents in the movement’s posters and why exactly this strategy was employed. Due to the limited length of a Master thesis, I will examine only this one historical example of queer political iconography. I take the iconography of ACT UP for contextual and comparative reasons because of its similarity to recent iconography in terms of means and forms of visual strategies (i.e. both – the

iconographies of drag Putin and ACT UP – take the faces of their political enemies as the object of the critique).

In the broadest and most abstract sense, my paper explores the ambiguous and multifaceted combinations of power and political imagery. In this thesis, I am interested in the particular forms of those combinations, the analysis of which can help to define and to investigate the specific examples of political iconography the best. Thus, my theoretical framework will conceptualize the nature of political imagery by analyzing its performative power, its power to resignify and its affective power. These categories will inform the analysis of drag Putin and the iconography of ACT UP, for they can address the most complex specificities of such iconographies. In order to build this theoretical repertoire, I will take the category of performativity from J. L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory and its critical examination by Jacques Derrida (1982), the concept of resignification from Judith Butler's (1997) thoughts on politics of resignification, and the conceptualization of affects from Sarah Ahmed's (2004) theory of affective economies in order to productively transform these concepts into the useful categories for the analysis of the political imagery. Hence, my project stands on the intersection of queer theory, poststructuralism and visual studies, and could be situated in what has been called "pictorial turn" in the humanities (Bakewell 1998) or "iconic turn" in critical theory and cultural studies (Wolff 2012), which relies on previously marginalized aesthetic experiences, encounters and affects. Having said that, I position my project in this "turn" not without a critical re-evaluation of this very field.

Another central theoretical orientation of this thesis is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) notion of "paranoid" and "reparative" readings. These two different modes of interpretation present a hermeneutical conflict between, on the one side, an analysis driven by suspicion, negativity, and finding knowledge, and, on the other side, an analysis based on affective openness, affirmative criticism, and seeking pleasure. These two interpretational frameworks

will allow me to explore existing different interpretations of particular forms of queer political iconography and to suggest unexplored reparative ways of perceiving it that take into consideration all the complexities those iconographies carry. Thus, an orientation to those reparative interpretations is the underlying presupposition of this project.

For the discursive research of both iconographies, I will employ a visual discourse analysis, which is part of a critical visual methodology that underlines cultural signification, social practices and power relations when analyzing the imagery (Rose 2002, 135-138). Following Rose (*Ibid.*), I will use a visual discourse analysis that applies a Foucauldian framework of analysis and utilizes the concepts of discourse and power that will lead my research. This particular method is useful because of the character of my object of research: the imageries of LGBTQ movements are directly related to reconfiguration of power relations using discursive-intertextual means.

The overall significance of my project is related to the fact that the existing scholarship of visual queer culture does not extensively focus on the field of queer political iconography. As Meyer (2006, 441) assures, the scholarship almost completely ignored the aspects of visibility and visual politics in lesbian and gay political organization. While quite a number of LGBTQ studies concentrate on the intersection of art, politics and culture, the political imagery of queer movements today still attracts little attention from scholars. Consequently, my work is trying to address the problem that until now “queer political iconography” has not emerged as an independent research field. Therefore, the traditional forms of queer political iconography have not been researched “properly” and the recent forms of it (such as “drag Putin”) have not been analyzed at all. My analysis will contribute to the research field of queer visual culture while examining very recent social and political phenomena. This will enable to explain the role of visual politics in queer political



organizations: i.e. how visual politics are taken to fight dominant discourses, representations and power, and to build communities, solidarities and culture.

In the first chapter, I will explore how the power of political imagery constructs the political image as an act in itself that triggers effects and affects. I will use the concepts of performativity, resignification, and affects that later will shape my particular analyses of different queer political iconographies. The main focus of my second chapter is the reading of queer political iconography of the ACT UP movement. Invoking the categories of performativity, resignification, and affects, I will simultaneously explore the visual materials of ACT UP through paranoid and reparative readings. The third chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the drag Putin iconography. While engaging the two different discussions on the meanings of drag, camp, and shame(-ing) that defines the essence of drag Putin, I will direct my analysis to thus far unexplored reparative interpretations of drag Putin. After this, I will compare different queer visual strategies of using political iconography and conceptualize the strategy of “queer reparative picturing” that drag Putin illustrates.

## Chapter 1 | Power and Political Imagery

In this chapter, I develop a set of conceptual categories that will inform the analysis of queer political iconography in the following chapters. I construct this framework out of the categories of performativity (taken from Austin's work and Derrida's commentary on it), resignification (as it appears in Butler's writings), and affects (as theorized by Ahmed). In this chapter, all these concepts are transformed into useful tools for a visual analysis, since the analysis shaped in this way discloses the functioning of political imagery understood through the different power modalities: performative power, power to resignify, and affective power. Alongside this, throughout the chapter I engage into the discussion on the "iconic turn" that allows me to orient those concept towards the field of visibility.

### 1.1. Performative Power: Citationality without the Lures

Images can have a performative power or can *act* performatively, thus, be an *act* in itself. In 1962, Austin explained "how to do things with words", i.e. how language and speech acts in particular can be performative. As some scholars noticed, instead of being only about linguistics in a strict sense, the concept of performativity can be reconfigured and applied to different phenomena, including images as well. Although quite a number of scholars have tried to show "how to do things with images" (Pateman 1980; Bakewell 1998; Wolff 2012; Ash 2005; Cronin 1999 etc.), they have mostly used advertising images in order to show the power of persuasion and the impact that images have on us. Since for my analysis I am using political images, understanding the power of an image must not be based on the criterion of persuasion that can be either successful or not (Pateman 1980), but on the things, effects and affects it creates that cannot be measured by success or failure. Hence, my analysis must start with coming back to Austin's thoughts on performative speech acts while at the same time considering Derrida's critique of his ideas, in order to reshape and refresh the concept of

performativity and all that follow from it, and this way to make it useful when analysing political imagery.

In his book “How to Do Things with Words” (1962), Austin breaks with the conventional understanding of language as a tool to transmit information. He claims that speech in the form of an utterance can be not only a statement that describes or reports something, but that utterances can be performative – they can be acts, they can do things or cause an effect and hence be productive. Austin illustrates how utterance can be performative through some examples: when one says “I do” during one’s marriage ceremony, when one, being in the authority position, declares war, when one, responsible for this role, names a ship – these are all about saying and doing at the same time (Austin 1962, 5-7). These statements, uttered in the right time and right place, are not descriptive or reporting – they are the performance of the action which results in producing a new object (be it a particular ship, marriage or war). Some rules are necessary for the utterance to be successful: for instance, “appropriate circumstances” (the setting, witnesses and other important attributes in the marriage ceremony, authority position in declaring a war etc.) or certain intention (an honest promise, sincere intention to marry, basically no joking, lying or acting) (*Ibid.*, 8-11). If these conditions are damaged, the performative utterance is not false (for it always does an action) but rather void, “given in bad faith” or “not implemented” (*Ibid.*, 11). These unhappy performatives or infelicities, as Austin named it, are characteristic to all conventional speech acts because such acts are susceptible to be used mistakenly, unintentionally, by accident, when influenced by someone or something in a way that reduces “agent’s responsibility” (*Ibid.*, 21).

What is important in Austin’s work for me here is the turn from the descriptive function of words to a performative function. This opens up the possibility to conceptualize language and speech in particular as having a power to affect reality, to produce objects, to

make things. It also changes the notion of language – while we tend to understand language as a means of communication, as a tool in the hands of the subject, the performative power of speech acts tells something different about it: language itself is a performative, powerful, productive force that can work because of its quality or character. However, language is not autonomous – according to Austin (1962, 60), performative utterance is coupled with the performance of an action and, thus, the performer, the person who performs the act and utters the speech act. It means that the productive force of language in performative utterances is partial and dependent on the performer which is positioned as a source of an utterance.

Worth mentioning is the critique addressed to Austin by Derrida in his text “Signature, Event, Context” (1982) which is usually ignored by scholars who apply speech act theory to images. Derrida mostly concentrates his criticism towards Austin’s distinction of the ordinary use of language and the “parasitic”, “abnormal” use of language. Austin (1962, 22) excludes parasitic use of language from his theory of happy and unhappy performatives and claims that parasitic speech acts (such as acting on a stage, reading poems, joking, not being serious) etiolates and weakens the “health” of the language. Derrida (1982, 16-17) claims that Austin excludes those speech acts as parasitic performatives from “ordinary language” because of their citational character which ruins the responsibility, authenticity, and centrality of the subject. While for Austin parasitic language is that which relies on citations and, thus, does not respect the *seriousness* and authenticity of the language, Derrida (*Ibid.*, 18) shows that, on the contrary, all speech acts (including “ordinary language”) are citational because, without any codes or conventions repeated, performative utterance could not be recognized or identified at all. Derrida makes it clear with the question:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”? (18).

This means that the opposition between singular original utterances and citational parasitic utterances that Austin insisted on are replaced by Derrida with “different kinds of marks or chains of iterable marks” (*Ibid.*) that characterize the citational character of every utterance. This also changes the way we position a performer in the act of utterance: instead of intentionality and consciousness of the subject that governs the utterance, “this essential absence of intending the actuality of utterance, this structural unconsciousness” (*Ibid.*) takes place in the speech act. In other words, the subject no longer does things with words if by *doing* we mean producing an authentic objects by authentic subject, rather the subject is displaced by his/her citational utterances.

How can all this allow us to engage in the discussion on performative images instead of utterances? The scholars working on the “iconic turn” have shown how influent Austin’s theory for visual analysis is: in visual analyses, speech acts are translated into image acts, verbal performatives into visual performatives (Bakewell 1998), successful and unhappy performatives into successful or failed persuasion of the image (Pateman 1980; Ash 2005). Most of the authors that work within this new paradigm recognize that the humanities have marginalized aesthetic experiences, encounters, and affects by privileging “hermeneutic (and semiotic, analytic) approaches [which] cannot do justice to aesthetic experience” (Wolff 2012, 8). Consequently, the “pictorial turn” proclaims “a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality” (Mitchell in Bakewell 1998, 27). Images are seen to have a performative power which is given to them by spectatorship, instead of being just the passive objects without agency, but, however, this power is beyond the reach of semiotic, linguistic analyses (Wolff 2012, 7-8). The major problem I see is that scholars of the “iconic turn” more or less univocally argue that this postlinguistic analysis could give an access to the “real” perception unmediated by language (Moxey 2008, 132), since language is seen as the “mortal enemy” of

experience (Wolff 2012, 9). While I consider the critique of the humanities and critical/cultural theory regarding the marginalization of aesthetic experiences fair and reasonable, what troubles me here is the insisting on the postlinguistic analysis of the image as a way to reach the unmediated, pure essence of the image. This “lure of immediacy” (Wolff 2012), this belief in the existence of “culture-free” and “language-free” experience, I claim, might be the result of an uncritical appropriation of Austin’s speech act theory.

As mentioned above, when transforming speech act theory into the analysis of images, scholars tend to ignore Derrida’s critical commentary on Austin’s work. While the “iconic turn” surrenders to the “lure of immediacy”, Derrida (1982) writes about “the teleological lure of consciousness” (18) in Austin’s theory (attributed to the ordinary, original, intentional, and “relatively pure” utterances) which is supported by the belief in authenticity, originality, and singularity. What has been done here by scholars within the “iconic turn” is the replication of the speech act theory without considering the poststructuralist critique. In other words, scholars of visibility replicated the speech act theory by changing only its major focus, but not the rest. They claim that authenticity, originality, and singularity come not from language, but on the contrary, from images that were for a long time polluted with linguistic and semiotic interpretations. Images, not language, become a resort for an original, authentic experience. This has been done without questioning those categories, without taking into account Derrida’s critique and ignoring the concept of citationality and the deconstruction of “parasitism” suggested by him.

I address exactly these aspects because the critique of authenticity and the concepts of citationality or “parasitism” are, as I will show in my analyses later, crucial in analyzing the performative aspects of political imagery, especially queer political imagery which revolts and fights against hegemonic representations, discourses, and power that are exactly those bastions of ostensible authenticity and originality. Derrida’s revision of Austin’s speech act

theory provides the possibility to critically translate the significant concepts useful for a visual analysis of political imagery and to go beyond the “lure of immediacy”. Performativity based on citationality and the critical-strategic use of “parasitism” in the analysis of queer political iconography leaves no promises of authenticity and originality, and this only grants the critical dimension to such analysis.

Thus, while leaving the performative power of the image as a foundational point of departure in the analysis of queer political iconography, this re-examination of Austin’s theory through Derrida’s writing supplements it with new critical categories. Since the political image is a performative act that works in a citational or “parasitic” manner, it also causes effects. In the next section, I explore another mode of power: how the political image employs resignifying power to fight the hegemonic meanings, i.e. how it creates the effects of resignification.

## **1.2. Resignifying Power: Laying the Layers**

Since the “iconic turn” recognizes that performative power can be conceptualized in images to the same extent as in words, there is another step to be made in order to address another kind of power that is characteristic to words as well as, I claim, to images. It is the power of resignification that Butler analyzes in her writings.

In her text “On Linguistic Vulnerability” (1997a), Butler’s main argument relies on the assumption that we all are linguistic beings, for language is the condition for us to exist, to come into social being by the process of interpellating a body within language. As Butler claims, this is the reason why we are so susceptible to linguistic injury, so vulnerable to hate speech and to offensive call; this is why we feel that hate speech hurts us and even threatens our existence. She further argues that even though hate speech as a threat is “already a bodily act”, it simultaneously promises the material effects or consequences of the uttered words:

“the threat begins the action by which the fulfillment of the threatened act might be achieved” (*Ibid.*, 11). This is the place where Butler points out the temporal gap between the “act of threat” and the “threatened act” which opens up the possibility for a failure to fulfil the act and, thus, the possibility of unexpected response from the addressee. She proposes an outline of the strategy of critical response to hate speech by the actions of misappropriation, resignification and recontextualization of hateful speech acts in a way that rejects the role of the state as interventional power and relies on agency derived from injury.

When Butler (*Ibid.*, 14) writes about resignification practices, she illustrates it with the misappropriation of the term “queer” from its “original” meaning as an insult. The simplified model of resignification can be illustrated in a situation when one responds to a homophobic attack with “Yes, I am queer and I am happy being one!”. The recognized public revaluation of the “queer” is a proof for her that resignification of hate speech can be a successful strategy. In another text, where Butler (1997b, 69) analyzes the debate on pornographic images, she suggests the same strategy of resignification: instead of relying on state power in order to abolish offensive pornographic visuals, she calls for resignification which is a work of reading such *texts* against themselves and changing their previous dominant meanings.

The fact that images, like words, can misappropriate, resignify, and recontextualize is known and practiced, although, to my knowledge, nowhere explicitly theorized as such. “Culture jamming” practiced by guerrilla artists is one of such examples where images are used to resignify the dominant representations, discourses, and power. Culture jamming is “the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages” (Klein 2005, 438). By using culture jamming, guerrilla artists not only protest against neoliberalism and commercialization, they rather modify the meaning of advertising images by critically reworking and editing them. They use advertising image as an “activist canvas” (*Ibid.*, 439) that can change the dominant primary meaning with an alternative one.



Resignification in images works similarly as in words: the dominant meanings can be altered by insisting (in one way or another) on different significations. However, the new meanings never completely replace the previous ones – new meanings are always entrenched into the historicity of the previous ones: “the present discourse breaks with the prior ones, but not in any absolute sense. On the contrary, the present context and its apparent “break” with the past are themselves legible only in terms of the past from which it breaks” (Butler 1997a, 14). The same applies to culture jamming or other forms of political iconographies: in the resignification process, the historicity of meanings is indispensable, which means that new meanings come to form a new layer of signification. Hence, resignification lays new images on the previous images and in this way changes the dominant meaning of the primary image. In fact, this is the other way of approaching the issue of citationality: in the resignification process, one must quote the previous image, the previous discourse, in order to generate a (new) meaning out of it. Therefore, without historicity, always present and visible in the resignified image as citationality, there would be no intelligible result of resignification.

Since I have shown that images can function as resignifying practices directed against dominant representations, discourses, and power, in the next section, I turn to explore another mode of power characteristic to political imagery – the power of affects.

### **1.3. Affective Power: Circulations that Stick**

In the previous sections, my leading question was “how to do things with (political) images” and performativity (and citationality or “parasitism” that follows from it) together with resignification were the answers that I suggested to this question.

One more answer to this, one more mode of power that enacts political images as those which are able to challenge the dominant representations and discourses, is the affective power of the political image. Following Sara Ahmed's (2004, 119) claim that “emotions *do*

*things*”, my analysis, here, attempts to theoretically outline *how* emotions do things in the case of political images.

In the field of the “pictorial turn”, images are perceived, among other things, to be the objects of emotions (McLaren 2013, 97) that can touch the spectator with “affective force” (Ash 2006, 510) and, thus, inspire emotional reactions or actions. However, the affective power of the image does not reside in the image itself, nor does it work in a one-directional manner as coming from images to inspire emotions. Affects are seen to be produced by “constitutive relationality” – the relations between bodies and images where affective relations are produced and transformed (Coleman 2008, 169-174). In this way, images become not only things, but also “experiences to be lived out” (Coleman 2013, 5). Sara Ahmed provides a theory of affective economies that can help to extend and elaborate this discussion on affects and images.

Ahmed’s (2004) theory is grounded in relationality as well. She claims that emotions are not a private matter, not a property that belongs to individuals or reside in things: “emotions do not positively inhabit any-body as well as any-thing” (121). Ahmed mostly grounds her analysis in the categories taken from Marx and that allows her to claim that affect works in a form of capitalist economy where it is “produced only as an effect of its circulation” (*Ibid.*, 120). Affective economy, i.e. the system of circulation of affects, is exactly what increases the “surplus value”, the magnitude of affect. This means that “the subject” [as well as “the object”] is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination” (*Ibid.*, 121). Thus, emotions or affects are produced in a form of circulation between signs, objects, and subjects, in a form of economic relationality which only augments the value of emotions.

Ahmed (*Ibid.*, 124) characterizes affectivity as something that is difficult to locate in one place. This restless character of affect, this “failure” to reside in objects or subjects, is

exactly what makes affects productive in generating what Ahmed calls “adherence” and “coherence”. Adherence is the effect of the circulation of affects that sticks separate and different figures, objects or signs together, while coherence should be understood as circulation that sticks bodies into a collective. Adherence is generated by “sideway movements” or “sticky associations” between objects, signs or figures that affects evoke, while coherence is generated through “align[ing] individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments [to affects]” (*Ibid.*, 119). This begs for a conclusion that emotions “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds” (*Ibid.*, 117). Hence, those constantly circulating affective economies apparently *do things*: they construct communities and affective systems of sign, objects or figures.

Since affective economies are about a relational circulation of affects among different nodal points in the affect economy, rather than about the private feelings of the subject, this can lead directly to the discussion on the affective power of images. Images, I claim, do not hold affective power; they are neither a source nor the origin of emotions which are usually perceived as coming to the subject from the image in the act of an encounter between them. When we understand images as necessarily containing a particular affect that the image triggers in us, it is only, as Ahmed (2004) assures, a deception: “feelings appear in objects, or indeed *as* objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production ..., as well as circulation or exchange” (121). What stands behind every affect in the encounters with images is the history of affect’s circulation. When analyzing images, this should be taken into account together with the historicity of citational performativity and resignification: nothing in images is given; every affect, visual quote or layer have their histories.

The circulation of affects between images and subjects generates affective power or “affective force” that can stick, on the one hand, signs into the collections of meanings, and on the other hand, bodies into the collectives of people. These circulations that can stick are exactly what affect can do in the case of images: they can bring together the different signs and figures in images and form the affective meanings of those images through emotional attachments to them; and they can form a collective of bodies under the affective image that binds them together. The effect of “coherence” plays a pivotal role in analysing the circulation of affective power between political images and bodies: it is not a coincidence that often political groups or social movements evoke political imagery not only to frame themselves in the highly visualized culture, but also to stick to their communities, to tie the emotions to the movement through affective images. Thus, the affective economies grounded in relational circulation of affects between images (with their signs and figures) and bodies that can bring things together and produce collectives and collections (of meanings), open up the possibility to analyse the power of political images as arising not from holding and merely triggering affects, but from circulation of those affects that always bring their histories with them.

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The scholars working within the “iconic turn” have shown that images, like language, can not only report or describe, but be performative as an act in themselves. But again, what is missing in speech act theory as well as in the “iconic turn” is a critique of the notions of authenticity and originality, and a recognition of citationality as the governing principle of the performative act, be it speech act or image act. Citationality also includes historicity that is always present in the image. Historicity is visible even in the practice of resignification of the image, hence, resignification is always already a process of “laying the layers” – adding new meanings on the previous ones that are visible on the surface of the image. Historicity is also a very significant aspect of affects: while we tend to think that affects reside in images or

subjects, they work as an economy where the circulation of affects result, on the one hand, in sticking the signs and meanings of images, and on the other hand, in sticking bodies into communities under the affective image that binds. Hence, every-thing and every-body embedded in affective economies has a history – the traces of the circulation of affect.

This analysis provides useful categories for a visual analysis of (queer) political imagery that are complex enough “to do justice” to aesthetic experiences and visualities. Instead of uncritically following the promises (which come from the “iconic turn”) of an unmediated and authentic access to images available only by rejecting linguistic categories and language in general, I focus on the complex conceptual repertoire that can address the specificities of political imagery. One of the general specificities of (queer) political imagery is the fact that it is embedded in power relations and discourses, and, thus, plays specific roles in those relations and discourses and, as I have shown, can employ different power modalities: performative power, resignifying power, and affective power. In the following chapters, I will use this conceptual framework to analyze “traditional” and recent forms of queer political iconography.

## Chapter 2 | Looking at the Tradition: the Political Iconography of ACT UP

In this chapter, I direct my attention to the ACT UP movement's political iconography throughout the 1980s and 1990s. I focus on the particular graphic strategy: my chapter seeks to explore how this queer movement used the faces of its political opponents in the movement's posters and why exactly this strategy was employed. In the analysis, I once more use the categories of performativity (through citationality), resignification, and affects, while also employing the interpretative framework of "paranoid" and "reparative" readings (Sedgwick 2003a). I claim that ACT UP's graphic strategy can be defined as appropriating the genre of "monstrosity" and, thus, as a surrendering to negativity and paranoid practices (*Ibid.*), but still open to reparative reading from today's contemporary perspective. At first, I provide a short overview of the history of queer political iconography. After that, I turn to analyse the visual materials of ACT UP and, finally, I end with the discussion on the possible modes of interpreting ACT UP iconography.

### 2.1. Before ACT UP: Respectability and Revolution

A historical account on queer political iconography can be started by turning to the early years of gay and lesbian political organization. Emerged in the 1950s, the "homophile movement" in the U.S. gathered lesbians and gays for a political cause to end discrimination against homosexuals. By late 1950, *The Mattachine Society* appeared as an organization uniting homosexual men to promote the distinctiveness of gay culture, to give a sense of belonging and to form a political response to discriminatory laws (McGarry and Wasserman 1998, 143). However, in the following years, the profile of the organization was changed to a more assimilative direction: the emphasis on "sameness", "normality" and "evolution" instead of "revolution" replaced the previous focus on difference and distinctiveness (*Ibid.*, 145). In

1955, *The Daughters of Bilitis*, the first lesbian political organization in the U.S. emerged for the same reasons: to form a sense of belonging and encourage better social inclusion of lesbians into society, while undertaking a mission to educate society and eradicate prejudices against homosexuals (*Ibid.*, 146-147). These “homophile groups typically stressed responsible citizenship while seeking social and legal reforms that would improve the lives of homosexual people. They represented homosexuality as dignified, nonthreatening, and assimilable to the mainstream” (Meyer 2006, 450).

Consequently, the framing of the public image of homosexuals and carefully crafted visual politics were essential parts of the homophile movement. The chosen visual politics direction was a “politics of respectability” that required “to tone down what they considered the more flamboyant aspects of gay and lesbian culture to avoid alienating potential supporters” (Kissack 1995, 107). The Mattachine Society chose to promote the image of the homosexual man as a middle-class professional worker in order to distance themselves from stereotypic “swishness” or “effeminacy” of homosexual men which for them represented a “degrading stereotype” that carried negative meanings (Loftin 2007, 579-580). The same emphasis on respectability was present in the lesbian movement, where the general image of a lesbian was constructed according to the standards of a middle-class woman in skirt. As a result, this exclusionary visual strategy even more marginalized those who did not conform to gender roles, i.e. effeminate gays and butch lesbians (Loftin 2007, 578; McGarry and Wasserman 1998, 147).

Such “politics of respectability” reflected in the political imagery of the homophile movement as well. In the public protests, “participants were required to dress “appropriately” (women in skirts and men in dress shirts and ties) and to refrain from public displays of affection” (Kissack 1995, 107). It was used strategically in order to make an impression of homosexuals as respectable citizens like everyone else. The posters used in the protests were

also taken to create the image of respectability. The placards were non-confrontational, asking for (not demanding) equality (“Homosexuals ask for: equality before the law”, fig. 1), emphasizing social assimilation (“Homosexuals want: the right to make their maximum contribution to society”, fig. 1) and trying to deliver the message in the most non-controversial way, avoiding connotations to sexuality (“Homosexuals should be judged as individuals”, fig. 2). In this way, the political imagery of the homophile movement helped to construct the image of gay and lesbians as regular looking normal citizens that need to be accepted and incorporated in the society.

The gay and lesbian movements were drastically reshaped by the Stonewall riots in 1969, which eventually sparked the emergence of Gay Liberation Front (GLF) – a militant organization of gay and lesbians committed to fight against oppression of homosexuals. GLF was created by homosexual activists separated from the Mattachine Society which appeared to be too reactionary and passive when responding to the Stonewall riots (Kissack 1995, 113). Since GLF was dedicated to radical politics, their political and visual agenda was totally different from their predecessors. Visibility and visibility were understood to be the crucial components of the political struggle (Meyer 2006, 447), especially for the movement of those who deemed invisible and nonexistent for a long time.<sup>2</sup>

Through its visual means, GLF promoted sexual liberation, revolutionary goals, visibility, coming-out, and collective power that did not conform to any rules of the mainstream society. For instance, the famous GLF’s poster “Come Out!!” (fig. 3) presents a clear contrast to the visual strategies used by the homophiles. The poster shows a chaotic group of gays and lesbians who are yet united in solidarity. They are dressed casually, looking free, full of joy and powerful, like “an army of lovers” (Meyer 2008, 449). They throw their

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<sup>2</sup> Since the Stonewall riots, a milestone event of gay and lesbian history, was not captured in photographs due to its unexpectedness, the plenty of photographs documenting the marches and riots that took place after the Stonewall can also be understood as a compensation for invisibility of that significant event (Mayer 2006, 445).



message “right there”, bluntly. The same visual strategy is visible in their protests. Figure 4 presents a mass of people, carrying posters with revolutionary slogans (“Smash your heterosexist culture”) while also invoking ironic-sexual messages (“Sodomy is cool”). Figure 5 presents another example: with the slogan “Stonewall means fight back! Smash gay oppression!”), GLF again portrays itself as a confrontational movement related to the militant tradition of the Stonewall riots. Instead of appropriating the image of respectable citizens, members of GLF delivered a revolutionary image of homosexuals who were ready to fight against the norms of the mainstream society, not to conform to them.

After the dissolution of GLF in 1971, many different gay and lesbian groups were formed, however, only in 1987 another major queer activists’ group appeared under the name of ACT UP that introduced different kind of visual queer politics. Since ACT UP employed a variety of visual tactics, in the following sections, I analyze only one visual strategy: i.e. how ACT UP used the faces of their political opponents in the movement’s posters and why exactly this strategy was employed.

## **2.2. ACT UP’s Productive Negativity: Resignifying Monsters**

The ACT UP movement emerged in the late 1980s in the U.S. to fight the AIDS epidemic which was met with state ignorance, “scientific homophobia”, and media hostility directed against homosexuals. The media played a significant role here: together with early medical discourses of AIDS that labelled it a “gay cancer”, “gay disease” or “gay plague” interchangeably (Epstein 1996, 45-48; Lupton 1994, 8), the media sensationalized the epidemic by thoroughly constructing AIDS as a mysterious retribution to promiscuous homosexual life. However, this discourse that insisted on the fatal relation between homosexuality and death is not an invention of the 1980s. According to Nunokawa (1991), such public discourses of AIDS were so flourishing because of “a deep cultural idea about the

lethal character of male homosexuality” (311) which preceded the AIDS crisis. This deeply ingrained cultural idea linked the gay subject to inevitable death narratives, thus, AIDS appeared to be a logical sequence in this whole death driven narrative of male homosexuality.

During the epidemic, the discourse around AIDS was grounded in hierarchical binaries: illness/health, guilty/innocent, homosexual/heterosexual, perpetrator/victim, contamination/cleanliness, abnormal/normal etc. (Treichler 1987, 63-64). The discursive constructions of binary oppositions served to stigmatize people with AIDS and to simultaneously secure and purify the image of those living on the “other side” of AIDS. Alongside the emerging cases of AIDS within the general population<sup>3</sup>, public discourse gradually changed and AIDS began to be perceived not as an isolated gay problem, but as a threat to the general public. Homosexuals started to be seen as serial killers putting everyone around at the risk of deadly virus and deliberately spreading HIV within the general public (Bersani 1987, 220-211). It was understood not just as a health crisis but as a moral crisis as well: homosexual men threatened the sacred unity of “the family”, “the nation” and even “the species” (Watney 1987, 75). The “evil” was not just promiscuity, but the monstrous combination of AIDS and homosexuality that was causing panic, fear and anxiety everywhere around.

Homosexuals were defined through the discourse of “invasion”: “AIDS discourse has roused pollution, contagion and contamination anxieties to do with the maintenance of bodily and societal boundaries against invaders” (Lupton 1994, 132). AIDS was not only a “strange” disease, but also a “foreign”, coming from “strangers”, from “beyond” attacking the healthy society (Grmek 1990, 3).<sup>4</sup> These and other discourses constructed the image of gay

<sup>3</sup> Treichler (1987) claims that “the major turning point in US consciousness came when Rock Hudson [a famous American actor] acknowledged [in 1985] that he was being treated for AIDS” (43).

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, paradoxically, these invaders were not outside the safe bodily and societal order: “Like HIV lurking silently within a nucleus of a cell, the ‘other’, the gay man, prostitute or injecting drug user, lurks within

men as promiscuous killers, deadly invaders, polluting deviants that destroy society, population, nation, family, morality and sexual norms. The homosexual man was functioning as a figure of “monster”, embodying the “worst nightmare”, causing the ultimate danger for social, cultural, political, sexual, bodily orders and their normative standards. Nevertheless, monsters play a very crucial role in a society: they are paradoxically used as a mark that helps to reassert the normative values. As Shildrick (2002) perfectly describes, “the monster... rather than being simply an instance of otherness, reminds us always of what must be abjected from the self’s clean and proper body” (54). In other words, monsters tell us how to be good and normal, and what happens when you are not (Ingebretsen 1998, 26).

In the context of massive disinformation about HIV/AIDS and the hostile discourses demonizing homosexual men, the ACT UP movement used various forms of visual activism to produce counter-representations and counter-information of AIDS (Crimp 1987, 14). My analysis shows that those ACT UP posters which I take to analyze, being a form of counter-representation, were used strategically and deliberately as a response to the dominant popular discourses of demonizing homosexuals. The posters were created to visualise the monstrousness of the political enemies (politicians and priests) for not taking responsibility for the public health crisis. So this ACT UP strategy is about giving back the monstrousness: reconstructing monstrosity in the AIDS discourse and turning back the responsibility of AIDS crisis to those who were politically responsible for it. My short visual discourse analysis will show how the monstrosity genre was constructed by visual means and how this visual discourse turned the monstrosity (previously ascribed to gay men) back to where it came from.<sup>5</sup>

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the body politic, breaking boundaries by spreading disease into the heterosexual population using bisexual or promiscuous men as the carriers of infection” (Lupton 1994, 133).

<sup>5</sup> Since this chapter aims to delineate the logic of inverting the monstrosity genre, my short analysis will serve rather as an illustration of discourse inversion strategy than as a detailed account of the visuals including specific contexts from which the posters emerged.

Probably the most famous poster used in many ACT UP campaigns was “AIDSGATE” (fig. 6). It portrays then-president Ronald Reagan by using direct visual allusions to monstrosity because of his scandalous ignorance to take any significant measure towards the AIDS crisis or even address it publicly as an issue until 1987. His green-colored face, his demonic red eyes and his face expression remind of Frankenstein or at least persuades us that what we see is some kind of monster. Reagan’s face here—still recognizable and present—stands as a citation on which new meanings of monstrosity are laid. This layered image functions to resignify that face and entangle it in the circulation of negative affects that construct queer solidarity directed against the politics of Reagan.

Another poster (fig. 7) from ACT UP even more directly addresses responsibility of the AIDS crisis to Reagan. The black and orange target next to his portrait is bidirectional: in one way, “we” are his target (“He kills me”) while in another way he is “our” target because of his killing ignorance and homophobia in the face of the AIDS crisis. In these graphics, responsibility, guilt, and monstrosity of the AIDS epidemic are redirected to Reagan as the specific political figure as well as the main icon signifying homophobia of the times. This image, being a performative act of critique, quotes the face of Reagan in order to evoke the emotion of anger which, in turn, works to initiate “our” response: the black and orange target, instead of being directed only to “us” (in a sense that “he is killing us”), is simultaneously pointed to Reagan (because “he is our target”) in this way changing the dominant discourse of AIDS and saying that he is the one who needs to be attacked.

The third poster (fig. 8), mainly used in the 1990s, continues the monstrosity genre: the eyes and the facial expression of the conservative homophobic politician Newt Gingrich look crazily demonic and this depiction works again to readdress the hostile discourse back to where it came from (as in “it is not homosexuals or AIDS, it is you and your homophobia that is a heartless monstrous killer”). It is the perfect example of resignification that can be done

with images: one needs to cite and retain the previous meanings of the image (i.e. the face of Gingrich) while at the same time putting a different code of signification (i.e. demonic face expression). This results in changing Gingrich's public image into a politician representing a figure of monstrous homophobia causing the AIDS crisis.

A slightly different visual rhetoric is employed in portraits (fig. 9 and 10) criticizing religious leaders and homophobia coming from the Catholic Church. The spiral eyes in both faces suggest that they are hypnotized (by religion or homophobia) and thus mad and insane. That is why they are dangerous to society ("Public health menace") and need to be stopped ("Stop the Pope"). That is the exact inversion of the public discourse of AIDS, which normally presented homosexuals as those who endanger public health and society by spreading the virus.

The last four posters (fig. 11, 12, 13 and 14) present politicians as an embodied ultimate evil. In the first poster (fig. 11) Reagan's Chief of Communication Patrick Buchanan is called "AIDS disaster" and made to look like Hitler (by drawing Hitler's moustache and painting eyes in red), hence, the human monster. This poster is a direct reaction to Buchanan's homophobic discourse and his infamous public statements: for instance, he once claimed that AIDS is "an awful retribution of nature" (Volsky 2014). So this poster works similarly to others – it inverts the discourse ("it is not we, it is you who are the AIDS disaster") and negatively resignifies the face. The other two posters depict President George Bush and name him a serial killer (fig. 12) and monster ("Stop this monster", fig. 13) by stressing his failing responsibility to manage the AIDS crisis. And it again sends back the discourse of monstrosity and guilt (attached to gay men) to the most important political figure responsible for not taking sufficient measures in the face of thousands of deaths. The last graphic (fig. 14) resembles the Governor of Puerto Rico, Hernandez Colon, who becomes another target of ACT UP and is called the "AIDS criminal". ...Or rather labelled as one.

Labelling is an important visual motif that is common to most of these posters. Negative labels such as “Serial killer”, “Monster”, “AIDS disaster”, “AIDS criminal” attached to the faces of political enemies signify the power to label and to put things into categories. In the context of inversion strategies, this means detaching and redistributing the social labels attributed to homosexual men in the AIDS epidemic. Labelling is also the power of naming, of holding some kind of discourse which means having at least some control over the categories that are attributed and distributed. Thus, this strategy of labelling is an active and powerful response to social stigmatization of gay men: labelling here is another way of expropriating and redistributing power and discourse in a manner of inversion.

However, the visual means of inverting the dominant discourse of AIDS in political imagery would be impossible without performative citationality: one needs to cite the “primary” meaning (i.e. the face) intelligibly and lay another citation and another meaning on it (by using the genre or codes of monstrosity), which follows to the visual resignification of the AIDS discourse. Through its political imagery, the movement took this genre of monstrosity to appropriate and invert it, and in this way to resignify what is monstrous and who are monsters in the AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, the layered image should be understood as simultaneously incorporated into the circulation of negative affects (anger, contempt, shame, sadness, desperation, fury, despair) which pervaded the ACT UP community more strongly than positive emotions that used to appear less frequently (Gould 2009, 12-58). However, negative affects appeared to be productive and, thus, initiate the forms of solidarity directed against homophobic politics and maintained by such political imagery. Thus, affective economies (that mostly circulated negative affects) played a significant role in producing the confrontational political imagery of ACT UP and solidifying the communities of people with AIDS. In the next section, I turn to two different modes of

reading ACT UP iconography to provide a more complex understanding of the exact reasons that lie behind this iconography.

### **2.3. Iconographical Archive of Queer Paranoia: How to Read it Differently**

The negative affects that ACT UP invoked to build their political iconography, the imprints of negativity of the monstrosity genre visible in the political imagery was not just a strategic answer to dominant discourses, it also followed from the will to find “the” reason of the AIDS crisis in the state policy or individual political actors, from the will to uncover the disguised forms of oppressive homophobic politics. All this put together, I claim, could be defined as what Sedgwick calls “paranoid reading” derived from a “paranoid position”.

When conceptualizing two different interpretative concepts – “paranoid reading” and “reparative reading”, Sedgwick (2003a) draws on Klein’s psychoanalytic theory and Tomkin’s theory of affects in order to explain how paranoid reading in theory is privileged over reparative reading. Klein in her psychoanalytic theory talks about two ego positions – one is paranoid, another is depressive. The paranoid position can be described as the position of hatred, envy and anxiety caused by the dangers coming from environment, while the depressive position is “an anxiety-mitigating achievement” (*Ibid.*, 128) emerging through the capacity to escape paranoid affect, to calm yourself down by your own and thus “repair” the dangerous objects of environment and turn them into non-threatening ones. Sedgwick took these positions and reformulated them into paranoid and reparative reading practices.

According to her, paranoid reading is built on the “hermeneutics of suspicion” – an influential methodological mode of thinking and interpreting the world through suspicion and critical perspective. In short, paranoid reading is driven by “seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge” (*Ibid.*, 130), it disallows any surprise because all the (bad) news are already known, every object of inquiry is already there, waiting to be exposed by critical analysis.

Furthermore, it aims to provide a “strong theory” – a theory that could produce universalizing explanations. All the time paranoid reading tries to avoid the negative affect, but this only leads to a constant and inescapable process of working in negativity. Moreover, as Sedgwick claims, paranoid reading dismisses other ways of inquiry that are less concentrated around suspicion: it usually neglects the reparative way of reading. Instead of relying on suspicion and disavowing the affective moments of reading, reparative reading affirms the adverse character of the world (that is reason why it is also a pessimistic reading) and tries to seek pleasure and positive affects in this condition. Reparative reading is less definitional, less categorical, but “no less realistic ... nor more delusional or phantasmatic” (*Ibid.*, 150) than paranoid reading. It employs a wide range of positions, affects, ambitions, and risks because reparative reading is affect-oriented, and thus open to different kind of surprises. It basically surrenders the ‘knowing-in-advance’ and acknowledges that “the future may be different from the present” (*Ibid.*, 146). Reparative reading, therefore, gives the possibility to read the world differently and approach the conventional understanding of various phenomena in a new light.<sup>6</sup>

The iconography of ACT UP stands as a good example of paranoid reading arising from paranoid practices: enmeshed in the negative affective economies, it employs negativity that seeks to expose, to uncover the unacknowledged and disguised forms of homophobic politics in order “to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppression” (*Ibid.*, 124). Moreover, this iconography should also be placed in the context of the efforts of activists and scholars to find the origin, the spread, the reason of the AIDS crisis. This paranoid search generated numerous variations and plots through which the AIDS crisis and the origin of HIV were explained (Treichler 1987, 32-33). These paranoid practices

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<sup>6</sup> However, Sedgwick (2003a) does not totally reject paranoid practices and claims that it represents only one way, among other, of critical practices of seeking knowledge. According to her, “paranoia knows some things well and others poorly” (130). She also refuses to isolate these two practices from one another: Sedgwick claims that they are both “changing and heterogeneous relational stances” (128) that can infuse each other.



of looking and finding who are guilty, who are responsible for the crisis obviously shaped the iconography presented here: redirection of guilt and responsibility to political actors and the state was not just a technical inversion of dominant discourses; it also came from a paranoid attempt to find someone responsible and accountable for causing or maintaining the AIDS crisis.

As Sedgwick (2007) claims, the outspread paranoia of queer communities and queer theory in this period can be explained by the catastrophic dreadfulness of the AIDS crisis:

Dread, intense dread, both focused and diffuse, is a good name for the dominant tonality of those years for queer people, at least for those who survived. The punishing stress of such dread, and the need of mobilizing powerful resources of resistance in the face of it, did imprint a paranoid structuration onto the theory and activism of that period, and no wonder. The wonder, at least to me, is at the resoundingly vigorous resource of thought and action that many people were able to mine from that otherwise impoverishing, and humiliating, enforced resort to the paranoid position (639).

Hence, even though ACT UP activism found itself in the paranoid position, this very position in such a deadly context was a necessity that could provide a locus of needed “resoundingly vigorous resource of thought and action”. The paranoid reading carrying negativity at its core appeared to be a productive standpoint out of which radical politics and solidarity emerged. Hence, the paranoia of the ACT UP political iconography, I claim, should be interpreted in this very context: the paranoid practices of the political iconography of ACT UP was an indispensable tool to criticize homophobic politics of the time and to fight the AIDS crisis, while simultaneously creating counter-representations and building collectives under the political imagery of the movement.

However, the political iconography of ACT UP and its legacy in general is not just a historical example of queer paranoia which must be rejected and from which we, persuaded by the reparative viewpoint, should distance ourselves. On the contrary, the idea of reparative reading gives us the possibility to re-read the paranoid practices and to use that legacy of

paranoia to repair our own presence. Consider the following example. Sara Schulman (2012), a surviving member of ACT UP, writes about the “gentrification of AIDS” – a whole set of contemporary discourses and practices evoked to obscure, naturalize, and replace the painful remembrance of the AIDS crisis with neutral and depoliticized narrative of what happened. An encounter with such discourses inspired Schulman to start the ACT UP Oral History Project, documenting the memories of surviving members of ACT UP. This, in turn, encouraged scholarship and research based on the conducted interviews in the project (*Ibid.*, 4). Schulman also contributed to the making of the documentary film “United in Anger: A History of ACT UP” (2012, dir. Jim Hubbard). Surprisingly, in the same year, another documentary film about the history of ACT UP appeared under the name “How to Survive a Plague” (2012, dir. David France). All this perfectly illustrates how the legacy of ACT UP, although being a legacy of queer paranoia, can be read reparatively and function to repair our presence which carries, on the one hand, the current AIDS experiences, and on the other hand, the loss of the past, the melancholic position towards those communities that passed away because of AIDS (Crimp in Takemoto 2003).

Since the consequences of the deadly AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s had an impact on present queer communities (*Ibid.*), and since the “end of AIDS” appeared to be fake (Schulman 2012, 42), the emerging actualization of the memory of ACT UP stands as the reparative communal practices seeking to use that melancholia as inspiring tool to solidify the present communities and to draw attention to the current AIDS experiences. Reparative reading does not mean overcoming the loss, or curing the “wound” of AIDS that for Crimp (see Takemoto 2003, 90) should always be open as a reminder that AIDS is not over. “Repairing” means reconfiguration and rearticulation of the legacy of AIDS that enables the positive ways of creating and sustaining queer communities. In other words, the reparative reading of ACT UP iconography and activism in general means letting go negativity and

understanding the value of positive queer “world-making”<sup>7</sup> practices (Berlant and Warner 1998, 558) by using resources of collective memory and collective experiences. Thus, a (historical) archive of queer paranoia is open to reparative appropriations and the case of ACT UP is one of such examples.

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As I argue in this chapter, a historical account of queer political iconography shows how the politics of respectability was shaping the visual strategies of early homophile movements. Later, triggered by the Stonewall riots, GLF emerged as a militant queer movement that changed the major direction of queer visual politics: instead of relying on an assimilative image of gays and lesbians, they promoted the image of homosexuals as confrontational, sexually liberated and powerful group. ACT UP, another major queer movement, adopted the same confrontational strategy, however, for totally different reasons.

The dreadfulness of the AIDS crisis shaped the political iconography of ACT UP accordingly. Given the homophobic politics of the time and discourse that emphasized the monstrous combination of AIDS and homosexuality, ACT UP appropriated the genre of monstrosity to resignify that discourse and politics by redirecting monstrosity and responsibility back to where it came from. However, while using the notion of paranoid reading, I explained that this negativity, this claim of one-directional responsibility, this look for “the” reason behind the AIDS crisis arose from a paranoid position in which theory and activism of the time found themselves because of the dreadfulness of the AIDS crisis.

However, this paranoid position appeared to be a productive standpoint out of which radical politics and solidarity emerged. The paranoid practices of the political iconography of

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<sup>7</sup> For Berlant and Warner (1998) “the queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (558). The queer world-making process is based on the recognition that “queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality” (*Ibid.*).

ACT UP was an indispensable tool to criticize homophobic politics and to fight the AIDS crisis, while simultaneously creating counter-representations and building collectives under the political imagery of the movement. Despite the fact that queer paranoia left the imprints of negativity on queer activism and theory of those times, it can still be read reparatively by utilizing that legacy of paranoia to repair our own presence: a presence that carries the loss of queer communities and the current experiences of AIDS.

## Chapter 3 | Drag Putin: from Enemy to Gay Icon

In this chapter, I explore drag Putin according to the theoretical framework developed in the first chapter. This framework provides the possibility to analyze drag Putin through the categories of performativity, resignification and affect that, in turn, allow me to characterize the nature of power that drag Putin carries. After this, I turn to two different ways of reading drag Putin – “paranoid” and “reparative” – (as already employed in my second chapter) in order to discuss the possible strategies that lie behind that image. Following Sedgwick’s (2003a) conceptualization of these two modes of interpretation, I claim that reparative reading appears to be a more accurate and productive way of perceiving such multifaceted phenomenon as drag Putin. I end my analysis by comparing different forms of queer political iconography and introducing a term “queer reparative picturing”.

### 3.1. Drag Putin as Parasitic Critique

The focus of my visual discourse analysis is the image of Vladimir Putin, the Russian President in drag which has spread all over Europe and has been used mostly in various LGBTQ protests against the homophobic laws in Russia (fig. 15). The act that the image of drag Putin performatively produces can be termed a political critique. Drag Putin constantly appears in various protests across Europe organized by LGBTQ people as the act of critique directed to homophobic Putin’s regime and his “militarized and sexualized masculinity” (Foxall 2013). However, the image of drag Putin does not describe or report – the image *does* the act (of critique). Either accompanied by slogans, phrases, words or not, the image itself has the power to stand as a critical act alone. This critical act would not be possible without the citational character of language and discourse (Derrida 1982). This image could not be identifiable as such without codes, conventions, and quotations of some other images:

particularly the quotation of Putin's face, the "code" of drag, the conventions of femininity and gayness that is at stake here. All this merges into one picture to form an act of critique – it is the unexpected citations of different symbols, the unanticipated but deliberate combination of quotes that makes it critical.

Furthermore, this type of critique originated from paradoxical citationality carries irony and comedy as well. Following Austin's theory of performative speech acts, one can even say that this is a perfect example of parasitic critique, since for Austin (1962), as I have already stated, citationality (that includes joking, acting, and not being serious when using language in general) was a parasitic use of language that etiolates and weakens the "health" of language. However, his theorization of "parasitic use of language" can still be useful when placed into a political context instead of linguistics. Drag Putin is indeed a parasitic image that aims to weaken the representational symbol (the face of Putin) of homophobic politics. This parasitic critique seeks not only to attack its object, but also to erode its representation, authority and power by employing paradoxical and ironic citationality. By exploiting the representation of the other and living at the expense of the other's representation, it works exactly on the same principle as a parasite. Hence, the performativity of the drag Putin image can be explained through the notion of "parasitic critique".

One of the main effects that the performativity of drag Putin creates is the act of resignification, already discussed in the first chapter when analyzing politics of resignification conceptualized by Butler (1997a, 1997b). The process of resignification can be traced by exploring how the original image of Putin (fig. 16) was changed into the edited image of drag Putin (fig. 15). The original image of Putin is a close-up portrait where the face does not leave space for anything else. This particular portrait of Putin is not a standard presidential picture; it creates some kind of intimacy in the tension of the gaze, the very personal encounter in which the power of the gaze unfolds. This gaze is somehow uncomfortable, even threatening

the usually safe relation between such kind of picture and the self; it is asymmetrical – staring arrogantly to us who do not have the power to answer to this gaze. I want to emphasize the spectator's affective relation to the image in order to show the fact that the original image of Putin *has* a symbolic affective load or, rather, is incorporated into the affective economies. This should be understood in the context where homophobic politics in Russia and Putin's homophobic policy towards LGBTQ people in particular are considered. It is not a coincidence that exactly this portrait of Putin was used for queering the image. For LGBTQ people that close-up face and gaze symbolizes and represents the threat to their lives, the quintessence of fierce and arrogant homophobic politics combined with militarized masculinity.

This is the reason why exactly this image of Putin came to be resignified: the official image of Putin which signifies a homophobic threat was edited in a way to change the meaning of it. When one looks at the re-made image, one still can recognize the face of Putin; thus, he is still there, but with a totally different meaning. The edited image not only quotes and distorts that quotation of the face by producing a separate image, but rather works as a proliferating parasite: it makes that distorted quotation work on the original image and, hence, on the “original person” and his public image. The comparison of the original and the edited copy expose that signification has been changed by putting a layer on the original – a layer of feminine traits (heavy make-up) which resemble the appearance of the drag queen and in the background of it — (usually) a rainbow. In the resignifying process, this layer serves to produce connotations of gayness, femininity and drag that replace militarized masculinity and homophobic threat that existed in the original. In the protests, these edited images are accompanied by such phrases as “Putin go homo” (fig. 17) or “Tsaritsa Putin” (fig. 18) that stress the queer/homosexual layer of the image even more. So drag Putin is a perfect example of resignification politics: it engages in the replacement of the meaning of the threatening

object in order to neutralize its threat or, as Butler (1997, 69) might say, to read it against itself, to repeat it while simultaneously adding the new meaning. The edited portrait shows us that Putin is just a clownish queer drama queen who has no right and power to rule or decide about others' lives. He is not a danger, not a threat anymore; on the contrary – he is addressed as the one who is no longer able to exercise one's power. This sums up the purpose of resignification politics. However, the resignified image has received different kind of reactions and responses from LGBTQ people, so drag Putin has also become the object where conflicting emotions meet.

As I have mentioned earlier, this image, as any other image, is incorporated into our affective economies where emotions circulate and bind us to the image or move us in one or another way. Obviously, there are multiple ways to relate emotionally to this image, multiple ways to live the affective experience. In this case, I want to single out two affects that seem to be the most commonly expressed. First, the most common reaction to it is what can be called an “affirmatively ironic laughter”: this affective reaction allows relating to the image in a positive way while at the same time being critical and concerned about the issue the image addresses.<sup>8</sup> Another common affect expressed in public discourse is anger supported by accusations of transphobia: anger rises from the interpretation that portraying Putin in drag is misogynist, homophobic and transphobic, since this image is used to insult and shame him (Williams 2014). In other words, the critique addressed to this image by trans activists draws attention to the aspect that the traits of femininity, gayness and camp are taken to shame and humiliate Putin and this consequently reinforces those traits as shameful. The members of trans community that find this picture insulting assert that “they aren’t jokes” (fig. 19). They insist on reading drag Putin “critically” in order to expose (internalized) transphobia of those using this image. My instant conclusion would be that the affective relation to the image

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<sup>8</sup> The outspread of this image among LGBTQ movements around the world would be impossible if this image was seen as problematic and unacceptable.



definitely depends on the reading that one engages in. Therefore, in the next section, I elaborate more on two different types of interpreting drag Putin that leads to the understanding what exactly motivates these affective reactions and what, after all, these interpretations have to suggest about the visual strategies that lie behind drag Putin imagery.

### **3.2. Paranoid Readings: Camp, Drag, and Shame**

In this section, I want to draw attention to the discursive trajectory that was initiated by transgender online media when some conflicting opinions about the drag Putin image were published on the transgender news website “Transadvocate”. According to some LGBT network members, employing the traits of femininity, gayness and drag in order to insult and humiliate Putin is transphobic and misogynistic (Williams 2014). However, there are some other opinions represented in Williams’ article, arguing that drag is not offensive, that the former approach is oversensitive and that it is more about the clownish aspect of it than about femininity. It is worth to notice how the discussion itself is positioned in this article: the title of the article – “Putin in drag: what transmisogyny looks like?” – already implies that Putin in drag is the answer to that question (even the structure of the sentence suggests that there is only one option to that question). The couple of introductory sentences reinforce this discourse by again representing only one position: “Do you think the image is problematic? Some feel the image uses trans expression to shame and mock Putin, thereby degrading the trans experience” (Williams 2014). The chosen meme beside the text (fig. 19) also contributes to the interpretation of drag Putin as “degrading the trans experience”. So the counter-discourse that criticizes the use of this image is deliberately designed to silence those opinions that affirmatively accept this image and privilege those that criticize it and seeks to expose its violent character.

Transadvocate's initiated discourse perfectly corresponds to the principles of paranoid reading that I have already discussed in the previous chapter: it deploys negative affects, has a "faith in exposure", imposes an already-made explanatory framework, and rejects other ways of inquiry, especially affect-oriented affirmative interpretations of drag Putin. Moreover, such paranoia prevents from seeing the obvious: drag Putin is about the style of camp and the practice of drag; it does not address the "trans experience". If one conceives drag Putin as insulting and degrading, then every single performance of drag and the use of camp in general should be accordingly named as transphobic, for camp and drag are built on aesthetical imaginaries of multiple combinations of "irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor" (Babuscio 1993, 20) that interacts with gay femininity. This misinterpretation fails to see that drag/camp is not reducible to "trans experience" which apparently is vulnerable to the intersection of shame, gender parody, irony, and humor. As David Bergman (1993) claims, there is a consensus among scholars that "camp is a style that favors "exaggeration", "artifice", and "extremity"" (5), while drag is understood as a performance that is "the essential act of the camp" (6). Transgender studies scholars emphasize that usually "trans experiences" are related to transgender people's efforts to construct stable, intelligible identities and to integrate themselves into society (Davis 2009, 102-103). Hence, neither drag nor camp can be fully equated to transgender people's experiences.

Another aspect that paranoid reading of drag Putin dismisses is the deployment of shame for political ends. The strategy of shaming is seen as reactive, unproductive, and even demeaning. As a response to that, Transadvocate brings the discourse of pride ("We aren't jokes!") which emphasizes dignity, legitimacy, acceptance, but simultaneously represses shameful topics and the social and personal expressions of shame in general (Halperin and Traub 2009, 3-4). Despite the fact that "pride discourse" values an affirmative vision of dignity and pride, it still works in negativity when trying to isolate, to distance pride from

exposed mechanisms of stigmatization and oppression generating shame. Therefore, paranoid reading of shame and shaming rejects an affirmative deployment of shame theorized by many queer scholars and practiced by many queer activists. In queer theory, it is widely accepted to claim that shame is intrinsic to gay identity formation (Sedgwick 2003b, 63; Warner 2009, 289) and can be transformed into political forms of queer collectivities (Crimp 2009, 72; Moon 2009, 359), including queer politics of shaming based on redirecting shame to heteronormative discourses, as did Gay Shame collective in San Francisco, ACT UP, Queer Nation (Rand 2012; Gould 2009, 389; Halperin and Traub 2009, 9). The urge to silence the political expressions of shame and deny the legacy of “shame activism” only leads to the paranoid position of defending pride from any connotations of shame.

However, the answer to the reading of drag Putin as transphobic and counterproductive strategy should not be to slip to another “extreme” and claim that the image of drag Putin is a subversive tool that takes drag/camp and shame to disrupt the homophobic nature of Putin’s politics by exposing the gender order and gender identities supporting those politics as imitative, phantasmatic, fake, illusionary and unnatural. This interpretation, while appreciating the political side of drag/camp/shame, still relies on paranoid reading and this is the point where Sedgwick criticizes Butler the most. Butler is usually seen as one of the main figures that brought camp/drag into academic discourse and conceptualized its politically subversive potential (Bergman 1993, 11). Butler has used camp/drag many times as an example of how performativity works and how the subversion of ostensibly natural gender order is possible. In her conceptualization, which still prevails in academic discourses, drag imitates gender and in this way “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler 2008, 187). Moreover, such “parodic proliferations deprive hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (*Ibid.*, 188), so drag (as well as cross-dressing, imitative butch/femme identities) for Butler works as disruptive acts

that have a capacity for subversive political power. Sedgwick (2003a, 139) criticizes Butler for this, claiming that Butler's theory of drag is an example of paranoid reading and thus misrecognizes camp/drag. Butler's drag theory fits into the character of paranoid reading: for her, drag serves to reveal, to expose and to denaturalize oppressive gender order that is "already there", waiting to be displayed in all its negativity. And, as Sedgwick assures, "camp is most often understood as uniquely appropriate to the projects of parody, denaturalization, demystification, and mocking exposure of the elements and assumptions of a dominant culture" (*Ibid.*, 149). Thus, perceiving drag Putin as a merely subversive image that uncovers the hidden infrastructure of homophobic politics does not provide a fair explanation that takes into account all complexities of this strategy and enables affective reading not restricted to negativity. In the next section, I will present how drag Putin can be read reparatively.

### 3.3. Reparative Readings: Incorporation, Pleasure, and Critical Intimacies

Instead of relying on suspicion and disavowing the affective moments of reading, Sedgwick (2003a) suggests reading camp/drag reparatively. She defines camp as "the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices" (*Ibid.*, 150) manifesting in the elements of camp:

...the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the "over"-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtaposition of present with past, and popular with high culture (*Ibid.*).

The same reparative reading of camp/drag is present in Meyer's (2010) writings. For him, camp is first and foremost a "social agency based on remembering and citing the bodies of gay forebears; it is a set of strategies and tactics that exist within the collective memories (the performance repertoire) of gay men" (*Ibid.*, 1-2). These readings of camp/drag, among other

things, underline community and historicity as the most important aspects that lead reparative practices and hence reparative reading. Unlike in paranoid readings, camp/drag here is not perceived as primarily directed to disclose violent gender order. As a reparative practice, drag is not a one-dimensional political strategy. Above all, camp/drag is about queer community, where such practices consolidate memories, experiences, affects, styles and other things, and literally become reparative practices that “repair” injured agencies and communities, that evoke strategies and tactics.

There are many examples when camp/drag was used for direct political purposes (Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson 2004). What becomes clear when reading camp/drag reparatively is that political power arises not from the fact that it denaturalizes gender roles, but from creatively and unpredictably assembled and connected elements of collective gay memories, experiences, affects and so on. Since all these elements belong to the constitutive outside of a heteronormative mainstream culture, the very fact of consolidation of these elements into bodies or objects, the very fact of embodiment of camp/drag is already political. Camp/drag is not an instrument of disclosure of coercive gender order; it is more about positive political acts, the affirmative character of struggle, more about the queer world-making, building a counter-culture through political strategies and tactics of appearance. This gives a chance to look at “drag Putin” in a totally new perspective: not as a subversion or reinforcement of homophobia (as popular discourses suggest), but as a political deployment of collective memories, citations of gay culture practices, affective experiences of pride and shame, resources of styles, and tactics of queer world-making through affirmative orientations. This means that Putin is not just an object of critique perceived as enemy distant from queer movements. Putin’s image was expropriated and included in these reparative practices to generate a different kind of critique without falling into negativity and paranoia. Putin’s image was critically incorporated into queer movements by making him a new gay icon.

Thus, drag Putin functions not as a negation of the face of Putin, but as the critical incorporation of that face into gay culture.

If we stick to this interpretation, Putin dressed in drag is no longer dangerous not only because he is dethroned by shame redirected to him, but also because he was made the symbol, the icon of contemporary LGBTQ movements: in short, we made him work for us! Now he is our Diva (fig. 20)! And the widespread use of this image in different contexts (protests, gay prides, media) around the world stands as a proof that this image is starting to replace the official/original face of Putin on a large scale and that is exactly what parasitic critique seeks to do. I claim that this strategy of resignification and appropriation/redirection of shame would be impossible without a reparative approach which engenders an affirmative reaction: despite the negativity of the factual homophobia in Russia and the rule of Putin, reparative reading or reparative reaction (affirmative ironic laughter produced by drag Putin) gives the possibility to seek pleasure and positive affects in these conditions but at the same time remain critical and *pessimistic*. So the appropriation of shame and reparative look are the ways that help us not to fall into negativity and paranoia in the face of homophobic regimes but instead generate new solidarities and strategies.

The critical incorporation of Putin's image into queer movements is visible especially in figure 20, which reproduces the picture from Christopher Street Day march that took place in Berlin, 2014. Here, drag Putin is presented with a slogan "I am DIVA here!", in this way incorporating his face into the celebration of gay pride and turning him into an icon. The same can be said about the figure 21 – this image, taken during the Sydney Pride in 2014, captures drag Putin used in a banner promoting "absolute equality [for] absolutely everybody". Here, drag Putin again becomes one of the central faces of gay pride, the façade of the movement. One more example of that is from Austria: drag Putin literally became the face of LGBT and human rights NGOs' organized campaign against homophobic laws in Russia (fig. 22). It is

also worth to notice how this image travels spatially: from being used only as a critical poster in the protests, it also gradually came to appear in gay prides and that helps to sustain the argument that this image is used affirmatively and ironically. This critical strategy of neutralization does not refuse pleasure and positive affects that are so important to keep the movement away from falling into negativity and paranoia.

The pleasure comes from irony, parody and humour that are concentrated in drag Putin, so the incorporation of drag Putin into the movement also means self-irony and self-reflexivity. Figure 18 as well as figure 20 show how wittily Putin can be interpreted: by positioning him as the central face of the movement, it creates an ironic relation to this face (“he is our Diva, our Tsaritsa, our Icon”) that keeps the element of criticism always present in this ambiguous relationship. The pleasure also comes from entering into critical intimacies with the image. For instance, figure 17 shows a man in the protest in Berlin (2013) holding the poster with Putin’s face and the slogan “PUTIN GO HOMO”. The paradoxical slogan merges two discourses into one and perhaps most accurately represents an affirmative/reparative approach: on the hand, Putin is told to go home, to go away and in a sense refuse his power; on the other hand, he is told to go homo[sexual], he is invited to become the part of the community, to become homosexual. This paradoxical and ironic slogan implies the intimacy between “us” and “him” which is at the same moment a critical one: we invite him to an intimate relationship with “us” while simultaneously being ironic about this invitation.

Figure 23 represents the same aspect of critical intimacies: during the same protest another man is carrying the poster with drag Putin and the hashtag “#Putinmyass” on it. “Putinmyass” can be read at least in two ways: one is “Putin (is) in my ass” (as in “Pain in the ass”), another is “Putin, put (your dick) in my ass” (or basically “Fuck me”). Both of these meanings are merged in the play of that slogan which spread widely and was used in different

forms (see fig. 24, 25, 26). Employing the allusion to homosexuality, Putin here is incorporated not only ironically, parodically and critically, but sexually as well. Figure 27 shows one more example of this critical intimacy: the man is kissing the drag Putin's portrait. It proves again that drag Putin is a different kind of critique than we are used to think of: while refraining from negativity, anger and the total rejection of a political enemy, it creates the critically affirmative relation to the object of the critique. Playing with the discourses of shame, homosexuality and sex, these examples open up the discourse of critical intimacies producing the pleasure of critique. So drag Putin, let me make this statement, can be understood not only as a gay icon, but a gay sex symbol as well.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.4. Queer Reparative Picturing

The analysis of drag Putin presents a contrasting iconographical strategy to that of ACT UP. However, before going to contrasts, I want to consider similarities. In both iconographies, their object of critique is homophobic politics and violence, and in order to express this critique in the form of visibility, the face of the political enemy is taken as a symbol representing those homophobic politics. The face becomes a façade of homophobic politics carrying a symbolic value, but at the same time it stands as an embodiment of it. Homophobic politics and its violence, instead of being anonymous, disguised, diffused and decentered, is embodied in the recognizable face. This simultaneously makes the critique an abstract one (addressing homophobic politics as such) and a personal one (directed to a particular person who is deemed responsible for such politics).

Another reason to take the face of the political enemy in shaping queer political iconographies is to affect the public image, the official representations of the face and,

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<sup>9</sup> Having in mind how wide Putin's image have been used in sexual contexts – from pornographic materials depicting Putin (DailySquirt 2014) to anal plugs with Putin's face on it (Lowe 2014) – this appears to be more than a merely rhetorical figure.



consequently, of homophobic politics. Resignification of faces means fighting and eroding the dominant representations, discourses, and power that those faces embodied. Moreover, such iconography functions as a nodal point in the affective economies of queer movements where affects circulate and generate the affective responses (be it anger, despair or pleasure) to iconographies and in this way creates an attachment to them. Thus, the iconographical strategy of faces not only acts as an abstract and personal critique which resignifies and erodes the dominant meanings those faces carry, it also functions in affective economies and only through them creates the collective attachments to the movements political imagery.

Despite these similarities that initiate an iconographical dialogue between recent and previous forms of queer political iconography, there are contrasting iconographical differences that delineates different visual strategies of queer movements. The iconography of ACT UP was shaped by the horridness of the AIDS crisis and fierce confrontations with homophobic discourses. As I have shown in the previous chapter, ACT UP appropriated the genre of monstrosity which brought the marks of negativity in its iconography. While ACT UP clearly positioned its political opponents as the ultimate enemies, drag Putin iconography shows us a different strategy where the political enemy is critically incorporated in, not distanced from, the queer movement. This critical incorporation is possible only when negativity disappears, when that alienating negative distance separating political enemy from us cease to exist. Instead of maintaining that distance, drag Putin engages into an intimately critical relation to the image of Putin by invoking camp, drag, and shame, which lay down the pattern of ironic ambiguity but at the same time incorporate Putin's image into the movement through exactly these elements taken from a queer archive of collective memories, practices and experiences.

As I have shown, these differences in strategies depend on the positions in which the movement find itself. However, even though ACT UP appeared to be in a paranoid position,

and those framing drag Putin in a reparative one, they both can be read differently. ACT UP iconography of faces can be interpreted through a reparative viewpoint and drag Putin can be perceived through a paranoid lens. I do not aim to prove that paranoid positions and paranoid readings should at every instance be replaced or overcome with reparative practices. On the contrary, my analysis pointed out that the paranoid position and paranoid reading in different cases and in different circumstances might be a necessity that helps to effectively launch immediate solidarities, counter-discourses and radical politics. However, this does not preclude the reparative reconfigurations of such paranoid practices which can be turned into the collective resources for queer world-making projects. So the reparative position and reparative reading seems to be a more visionary, affirmative, positive, pleasurable and constructive resource of thought and action than the former one. Instead of working in negativity when looking, finding, listing and classifying different forms of oppression, it provides a pessimistic but positive way of dealing with hostile environment while also repairing and building a queer world.

Such reparative practices in queer political iconography, I argue, may be termed “queer reparative picturing”. Drag Putin is one of such examples illustrating how queer reparative picturing functions: it uses its own social and cultural resources to generate a critical practice devoid of negativity that can still address the injuries caused by the hostile environment and to sustain a practice of repairing, (re-)building and binding those injured queer communities in positive and unexpected visual ways. These collective resources inspiring queer reparative picturing practices also include the legacy of queer paranoia, hence, reparative picturing can employ and reconfigure paranoid picturing practices such as the iconography of ACT UP. Within queer communities, such iconography can be turned into educational materials, awareness-rising practices, symbols of a collective history, repertoires of possible visual tactics and politics, and so on.

I would, however, not restrict queer reparative picturing only to the political imagery of queer movements. It also covers a visual manifestation of reparative use of queer collective resources in culture and society in general. Consider, for instance, camp. Camp, being one type of resource of collective archive of gay men's visibility, is employed in various reparative ways. Meyer (2010, 5) points out the major practices when camp is expressed the most often: the drag show, the pride parade, the political protest action when "camp-as-tactic" is employed and so on. All these practices of using camp can also be seen as the examples of queer reparative picturing that takes camp as a resource to repair the injured lives through pleasure and positive affects. So queer reparative picturing can be understood as a critical visual practice that transforms negativity caused by homophobic environments into the positive practices of queer world-making by using collective memories, citations, affective experiences and other resources.

Queer reparative picturing changes not only the way how queer communities use their cultural resources for different reasons, it reshapes that very archive of queer resources as well. If we stick to the example of camp, it is clear that camp can be employed for reparative picturing, but reparative picturing, in turn, reconfigures those very citations of camp as well. Camp for a long time has been marginalized by political and sometimes communal gay and lesbian organizations, but reparative picturing brings camp back and reanimates the communal traditions of "effeminacy", "gay femininity" and "swishness" that are closely tied to it. Despite this historical negativity attached to camp, it has become a reparative element in queer politics, communities and culture. So this is a good example how queer reparative picturing can change paranoid and negative political, communal and cultural queer practices into reparative, positive and affirmative ones.

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In this chapter, I argue that drag Putin, being a complex phenomenon, can be analyzed through the functioning principles of performativity, resignification, and affective economies which allow me to identify what drag Putin produces, what effects it causes, and in what affective circulations it is entangled. In this inquiry, drag Putin appears to stand as parasitic form of critique that invokes resignification as proliferation of itself while also being entwined in the ambiguous affective economies of ironic laughter, anger, and shame.

Two different ways of reading were provided to analyse the ambiguous reactions drag Putin evokes. Paranoid reading, practiced by some trans activists, turned out, I claim, to be misinterpreting the aspects of drag, camp, and shame related to drag Putin, and to be too negative, having a “faith in exposure”, imposing an already-made explanatory framework, and rejecting other ways of inquiry, especially affect-oriented affirmative interpretations of drag Putin. Reparative reading suggests a different interpretation of camp, drag, and shame and this allowed me to consider the unanticipated forms of parasitic critique of drag Putin: by merging visual discourse analysis with reparative reading, I showed that the political load of drag Putin is based on the critical incorporation of Putin’s image into the iconography of the queer movements and culture which simultaneously is supported by critical intimacies and sexualization of Putin within gay culture.

Reparative reading, here, proved indeed to be “less aggressive, less thesis-driven, less angst-ridden style of critique that would seek to repair the damage of homophobia and other forms of prejudice and violence rather than simply revealing allegedly new and ever more insidious forms of abuse in rather unlikely places” (Hanson 2011, 101). A reparative reading of drag Putin explains solidarity suddenly emerged under the image of drag Putin and elucidates how this “repairing” strategy changed Putin from being a gay enemy to a gay icon for political reasons to neutralize his homophobic politics, discourse and representations while not surrendering to negativity and despair. I claim that the most accurate term to name the

reparative functioning of drag Putin is “queer reparative picturing” which is reserved not only for reparative iconographies of queer movements, but applies to other forms of reparative use of queer collective resources as well.

## Conclusion

In the beginning of this thesis, I have set my research direction to examine, first, the iconographical strategies of drag Putin and its relation to the previous forms of queer political iconography and, second, the hermeneutical conflicts that shape different perceptions of drag Putin. I have also determined my orientation to “reparative reading” (as theorized by Sedgwick) as the guiding mode of my interpretational work in order to take into account all the complexities and ambiguities of queer political iconographies, and to explain the functioning of those iconographies without falling into paranoid theories or interpretations.

Drag Putin, analyzed through the categories of performative citationality, resignification, and affective economies, appeared to be a “parasitic” form of critique that functions through resignification process and is maintained by the affective economies of ambiguous emotional attachments. The main argument of the thesis lies in the analysis showing that when drag Putin is perceived through what Sedgwick calls “paranoid reading”, it brings negativity built on exclusionary inquiry, faith in exposure that does not allow any surprises in explanations, and misinterpretations of drag, camp, and shame that are related to drag Putin. I claim that drag Putin is a form of reparative practice emerging from a reparative position, thus, requires an open, affect-oriented and affirmative approach that can address the nature of drag Putin iconography the most accurately. Reparative reading showed that the political load of drag Putin is based on the critical incorporation of Putin’s image into the iconography of LGBTQ movements and culture which simultaneously is supported by critical intimacies, the pleasure of critique and sexualization of Putin within gay culture.

Hence, the main visual strategy that lie behind drag Putin, I argue, may be called “queer reparative picturing” – a critical visual practice that transforms negativity caused by homophobic environments into the positive practices of queer world-making by using collective memories, citations, affective experiences and other resources. Queer reparative

picturing also includes those visual practices that have emerged from a paranoid position. I took the example of queer political iconography of ACT UP as an illustration how visual strategies informed by paranoia can be reconfigured in various reparative ways. But this is not the only relation that can join recent and previous forms of queer political iconography. Even though ACT UP's iconography of faces is embedded in paranoid negativity, it can still be tied to recent forms of queer reparative picturing, since the latter takes to employ those forms of visual critique that had been already "tested" by ACT UP: i.e. performative citationality, resignification, and affective circulations that build collections of meanings and collectives of people around the movement's imagery. I do not aim to suggest that the iconographies of drag Putin and ACT UP should be seen as coming from one or participating in one queer visual tradition. I claim that there is a possibility to look and find the points of intersections between both of these iconographical strategies, and the fact that they both belong to queer political imagery allows me to place them in the field of diverse queer political iconographies.

My thesis also sought to address the fact that queer political iconography does not yet exist as a research field. Despite the fact that there are quite a number of works within LGBT studies that undertake to analyse the intersection of art, politics and culture, the "iconic turn" to political imagery of queer movements has not arrived yet. That is the reason why in the beginning I chose to place my analysis in the critical but intimate relation to the "iconic turn" taking place in the humanities and cultural studies. Due to this gap in scholarship, our knowledge about the visual strategies and visual politics of queer movements is usually impoverished and the analyses and histories of those movements are left incomplete.

I consider my examination of ACT UP and drag Putin iconographies as a contribution to this potential research area. Moreover, by introducing the term "queer reparative picturing" I hope to open up a field of possible research on how visual politics are taken by queer people to construct communities and movements, to fight dominant discourses, representations and

power, to repair the injuries of the past and the present, to build new cultures and projects, to consolidate collective emotional experiences and so on. So this brings a political and social importance as well: in this highly mediated and visualized “Western culture”, social movements and groups fight their struggles by employing visual politics as well, hence, ignoring these political and cultural processes means missing something very foundational about political organization in contemporary culture.



## Appendix



**Figure 1.** *The Mattachine Society protests at Independence Hall.* 1965. Source: [www.gaypioneers.com](http://www.gaypioneers.com)



**Figure 2.** Tobin, Kay. *The Protest of the Mattachine Society.* 1966. The New York Public Library. Source: [www.digitalgallery.nypl.org](http://www.digitalgallery.nypl.org)



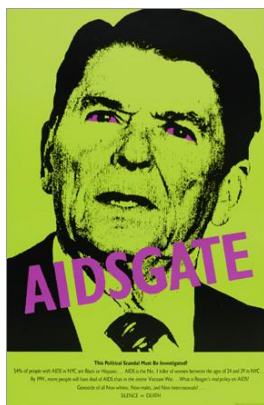
**Figure 3.** *Come Out!!* Gay Liberation Front poster. 1970. Source: Meyer 2006.



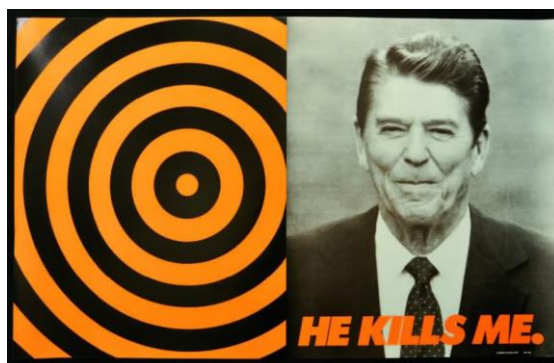
**Figure 4.** Rose, Steve. "Times Square Protest March". 1970. Source: Meyer 2006.



**Figure 5.** Gay Liberation Front marching. n.d. Source: [www.ameliastagg.com](http://www.ameliastagg.com)



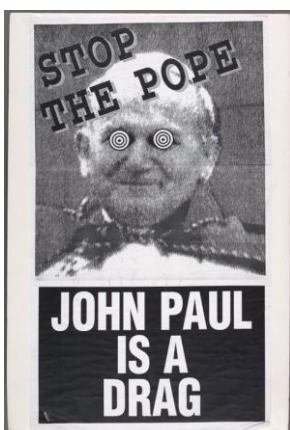
**Figure 6.** ACT UP New York, *AIDSGATE*. 1987, Offset. Source: [www.politicalgraphics.com](http://www.politicalgraphics.com)



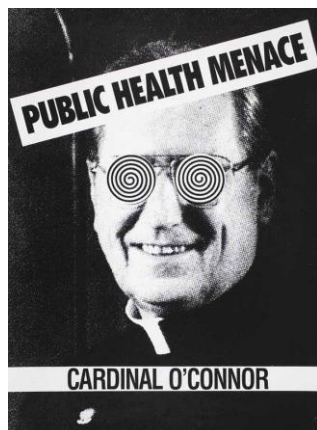
**Figure 7.** Donald Moffett, *He Kills Me*. 1987, Offset. Source: [www.politicalgraphics.com](http://www.politicalgraphics.com)



**Figure 8.** ACT UP New York, *Newt Gingrich image*. 1996-7. The New York Public Library. Source: [www.digitalgallery.nypl.org](http://www.digitalgallery.nypl.org)



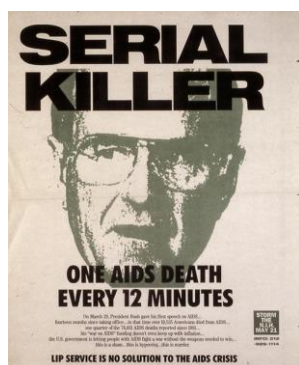
**Figure 9.** ACT UP New York, *Stop the Pope. John Paul is a drag*. 1996-7. The New York Public Library. Source: [www.digitalgallery.nypl.org](http://www.digitalgallery.nypl.org)



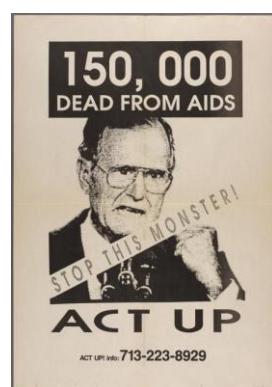
**Figure 10.** Vincent Gagliostro, *Public Health Menace*. 1987. International Center of Photography. Source: [www.icp.org](http://www.icp.org)



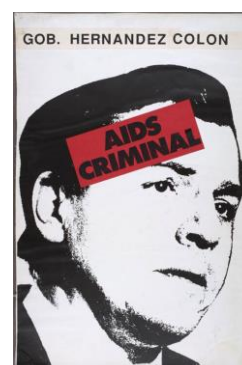
**Figure 11.** ACT UP New York, *Buchanan AIDS disaster. Campaign '92*. 1992. The New York Public Library. Source: [www.digitalgallery.nypl.org](http://www.digitalgallery.nypl.org)



**Figure 12.** ACT UP New York, *SERIAL KILLER*. n.d. Source: [www.surviveaplague.tumblr.com](http://www.surviveaplague.tumblr.com)



**Figure 13.** ACT UP New York, *150,000 dead from AIDS. Stop this monster!* 1996-7. The New York Public Library. Source: [www.digitalgallery.nypl.org](http://www.digitalgallery.nypl.org)



**Figure 14.** ACT UP New York, *GOB. Hernandez Colon. AIDS criminal*. 1996-7. The New York Public Library. Source: [www.digitalgallery.nypl.org](http://www.digitalgallery.nypl.org)





**Figure 15.** *Drag Putin*. n.d.  
Source: [www.putinarainbow.com](http://www.putinarainbow.com)



**Figure 16.** *Vladimir Putin - Tsar of the New Russia*. The cover of Time magazine. 2007. Source: [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)



**Figure 17.** AFP. *PUTIN GO HOMO*. Photo from a protest in Berlin. 2013. Source: [www.huffingtonpost.fr](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr)



**Figure 18.** Reuters. *Tsaritsa Putin*. Poster from a protest in Amsterdam. 2013. Source: [uk.reuters.com](http://uk.reuters.com)



**Figure 19.** *We aren't jokes*. Meme from the Internet. n.d. Source: [www.transadvocate.com](http://www.transadvocate.com)



**Figure 20.** Reuters. *Vladimir Putin as Diva*. Photo from the Christopher Street Day in Berlin. 2013. Source: [www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de)



**Figure 21.** AP. *Putin on the Ritz*. Photo from Sydney Mardi Gras pride parade. 2014. Source: [www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk)



**Figure 22.** *To Russia with love.* Photo from a Rainbow March in Vienna. 2014. Source: [www.torussiawithlove.at](http://www.torussiawithlove.at)



**Figure 23.** Groffman, Adam. *Putinmyass (I).* Photo from a "Stop Homophobia" demonstration in Berlin. 2013. Source: [www.travelsofadam.com](http://www.travelsofadam.com)



**Figure 24.** *Putinmyass (II).* Photo from a protest in front of the Russian Consulate in Frankfurt. 2013. Source: [www.blindad.de](http://www.blindad.de)



**Figure 25.** *Putinmyass (III).* Photo from a protest in front of the Russian Consulate in Frankfurt. 2013. Source: [www.blindad.de](http://www.blindad.de)



**Figure 26.** *Putinmyass (IV).* Photo from a protest in front of the Russian Consulate in Bonn. 2013. Source: [www.gruene-nrw.de](http://www.gruene-nrw.de)



**Figure 27.** Demotix. *A protester kisses a poster of drag Putin.* Photo from a protest in London. 2013. Source: [www.demotix.com](http://www.demotix.com)

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