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Queer Curls, Gender Power, and Plato: Eclectic Iconographies of Self-Empowerment in Lil Nas X's *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)*

Abstract: In recent years, mega-stars such as Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe, and Sevdaliza have successfully integrated critical academic discourse into the conceptions of their current music video productions. In a way, queer Black superstar Lil Nas X is continuing that tradition. He creates an eclectic, hybrid image between Christian iconography, Greek mythology, and Platonism and has empowered himself in this scenery as a Black queer devil. In doing so, he recapitulates the 2000-year-old exegesis of Plato's Symposium, questioning representational logics of the European cultural history of queer people. This paper traces the connections of media representations of queerness in Christian iconography, Greek mythology, and self-empowerment thematized in the music video *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)*.

Keywords: Lil Nas X, music video, queer pop, *Montero*, queer representation, queer, Black empowerment, queer iconography, media art

With his debut studio album *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)* and the music video of the same title (both 2021), queer Black artist Lil Nas X presented a production in which he links Christian iconographies with those of the ancient Greeks, negotiating positions from the Bible and ancient philosophy on the “third” gender.¹ In the music video he quotes the story of creation as well as Plato's Aristophanic treatise on the third gender from *The Symposium* (385 and 378 BC). The video can thus be read as an audiovisual representation that mediates between the appropriation of a European canon, the adoption of Christian and ancient iconography, and the exegesis of Platonic male-male relationships. Artistic conceptions dedicated to the appropriation of the European canon from a Black perspective have recently been very successful. There seems to be a tendency in current music productions of adopting a European configuration of the gaze to not only make it visible but also expose it as male, colonial, or patriarchal. These productions thus expose the fact that visual regimes become established under specific historical and cultural circumstances.² Lil Nas X takes this as a starting point for reversing centuries-old visual regimes; in doing so, he follows a political program.

1 R. E. Allen: *The Dialogues of Plato. Volume II. The Symposium*. New Haven, CT 1991, 130. See also: Markus Hirschfeld: *Berlin's Third Sex*, trans. by James J. Conway, 2017.

2 Kathrin Dreckmann: Black Queen and King: Iconographies of Self-empowerment, Canon, and Pop in the Current Music Video. In: *More Than Illustrated Music: Aesthetics of Hybrid Media between Pop, Art and Video*, ed. by Kathrin Dreckmann / Elfi Vomberg. London 2023, 125–144.

Logics of visibility as well as strategies of enactment become apparent and transform themselves into poignant political visual agendas. How can one describe aesthetic concepts such as these? How are traditional iconographies reconfigured and reflected between the present and the past?

In an interview with TIME magazine he states that “he wanted to deploy this type of iconography and symbolism to draw a connection between ancient and modern-day persecution.”³ He is concerned with taking queerness seriously as a concept that has been around since antiquity. However, perspectives that either label queerness as a heterosexual esoteric fantasy or socially marginalize it through pathologization should be taken into account.⁴ Roland Betancourt, art professor at the University of California and author of *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* says in an interview with TIME Magazine: “[the video] says that institu-

3 Andrew R. Chow: Historians Decode the Religious Symbolism and Queer Iconography of Lil Nas X’s “Montero” Video. *Time* (March 2021). <https://time.com/5951024/lil-nas-x-montero-video-symbolism-explained/> (last accessed 03 July 2022).

4 Luc Brisson: *Sexual ambivalence: androgyny and hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman antiquity*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 2002, xiii.

In *Sexual Ambivalence*, Brisson consolidates and develops his earlier explorations of sexuality in the ancient Mediterranean. He describes *Sexual Ambivalence* as a “working aid to the study for all those interested in the question of dual sexuality, whether in the domains of psychoanalysis, gay or gender studies, the history of medicine or zoology, the history of ideas, or even the history of art.” Especially in chapter two (Dual Sexuality and Homosexuality), Brisson considers another type of simultaneous dual sexuality in humans, displayed by persons with the physical attributes of one sex and gender characteristics of the other, specifically: passive male homosexuals who assumed women’s costume, behavior, and submissive sexual role, along with females who acted out aggressive male personas in their relationships with (passive) female partners. Brisson touches briefly on several related issues that have received much recent scrutiny. Current scholarship on the ancient Greek and Roman perceptions of homosexuality and heterosexuality indicates that they were not the same as our own Western ones. The polarized categories of homosexual and heterosexual themselves are relatively modern. In chapter three (Archetypes), Brisson turns to divine paradigms and precedents for simultaneous dual sexuality, considering mythological prototypes, entities not viewed as monsters but as essential contributors to the generation of the universe, gods, and mortals. He begins with Aristophanes’ myth of Eros and the androgynes in the *Symposium*, considers possible links with Orphic traditions, and then examines related phenomena in Gnosticism, the Chaldean Oracles, and the Hermetic Corpus. Brisson’s full, interpretive discussion provides useful background for an analysis of Aristophanes’ vision in the *Symposium*. The Orphic cosmography, with its double-sexed progenitor Phanes, called by a variety of other names, has been considered a parallel for Aristophanes’ globe-shaped ur-humans. The connection of Aristophanes’ fable with the Orphic tradition of a bisexual proto-being is problematic. Dover has suggested that the *Symposium* may have influenced later versions of the Orphic material and that Aristophanes’ androgynes were the inspiration for the subsequent Orphic fragment in which Phanes’ genitals are described as projecting from the rear of his body.

tionalization of homophobia is a learned thing – and that there are other origin myths available to us that are not rooted in those ideas.”⁵

This thesis implies that the representation of homosexual love in European cultural philosophy is in need of a new reading. To seriously consider this would also mean that in the video *Montero*, the exegesis is brought into a connection with feudal self-dramatization in the style of European monarchies as a strategy of empowerment. This bears the question: Does a music video, which primarily serves the purpose of marketing a product, possess the capacity to question the canon of significant philosophical history on a mass-cultural level?

First, the themes of the music video and its dramaturgy will be deliberated in the following. Subsequently, the thematic spectra hybridized in the music video will be elaborated on and discussed. In the conclusion, the results on the relevance of de-constructivist music video analysis will be discussed.

1 Plato's *Symposium* and Christian Iconography

The music videos scenic opening shows a sky – a sun surrounded by pink clouds. The camera descends from the shots of the sky to another world (00:11); the viewer catches a short glimpse of the remains of ancient-looking columns, broken Greek sculptures (Fig. 1) (00:10), a death mask (00:12), while a snake slithers along an under-world architecture.

From the mountain of the gods (“monte”) down into the apparent underworld, which at the same time is not clearly defined, for implied here is a Garden of Eden in the marble ruins of ancient Greece. Right from the start, hierarchies of propositional logic between Christian and ancient iconography are addressed. Inevitably the recipient thinks of Platonic shadow people from the cave allegory formulated in the *Politeia*.⁶ This context is already called upon in the lyrics:

You live in the dark, boy,
I cannot pretend
I'm not fazed, only here to sin
If Eve ain't in your garden, you know that you can

The figure of Eve, introduced in the text, is perceived as a guardian – only when she is not present does “you” know that he can sin. The boy who lives in the dark does not

⁵ Andrew R. Chow: *Historians Decode the Religious Symbolism and Queer Iconography of Lil Nas X's "Montero" Video*. See also: Roland Betancourt: *Byzantine Intersectionality Sexuality, Gender & Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton / Oxford 2020, 121–143.

⁶ Plato: Republic. In: id: *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. by Huntington Cairns / Edith Hamilton, trans. by Lane Cooper. Princeton, NJ 1961, 747.



Fig. 1: Ruins of ancient Greek statues and buildings.

Screenshot: Lil Nas X: "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" (Official Video). Directed by Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X (26 March 2021).

live in the light, he does not show himself and is not visible. Since this scene, which contains Plato's verses from the *Symposium*, focuses on brightness and darkness, the philosophically trained eye inevitably makes an association with recognizing vision, an ontological category of inner knowing established in Plato.⁷ For Plato, seeing is not a sensory-physiological process, it is epistemological. With the implied image and gaze aesthetics in the video, the recipient gains the impression that the detachment from Eve in the story of creation here also means the detachment from the heteronormatively determined male-female relationship associated with Eve.

Romantic talking? You don't even have to try
 You're cute enough to fuck with me tonight
 Looking at the table all I see is weed and white
 Baby, you living the life, but nigga, you ain't livin' right
 Cocaine and drinking with your friends
 You live in the dark, boy, I cannot pretend
 I'm not fazed, only here to sin
 If Eve ain't in your garden, you know that you can

Apparently, the protagonist of the song is living in the shadows, intoxicated and going down the wrong path – unenlightened. As in Plato's verses from the *Symposium* that are directed toward brightness and darkness, the philosophically trained eye inevita-

⁷ Plato: *Republic*, 747.

bly makes the association with cognitive seeing, an ontological category of inner cognition established by Plato. For Plato, seeing is not a sensory-physiological process, it is both ontological and epistemological.

If the lyrics seem simple and uncomplex at first, they merge through the divergence of image and text into a reformulation of the history of Plato's Forms ("Ideas"). Referring back to the cave allegory, Plato's maieutic questioning makes possible the achievement of a state of "the good" by overcoming the darkness and the shadows.

The video's narrative goes even further, hybridizing Christian and Greek imagery with Roman architecture. The shadow existence and the fall of man are formulated with a view to Roman pictorial logics as historicized gestures turned to stone in the video:

In the background while the serpent is hypnotizing him, the broken hand of a ruined marble colossus is plainly visible. This may be based on the famous colossal hand of Constantine I, the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, that is on display in the Musei Capitolini in Rome. This hand, of course, falls at the intersection of the Christian and the classical, thereby further emphasizing both themes, which are important throughout the video. The fact that the hand is broken and lying on the ground also emphasizes the idea of the fall of man.⁸

2 Plato's Spherical Creatures or: When the Bodies Were Separated by Angry Zeus

As mentioned above, the video's citation of Plato's *Symposium* is noteworthy. It poses the first exegetical riddles to the recipients. Inserted in ancient Greek: ἐπειδὴ οὖν ἡ φύσις δίχα ἐτμήθη, ποθοῦν ἕκαστον τὸ ἥμισυ⁹ (Fig. 2) ("Now when our first form had been cut in two, each half in longing for its fellow would come to it again"¹⁰).

This passage from Greek mythology, which Plato has the comic poet Aristophanes narrate in his dialogue *Symposium*, explains the Platonic perspective on the origin of erotic desire. According to Plato, Aristophanes explains his perspective on Eros, the god of love, in an extensively formulated monologue at a banquet.¹¹ He then formulates it with regard to the origin of man and desire, explaining that there were originally three sexes,¹²:

⁸ Spencer McDaniel: Here's the meaning of the Symbolism in Lil Nas X's Controversial New Music Video. *Tales of times forgotten* (07 April 2021). <https://talesoftimesforgotten.com/2021/04/07/heres-the-meaning-of-the-symbolism-in-lil-nas-xs-controversial-new-music-video/> (last accessed 09 June 2023).

⁹ Gregory R. Crane: Plato Symposium 190a. *Perseus Digital Library*. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0173%3Atext%3DSym.%3Asection%3D190a> (last accessed 09 June 2023).

¹⁰ Gregory R. Crane: Plato Symposium 191a. In: *Perseus Digital Library*. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.+Sym.+191a&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0174> (last accessed 09 June 2023).

¹¹ Allen: *The Dialogues of Plato*, 130–134.

¹² (190 St3 A) Allen: *The Dialogues of Plato*, 130.



Fig. 2: A tree with ancient Greek enscription.

Screenshot: Lil Nas X: “Montero (Call Me By Your Name)” (Official Video). Directed by Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X (26 March 2021).

In the first place, there were three sexes among men, not two as now, male and female, but a third sex in addition, being both of them in common, whose name still remains though the thing itself has vanished; for one sex was then derived in common from both male and female, androgynous both in form and name, though the name is now applied only in reproach.¹³

In the exegesis of this passage, inserted by Lil Nas X, there are different positions which essentially have to do with the translation history of this text. Lil Nas X conveys a one-sided perspective in the video, as if the quote from antiquity were already about queer love as it is understood today.¹⁴ However, the quote he stages has a complex exegetical history which is not commonly known. Against the background of this history, one can understand the video as a reference to an interpretive construct of “queer” since antiquity, formulated in terms of the history of science. The history of translation already gives a good indication of the complexities of interpretation and reception. Thus, in 1920, when Sigmund Freud did not deduce desire from the “pleasure principle,” he followed a different translation than that of Rudolf Kaßner in 1921.¹⁵ In his interpretation, however, Freud definitely sees heteronormative unions between the halves separated by Zeus.

¹³ Allen: *The Dialogues of Plato*, 130.

¹⁴ This scholarly term only came into fashion at the beginning of the 1990s.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Group Psychology and Other Works* [1920–1921]. In: id.: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. by James Strachey. New York, NY 1962, 57–58.

It becomes clear that “Freud considers only one pair out of three, and not the one favored by Aristophanes. Astoundingly, how the fact of same-sex desire, which is supposed to be explained by the story, becomes even more surprising in the Freudian version.”¹⁶

The interpretation by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld is remarkable. Philosopher Michael Groneberg, who has dealt extensively with the translation history of Plato’s *Symposium* and reconstructed the passage in its reception history, states of Magnus Hirschfeld that he was the one who did an enormous amount of highly differentiated research, both of empirical and historical nature, pursuing the same project of scientific enlightenment and de-criminalization of homosexuality. He developed a rich taxonomy of the empirical phenomena of sexual differentiation and sexuality, e.g. distinguishing hermaphroditism and androgynism by referring to the primary and secondary sexual features respectively. This distinction is useful and has been retained in the scientific literature. Hirschfeld also uses the term of a third sex, with explicit reference to Plato’s Aristophanes. He identifies the third sex with his “sexuelle Zwischenstufen” that in English would be called “intersexes.” He distinguishes four groups among them: hermaphrodites, androgynes, homosexuals, and transvestites. He criticizes the fact that they were formerly mixed in together, but continues to do this himself by subsuming them under one category: the third sex.¹⁷

Hirschfeld’s achievement, then, was to sexually differentiate and redefine Aristophanic mythology. Aristophanes explains his conception of Eros on the basis of the male spherical men, who become homosexual men after being split by Zeus. Moreover, he finds these spherical men to be the most masculine of all due to their purely male form of origin. Aristophanes deals with male homosexuality in particular detail and with apologetic tendency; with this example (of homosexual men) he explains/demonstrates his understanding of Eros in further detail. He defends boys who devote themselves to men; they would not be shameless but especially manly and brave, which he considers proven by the following:

A great proof: actually, it is only men of this sort who, when they grow up, enter on political affairs. When they reach manhood they love boys, and by nature pay no heed to marriage and the getting of children except as compelled to it by custom and law; it suffices them to live out their lives unmarried, with one another. So this sort of becomes wholly a lover of boys or a boy who loves having lovers, ever cleaving to what is akin.¹⁸

This is now the point at which Aristophanes – starting from the love of a boy – describes the appearance and nature of Eros in more detail. He describes the shock that

¹⁶ Michael Groneberg: Myth and Science around Gender and Sexuality: Eros and the Three Sexes in Plato’s Symposium. *Diogenes* 52/4 (2005), 39–49, 45.

¹⁷ Groneberg: *Myth and Science around Gender and Sexuality*, 44.

¹⁸ Allen: *The Dialogues of Plato*, 133.

seizes a lover when he meets his corresponding half; the philologist of antiquity Reginald E. Allen writes:

they are then marvelously struck by friendship and kinship and Eros, and scarcely willing to be separated from each other even for a little time. These are the people who pass their whole lives with each other, but who can't even say what they wish for themselves by being with each other. No one can think it is for the sake of sexual intercourse that the one so eagerly delights in being with the other. Instead, the soul of each clearly wishes for something else it can't put into words; it divines what it wishes, and obscurely hints at it.¹⁹

It is thus quite possible to read the relevant excerpt from the *Symposium* on the so-called spherical people in a “queer” way. Logics of visibility and strategies of representation of queer Black people correspond at this point with one of the earliest and elitist philosophies between desire and eros, with strong consequences for the definition of social-sexual role concepts.

3 Wigs, Curls, and Power

It is evident that Lil Nas X works intensively on questions of exegesis in the form of a hybrid aesthetic. The deliberate implication and inclusion of sexual and exegetical ambivalence at the beginning of the video sets the tone for further metaphorical and iconographical composition throughout the following scenes.

After the *Symposium* quote fades, a scene follows in which the Lil Nas X can be seen wearing a blue wig (01:16). This is followed by a sequence in which he appears three times as a clone. In the foreground, an alter ego with not-so-highly “toupeed” hair in pink appears, and to his left and right two other versions in blue but with different hair lengths (Fig. 4). The protagonist (i.e. Lil Nas X) can be seen bound by chains in the next scene, Greek sculptures behind him; shortly after (01:49), a scene that quotes the myth of Icarus – or a possible reference to Zeus. A little later, Zeus grasps a staff, which turns into a pole on which he glides down into the underworld (Fig. 3). This scene combines elements from the mythological worlds of Icarus and Orpheus. The hairstyle has changed in this scene. Lil Nas X descends into the depths of the glowing lava. (02:19).

The campy hairstyle could also be deciphered as an interpretative reference point to the television series *Bridgerton* (Fig. 5), which premiered on 25 December 2020.²⁰ Lil Nas X's album had its release one year later. The references to socially constructed

¹⁹ Allen: *The Dialogues of Plato*, 133. See also: Groneberg: *Myth and Science around Gender and Sexuality*, 41; Robert Eisner: A Case of Poetic Justice: Aristophanes' Speech in the Symposium. *The Classical World* 72/7 (1979), 417–419. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4349087>, 417–418. [Own translation, K.D.].

²⁰ References to cultural theory are certainly a possibility, as this can also be seen in the work of Janelle Monáe, cf. Kathrin Dreckmann: “PYNK” beyond forests and thighs. In: *Music Video and Trans-*



Fig. 3: Lil Nas X pole dancing while wearing tall leather boots.

Screenshot: Lil Nas X: *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)* (Official Video). Directed by Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X (26 March 2021).

classifications of race, class, and gender in his video are visually so intense that they could have absorbed the affinity to the Baroque wig. Looking at the canon of European art and through royal productions handed down in cultural history, videos like those of the Carters and of Janelle Monáe have developed appropriation as an Afro-diasporic empowerment strategy.²¹

The fact that Lil Nas X views himself as part of this successful tradition and uses it aesthetically can be seen as a very specific practice of citation and reception from a pop-cultural point of view. In any case, the hairstyle plays a special, royal role here.

The fact that Lil Nas X could have drawn on Louis XIV in terms of hairstyle history,²² and as a man carries this wig code to the outside world, points to a cultural-historical interference: British cultural historian Peter Burke quotes George Collas from 1912, referring to Louis XIV's "glory enterprise" which he views as reminiscent

culturality: *Manifestations of Social Utopia?*, ed. by Kathrin Dreckmann / Christofer Jost / Bastian Schramm. Münster going to press 2024, 2024, as in Beyoncé's work *Lemonade* cf. Kintra D. Brooks / Kameelah L. Martin: Introduction. In: *The Lemonade Reader*, ed. by Kintra D. Brooks / Kameelah L. Martin, New York, NY 2019, 3. Or in her current Renaissance tour. Cf. Kathrin Dreckmann: "I'm too classy for this world, forever, I'm that girl". Media hybrids between Pop and Art in Beyoncé's *RENAISSANCE*. In: *Aesthetic Amalgams and Political Pursuits. Intertextuality in Music Videos*, ed. by Agata Handley et al. London going to press 2024, 2024.

21 Kathrin Dreckmann: *Black Queen and King*, 125–144.

22 Susan Sontag dates the origins of Camp back to Louis XIV. Susan Sontag: *Notes on "Camp"*, In: Fabio Cleto: *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Edinburgh 1999, 56–57.



Fig. 4: Three clones of Lil Nas X wearing differently colored wigs.
Screenshot: Lil Nas X: "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" (Official Video). Directed by Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X (26 March 2021).



Fig. 5: The Character of Queen Charlotte in Netflix's "Bridgerton". Screenshot from Bridgerton Episode 5, Season 1 "The Duke and I". Directed by Sheree Folkson. Shondaland / CVD Productions, UK 2020.

of “contemporary publicity.”²³ The wig played a central role: “integration of the allonge wig into the exaggerated courtly etiquette that developed at the Versailles court under the Sun King made it the culmination of the refined lifestyle of the Baroque.”²⁴ Louis XIV, in particular, introduced the luxuriant allonge as a state wig.²⁵

By 1665, wigs were so common that Louis XIV approved royal wigmakers for Paris. The king, on whose head thick, curly, exceedingly beautiful hair was sprouting, had, however, refused to wear a wig in his youth. If at all, he initially accepted only *wigs à fenestres*, that is, those through whose openings natural curls could protrude. Only after 1672 did he wear wigs *à cheveux vifs*, which presupposed shaved skulls and were later powdered. Perhaps the reason for this was that wearing increasingly large wigs on full head hair resulted in oversized shapes and their fastening caused difficulties. Or perhaps people were looking for a way to ward off troublesome parasites.²⁶

The wig became an “expression of status and power” through him: “Louis XIV did not invent the voluminous curly wig, in fact he was not the first to wear it, but during his reign it acquires the rank of an outfit piece.”²⁷

It becomes clear that the wig was not only used as a social marker but also gained general acceptance as a fashion accessory. The self-staging strategies and advertising campaigns in the self-representation by the Sun King obviously had a direct influence on the era and fashion and social semantics: “Thus, the wearing of an allonge wig directly influences courtly fashion.”²⁸

The staging of Lil Nas X as a self-empowering person who has appropriated codes of European iconographies becomes evident. The singer rises above cultural history and philosophy and transforms his claim to power (which can be read as a code of hairstyle, fashion, and gesture) into a campy, i.e., ironically condensed, quotation. When mentioning Lil Nas X’s reference to the wig from the baroque period, Queen Marie Antoinette

²³ Peter Burke: *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*. New Haven, 1992, 4.

²⁴ Luckhardt et al.: *Lockenpracht und Herrschermacht*, 9. [Own translation, K.D.]. Basically, it is true that wigs were worn in ancient Egypt and Rome, and especially women in Greece and the Roman Empire owned extensive hairpieces. In the Baroque period, the fashion was rediscovered, whether the hair loss to be concealed was due to disease or treatment by quack doctors. Wigs were part of the contemporary fashion.

²⁵ Paas et al.: *Liselotte Von Der Pfalz: Madame Am Hofe des Sonnenkönigs; [Ausstellung der Stadt Heidelberg zur 800-Jahr-Feier, 21. September 1996 Bis 26. Januar 1997 im Heidelberger Schloß]*. Heidelberg: HVA, 1996, 191.

²⁶ Paas et al.: *Liselotte von der Pfalz*, 191. However, there are also other positions on this: “Accessories, especially the wig, also played an important role in the 17th century. This fashion had appeared around 1633, even before Louis XIV took office, after his father, Louis XIII, had lost his hair due to illness and had used this trick to hide his baldness. Soon he found imitators among men who had been deprived by nature of beautiful long hair, as the courtiers were fond of wearing.” [Own translation, K.D.].

²⁷ Luckhardt et al.: *Lockenpracht und Herrschermacht*, 9. [Own translation, K.D.].

²⁸ Luckhardt et al.: *Lockenpracht und Herrschermacht*, 11. [Own translation, K.D.].

must be acknowledged as well.²⁹ Queen Marie Antoinette and the Sun King both placed importance on the imprint and choice in courtly fashion and the associated pose. This concerned not only outward appearance – habitus was also crucial, as distinction required “years of rehearsed body language influencing the entire body language.”³⁰

4 A Black Gay Man in the Context of Greek Philosophy and Christian Iconography

The now iconic Baroque-looking wigs worn by Lil Nas X were more for royal representation than for pleasure and can certainly be assigned to the fashion style of an old Europe in terms of pictorial history. Lil Nas X thus thematizes the connection between extraordinary festivities and their fashion since the Baroque period, such as accessions to the throne (another example would be the legendary festivities at the court of Louis the XIV). Royal pomp and historical extravagance seem to have been hybridized in this video. Black representational logics thus reveal Lil Nas X as the mastermind of aesthetic staging. As a Black gay man, he interprets himself in the context of Greek philosophy and Christian iconography and crowns himself – just as Napoleon crowned himself emperor. As Lil Nas X simultaneously stages himself on a pedestal as a motionless statue in multiple duplicity – with a wig that seems chiseled in purple hair – he is at the same time referring to Black identity, Baroque fashion history, and basic gender-theoretical questions. It seems as if he is aware that at least one figure is being quoted. Possibly he even makes it particularly clear, since he appears several times as a quasi-clone. He cites the techniques of citation himself by inserting himself as a Black queer man into the condensed gestures and poses of antiquity that have made their way through the Renaissance to pop culture.³¹ Lil Nas X’s citing techniques might remind one of the intermediary migrations of the Warburg School.³² Intertextual pop culture strategies are definitely transcended. Statues also usually symbolize power; think of the statues of Augustus of Prima porta, Nike of Samothrace, and the Venus de Milo. Lil Nas X recognizes these gestures of power in

²⁹ Luckhardt et al: *Lockenpracht und Herrschermacht*, 9. [Own translation, K.D.].

³⁰ Luckhardt et al: *Lockenpracht und Herrschermacht*, 9. [Own translation, K.D.].

³¹ As discussed in footnote 20, it is not unlikely that artists hire e.g. ethnomusicologists, religious practitioners, literary scholars, pop culture critics, and historians to conduct research for their artistic projects as evidenced by Beyoncé’s visual concept album *Lemonade*, see Kintra D. Brooks / Kameelah L. Martin: Introduction, 3.

³² The term “Warburg School” derives from Aby Warburg’s library and writings. He developed his own method of iconography and iconology by using examples of different times and themes with similar motifs. Erwin Panofsky’s concept of iconography is influenced by this tradition. This discourse is continued, see, for instance, Colleen Becker: Aby Warburg’s Pathosformel as Methodological Paradigm. *Journal of Art Historiography*, 9 (2013), 1–25.

the history of white people, and the moment of self-empowerment is revealed in the hybridization of doubling as a statue and thus as a work of art – the statuary thereby acting in the sense of breaking a continuity of history.³³

5 Lil Nas X: Rise and Fall of Icarus

In the video *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)*, Lil Nas X is tied up in an arena as if a spectacle is about to begin, with identical-looking spectators positioned around him. He is being filmed from above; the camera suddenly shows an Icarus floating in the sky. Lil Nas X abruptly returns to the arena as the Devil. A gun is handed to him out of nowhere. He wears red braids, symbolizing a metamorphosis. He returns to the arena and stages himself as Orpheus descending into the underworld. Here he meets the Devil, who is waiting for him (Fig. 6), thus also returning in turn to an eclectic underworld fantasy between Greek mythology and Christianity; he sits down in front of the Devil and conveys to the viewer that he has just had anal sex with him. This is followed by the writing “*Damnant quod non intelligunt.*” This means “They condemn what they do not understand.” Clearly there is an analogy to Jesus’ quote as he died on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”³⁴

The response to this quote from Lil Nas X: “If that [i.e., Hell] is where we [i.e., queer people] belong, then let me be the king of that,”³⁵ possibly alluding to a trip to Hell, since Heaven remains denied to him. This rejection of Heaven and the resulting coronation of the king of Hell seems to be identified here as both an empowerment and liberation strategy.

In the end, he kills the Devil and puts on his own crown. Suddenly he grows wings. This is the ultimate empowerment – which is then no longer precarious, since he has ended up in Hell anyway. Actually, of course, what is meant by this is the detachment from teleologically conceived Christian afterlife concepts of Heaven and Hell. The fact that he imagines himself in Hell wearing a crown engaged in a sexual act that is socially identified as “gay” on the one hand takes up the social constructions of sexual practices

33 Eckart Marchand: Aby Warburg on plaster casts. *Sculpture Journal* 28/3 (2019), 401–402, 405.

34 Lil Nas X (2021): “Montero (Call Me By Your Name)” (Official Video). Directed by Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X. 26 March 2021. Music video, 03:09. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k> (last accessed 08 June 2023). In blog posts related to this video, reference is made to the poem “Paradise Lost” by John Milton (1667), who advocated freedom and self-determination, especially in the seventeenth century. It states: “Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least / We shall be free; th’ Almighty hath not built / Here for his envy, will not drive us hence: / Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce / To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: / Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” John Milton: *Paradise Lost*. England 1667, lines 258–263.

35 Zach Campbell: Lil Nas X “Montero (Call Me By Your Name)” REACTION WITH LIL NAS X!!. *YouTube* video (8:45–8:50). Available online: <https://youtu.be/h2OAuf4G6CI?t=525> (last accessed 21 June 2023).

with gender connotations; on the other hand, aesthetically and culturally historically reflected fantasies of kingship and enthronement are linked from these internalized imaginings of the Devil with the gesture of self-empowerment, which always remains fragile through the figure of Icarus.



Fig. 6: Lil Nas X giving the devil a lap dance.

Screenshot: Lil Nas X: “Montero (Call Me By Your Name)” (Official Video). Directed by Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X (26 March 2021).

It is remarkable that a queer Black man adopts white metaphors of queen and king at this point, mediating between gender, race, and class with the help of the phantasmagoria of Heaven and Hell – as well as the appropriation of Platonic philosophical history and fashion theory reworked in terms of the history of clothing. The level of reflection not only refers to a panoramic view of a reflective canonization process narrowed in cultural and philosophical history; the view also adopts a multiplicity of media. Even the title in brackets *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME* refers to a 2017 film by Luca Guadagnino of the same name and a 2007 novel by André Aciman, a story about an affair between a 17-year-old Italian and a 24-year-old American man. The criticism is made clear in the video by a re-enacted scene of *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* (2005): gay movies are white.³⁶ On all levels, including the cinematic, Lil Nas X highlights the exclusion of intersectional or queer gay love in representations of Hollywood cinema, philosophy, art, and Christian iconography.

³⁶ Further contributions to this discussion can be found in: Rodrick A. Ferguson: *Aberrations in Black*. Minnesota, MN 2004.

6 Conclusion

In examining the references made in the video, it becomes evident that hybridization processes not only take place between Christian and philosophical iconographies, but also that new image orders are created that indicate cultural and philosophical exclusions without self-victimization. On the one hand, this nobilizes the music video as a cultural form itself within the framework of a conceptually commercially successful spectrum of art media; on the other hand, it designs a new visual language in that the hybrid painting itself – between iconic art language, reflected canon and philosophical history, media critique of representation, and queer self-positioning – becomes an image that corresponds with other images.

It follows that a new image-programmatic video aesthetic has been formed. The reformulation of an (iconic) art history grounded in a classical concept of canon introduces a new perspective of queer Black empowerment which has developed an agency that appropriates without colonizing.

In recent years, mega-stars such as Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe,³⁷ and Sevdaliza³⁸ have successfully integrated critical academic discourse into the conceptions of their current music video productions. While doing so, they quote from historical films, make use of canonized iconographies that circulate in art, video, and film, or refer to pop-cultural aesthetics that in turn feed on the field of European popular culture as well as art history. Examples of possible points of reference are Oskar Schlemmer, Fritz Lang, and Walter Ruttmann, whose works have become the starting point for a variety of references in for example Janelle Monáe's videos, among others.³⁹

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37 See Kathrin Dreckmann: "PYNK" beyond forests and thighs.

38 See Kathrin Dreckmann: Dehumanize your bitch, 211–231.

39 See Kathrin Dreckmann: Black Queen and King, 125–144.

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