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Nonbinary Identities and the Self: A Contemporary Analysis of Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Gender Identity, and Existentialism

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Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

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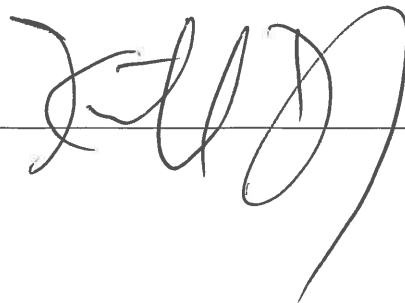
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**Nonbinary Identities and the Self: A contemporary analysis
of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, gender identity, and
existentialism**

By

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Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies Program

School of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Columbia College Chicago

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Abstract

Although there has been extensive discourse about gender and the performativity of gender from scholars, there is little room for the language and existence for Non-binary identities in the material world. Through a reading and discourse analysis informed by both queer theory and existentialism, this project demonstrates that the film, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* (2001) goes beyond disrupting gender binaries to giving up on gender binaries altogether, postulating the existence of a creative identity beyond male and female. This film is used as a case study to analyze and deconstruct gender on screen and how people read gender non-conforming bodies. This project researches and analyzes the film through a queer lens while focusing on the implications of existentialist philosophy through gender and the expression of gender throughout the movie. The theoretical lens of queer theory and film analysis are utilized in order to establish recognition for gender identities that are not formally recognized.

Keywords: Non-binary identities, film theory, queer theory, existentialism, transgender representation

"Like, it would be nice to believe that you could just exist, just be some true, honest, essential self. But you only really get to have a true honest essential self if you're white, male, het, and able-bodied. Otherwise your body has all these connotations and you don't get the benefit of the doubt."

Imogen Binnie, *Nevada*

The way people see us will never be the way we see ourselves. We split ourselves into metaphorical pieces when we present different facets of our personality to each person in our lives. This is not a bad thing necessarily, but it is a thing that happens. The intersections of our identities exist. We are never just a sibling, child, worker, or student. But rather we are complicated conglomerations of the product of our environments wholesale. The question I'm asking is, what happens when no one recognizes your gender? *Do you still exist?* In absence of formal recognition, John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* shows a way in which non-binary and gender non-conforming identities are made tangible. Despite the fact that the legal recognition or sometimes, social recognition of non-binary identities does not exist, through creative acts, performing, and self-recognition, it is possible to exist. Through a reading and discourse analysis informed by both queer theory and existentialism, this project demonstrates that *Hedwig* goes beyond disrupting gender binaries to giving up on gender binaries altogether, postulating the existence of a creative identity beyond male and female.

The Origin of Hedwig: Historical and Cultural Context of Hedwig and the Angry Inch¹

The film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) dir. John Cameron Mitchell, is an adaptation from the 1998 off-broadway musical about a transgender rock star from East Berlin Germany who survives a coerced sex reassignment surgery, then moves to the US in pursuit of "finding

¹ The use of the pink font is a reference to the original posters and album art from the original 1998 musical.

their other half’ as well as chasing down the man who stole their music. Told in a circular style², the audience initially meets Hedwig present day, and then they tell their story of how they had come to be “an internationally ignored song stylist, barely standing before you.” This is done while exploring the titular character’s past and gender identity through song³ and performance. One of their main philosophies is that part of themselves is somehow missing, and they always look for their “soulmate”. This drives them to find their “missing half,” and assuming that someone else will complete them. At first, they find their first husband Lt. Luther Robinson, in order to escape from an oppressive communist regime, and then a young man Tommy Speck when they are stranded in Junction City, Kansas, and eventually end up with Yitzhak, a Croatian immigrant who is often in the background. Hedwig seeks not only to gain love, but also recognition, citizenship, and stardom. At the end of the film, Hedwig realizes that they are a whole complete person, without the need of another “half,” and they are complete in their gender as well. To find “their other half” would cheapen their own existence as a complicated person and artist.

John Cameron Mitchell is the writer, director and main actor in this film and was the original Hedwig in 1998⁴. Initially coming from John Cameron Mitchell’s feelings and anecdotes from his youth, the show had very humble origins. Mitchell talks in the same playbill article

² Circular narratives cycle through the story one event at a time to end back where the story originated. Rather than provide a clear conclusion tying together the remaining pieces of the story, a circular narrative will provide closure through a return to the opening material. (<http://education.seattlepi.com/circular-narrative-style-5885.html>)

³ Order of Songs:

Tear me Down
Origin of Love
Sugar Daddy
Angry Inch
Wig in a Box
Wicked Little Town
Hedwig's Lament
Exquisite Corpse
Midnight Radio

⁴ <http://www.playbill.com/article/john-cameron-mitchell-on-hedwig-avoiding-social-media-and-what-it-means-to-be-queer-com-341433>

about the gender (or lack thereof) of Hedwig. It goes beyond the idea of sexual orientation, but rather seeking for recognition of existence itself in your own gender and through human interaction in general. Mitchell states, “For me it's more about the umbrella of what it means to be queer because *Hedwig* has less to do with sexuality and more to do with seeing the world through an unusual vision. What we call male and female energies are within all of us and have to be nurtured or they can become stunted and can become like cancers, the way certain things in the body, if they're not taken care of, can metastasize. If you're not working all those energies... it can hurt you. Pride is not necessarily something you do, but acceptance of what you are.” This is Mitchell’s response to the often asked question, “Is Hedwig gay?”. And the character is less about sexual orientation, but rather, more about how we orient ourselves to other people and the world we live in. Mitchell lived in Germany for quite some time when his father was stationed there from the American Military. The character “Tommy (Gnosis/Speck)” was influenced from Mitchell’s own life, and the character “Hedwig” (the character) was influenced from one of Mitchell’s babysitters from a long time ago. Nearly a one-person-show, Hedwig monologues from one tragedy to another, illuminating the complexities of relationships, love, and existence through rock songs and ballads. Stephen Trask was the composer and lyricist. In 1998, many queer people would flock to the MePa (Meatpacking district; parody of SoHo) of New York to see John Cameron Mitchell as the “Internationally ignored song stylist,” and Stephen Trask in his band Cheater, forming “The Angry Inch” fictional band⁵. From the humble origins of an exquisite corpse of stand-up comedy, drag, and music in various bars and nightclubs, to the Off-Broadway production in 1998, to the 2001 film festival circuit darling, to the 2014 revival on

⁵ *Whether You Like It Or Not: The Story of Hedwig*. (Documentary on the *Hedwig* DVD)

Broadway, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is quite the unique and impactful rock musical, “whether you like it or not.”⁶ As a cultural artifact, *Hedwig* is important and it reflects the conversations about identity and gender in various forms. Scholars, queer theorists and artists have engaged in conversations regarding *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and its impact on theory and what it says about gender. Gender theorist Judith Butler writes, “gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (526).

Hedwig is Nonbinary: Where Existentialism and Gender Meet

The way the public usually thinks about gender is through a binary. Man or woman. Girl or boy. And these labels have various roles and connotations attached to them as well.

Transgender women and transgender men are expected to further these binary expectations and expressions even more than cisgender⁷ people. For example, a transgender woman is expected to wear makeup and perform gender in a way that cisgender women aren’t expected to.⁸ For example, when cisgender women don’t shave their legs, that’s considered to be feminist. But when transgender women don’t shave their legs, their gender is policed.

Whereas all different kinds of genders and sexualities have existed for a long time before Western Imperialism and civilization, the notion that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (and the subsequent gender roles attached) are the only way of experiencing the world is far from the truth. From what scholars know about history, semiotics, and other gender studies, binary genders are not an

⁶ A quote from Yitzhak (Hedwig’s husband) that introduces Hedwig to the stage.

⁷ Transgender means you don’t identify with the gender you’re assigned with at birth. Cisgender means that you identify with the gender you were assigned with at birth. Ex: Jessica Chastain is a cisgender woman. Laverne Cox is a transgender woman.

⁸ For example, when cisgender women don’t shave their legs, that’s considered to be feminist. But when transgender women don’t shave their legs, their gender is policed

immovable fact. Gender is a social construct, but that doesn't mean it's not real. The idea of gender performativity, correlates with gender as a social construction. In the same way that Judith Butler talks about the malleability of gender and the performativity of it, Hedwig also embodies the way we see gender. Butler writes,

..gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (519)

This theory provides the explanation that gender isn't only biologically based--which is also a human social construction. Thinking about the ramifications of the idea of "gender as a social construct," we have to think about what this rhetoric does in places outside of academia. Do people understand that this doesn't mean that gender isn't real, nor everything is 'fake,' but rather that gender roles, identities are a product of our environments, but can also come from very real places?

One of the many responses to Butler is from Julia Serano, a trans woman author and biologist. She writes in one of her memoirs, *Excluded*, about the very rhetoric that might seem freeing to some, is constricting to others. Although in academia, scholars know that saying "gender is a construct" means that this is a social force that is arbitrary and has real effect in the world, scholars have to think about how rhetoric is interpreted by people outside of theory. Serano thinks about this in her perspective of a trans woman and saying that the rhetoric of "gender as a social construct" implies that her gender isn't real. She writes, "Look, I know that many contemporary queer folks and feminists embrace mantras like "all gender is performance,"

"all gender is drag," and "gender is just a construct." They seem empowered by the way these sayings give the impression that gender is merely a fiction...Almost every day of my life I deal with people who insist on seeing my femaleness as fake...Because I'm transsexual, I am sometimes accused of impersonation or deception when I am simply being myself. So it seems to me that this strategy of fictionalizing gender will only ever serve to marginalize me further" (Serano 105-108).

Meaning is assigned to words and other things, but nothing has inherent meaning. Pink does not automatically translate to "girl," but in the United States society, that is what has been constructed. As those who know from Roland Barthes' semiotics, myths can be both real and untrue. Barthes writes, "What must always be remembered is that myth is a double system; there occurs in it a sort of ubiquity: its point of departure is constituted by the arrival of a meaning...This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses it like an ambiguous signifier, at once intellectual and imaginary, arbitrary and natural" (121). And *gender* is a myth.

The concept of gender in a binary is very much a Western one that has been imposed because of colonization. People should be able to express themselves and how they view their own gender. Gender scholar Kate Bornstein writes, "A particularly insidious aspect about gender--our gender system here in the West, and perhaps for the planet as a whole--is that it is an oppressive class system made all the more dangerous by the belief that it is an entirely natural state of affair" (105). At the same time, gender itself is not a science (especially considering how science has been influenced by cultural relations of gender, thus why biology is also deemed irreputable). Many indigenous peoples had gender nonconforming cultures as well as the

colonial days of the early United States. The discourse of what is considered a “real” woman, or “real” man has always been culturally, not biologically based.

Through a close queer reading, Hedwig, titular character from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (film and musical) can be seen as non-binary, and existentialism is inherent to their⁹ gender identity. It is important to note, that instead of reading ‘Non-binary’ as a third gender, it should be read as an option of non-gendered Being, which is inherent to an existentialist philosophy. Although this is not canonically recognized, it is also not outright stated otherwise. The subject is gendered through outside forces, this is part of what is known as the subject’s “thrown-ness” as discussed in existentialism. “Thrown-ness” is a term used by Heidegger to exemplify the idea that we cannot choose where we are placed in the world (ex: socioeconomic status, race, gender) and although we have some autonomy as humans, so much of our lives depend on what is out of our control. People are gendered and labeled in general without consent. In this way, Hedwig is thrown into their harsh life of being in East Berlin, and being a queer body in a world that does not accommodate queerness. Even though Hedwig goes through various hardships, the one thing Hedwig can have agency over is their performance and musical expression. In this way, Hedwig’s performance acts as theory in the way that a person can be reflective about their own gender and own existence in the world after finishing the film. When people see Hedwig, they do see a tragic story of a person who has lost their place in the world, but a simultaneous triumphant story of regaining identity as well. As individuals, we look at Hedwig’s performance as an opportunity to explore identity, creativity and existing in a world that may not suit us.

⁹ I use “they/them” pronouns for Hedwig in a gender-neutral sense because the lyrics at the end of the musical “more than a woman or a man” implies that Hedwig is neither.

Hedwig is canonically queer and also transgender (albeit, through a coerced operation). However, there are several scenes and lyrics in the film that imply that Hedwig is not a cisgender man, nor a transgender woman. They would not be accurately categorized as either binary gender (man, woman). Non-binary genders are ones that live beyond the binary of man and woman. Non-binary is an umbrella term to categorize anyone who does not identify along the gender binary (they might be genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, bigender or non-binary)¹⁰. The usage of they/them/their pronouns is also, to signify the neutral gender status instead of insinuating the gendered connection with “he” or “she.” Pronouns are also, not necessarily indicative of gender, but for all intents and purposes, “they/them” is most commonly used to signify a non-gendered nature. Also, it is important to note, that instead of reading ‘Non-binary’ as a third gender, it should be read as an option of non-gendered Being, which is inherent to an existentialist philosophy. To think that there is the categories of “man,” “woman,” and “other,” this is othering and dehumanizing. Instead, it is a possibility and experience that language has not caught up to yet.

First of all, queer readings are important and essential to any viewer of the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Consuming media that is biased towards the majority (often, white, cisgender, and heterosexual), skews the kind of representation. Many times marginalized people are misrepresented or underrepresented. Queer theory scholar, Alexander Doty writes:

Queer readings aren’t “alternative” readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or “reading too much into things” readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the

¹⁰ Huston, Matt. “None of the above.” *Psychology Today*, vol. 48, no. 2. Mar/April 2015, pp. 28-30. EBSCOhost, [colum.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hxh&AN=101136214&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hxh&AN=101136214&site=eds-live&scope=site).

complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along. (16)

Queer people have limited representation, and the representation we do have is often stereotypical or underdeveloped. Not only is it important to analyze the themes of gender identity on film, but to also understand how they were translated from stage to screen, and what was lost and gained in this process. Just as words on a page can have connotative and denotative meanings, as can visual images through a film. When audience members participate and gather their own views upon popular icons and films, they become part of this bigger part of a cultural conversation involving critics, creators and the thing created. The film can inform us about our own gender and how we relate to other people through media. The messages and themes conveyed through the screen can reify and deconstruct dominant narratives about gender at the same time.

Reading Hedwig in a queer and disidentificatory way is essential to really understand the complexities of the film and nuanced gendered statements it asserts with the themes of power, belonging and subjectivity. The reality of being a queer person of color means negotiating the majority culture where we're told to not exist, therefore reconstructing and reworking ideas, bodies, art and more parts of the culture in our own favor is a necessity. Hedwig's performance being read by a queer person is vastly different from a straight person. While a queer person might walk away from the film thinking about how Hedwig remains their complex and multi-faceted self in and out of drag, a straight person might think that 'Hedwig turns back into a man.' As a queer person of color, reading media in a different way is not only something that is done, but something that is done to survive in a world not made for us. Academic Muñoz writes,

“Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship”

(4). As a queer body, Hedwig and their performances are speaking to a much more complex version of existing in a gender binary.

Both E. Patrick Johnson and Jose Esteban Muñoz look directly within the performance of theory and politics. Jose Esteban Muñoz’s work *Disidentifications* is a way to frame the idea of working *with* and *against* dominant ideology (in form of gender, in this case). Reading media in a disidentificatory way is not a means to an end, but rather a survival mechanism for those (specifically, queer people of color) to reinterpret media representations in their favor. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* works in a disidentificatory way when we read portrayals of multiple theories of gender, identity, subjectivity and the Self. Instead of the typical transgender narrative of “born in the wrong body,” there is no correct embodiment of existence, and that any *body* can be a wrong body when forced into the role.

The first song, “Tear Me Down,” establishes Hedwig as a gender nonconforming individual, a body that is disconnected from their surroundings, and as a person who is most comfortable during performance compared to existing in a society where they would have to “pass”¹¹ as cisgender (compared to performances). Performing in a creative space where a queer person can explore the fluidity of gender compared to strict social relationships in everyday life are two very different experiences where gender expression matters. Throughout the film, the Angry Inch band performs at various Midwestern cities in a restaurant called “Bilgewater.”

¹¹ Appearing cisgender to other cisgender individuals. This is for safety, and not for personal gain. As a transgender person it’s highly encouraged to pass as a binary gender (man/woman), or else your being is under judgement and scrutiny and in danger for violence.

Most of the restaurant customers always look perplexed and uncomfortable by Hedwig's presence. In "Tear Me Down," the lyrics illustrate the dichotomy between genders, and The Berlin Wall: "*There ain't much of a difference/Between a bridge and a wall/Without me right in the middle, babe/You would be nothing at all.*" This not only suggests that Hedwig is in 'between' the constructs of man and woman, but also establishes them as a metaphor of the Berlin Wall, that eventually is torn down. During this song, Hedwig is wearing a all-blue-jean romper with an American Flag inspired cape. On the right it says, "Yankee Go Home," on the other side it says, "With Me." The tongue and cheek humor, with a touch of poignancy, is one of the iconic hallmarks of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. This is queer humor. While straight audience members may not be familiar with 'Camp', the kind of biting comedy is also a defence mechanism against harsh realities.

The Midwestern restaurant settings themselves are microcosms of popular culture and subculture in the U.S. There are the typical families and older couples dining, disinterested by Hedwig's performance. But at the same time, there's usually a small group of young people completely enthralled and entertained by Hedwig's gender nonconformity. This dichotomy itself is another binary where the subculture of queer folks are occupying the scene, but the 'majority' are the people who do not care for the nonconforming genders or sexualities.

As an immigrant, and a trans person in the U.S., Hedwig is disconnected from not only the man/woman binary, but the citizen/foreigner binary as well. From a postcolonial and Queer theorist lens, Jillian Sandell presents the American identity is also framed with heteronormativity, yet another binary. In "Transnational Ways of Seeing: Sexual and National Belonging in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*," Sandell argues that the film is equally about

transnationality and specifically about how queer identifications and identities are produced in relation to the nation-state: “Embodied as a trans feminine identity in the US, as a German citizen, the character Hedwig straddles between the national identities as well as gender. Ideas of assimilation, citizenship, and already-made subjectivity is brought into question” (24).

Time and time again, the binary of American citizen and foreigner is brought up as a theme. From “America the Beautiful” instrumental playing before Hedwig takes a step onstage before the audience hears them sing, to the moments of Hedwig making tasteless jokes about being in control of Yitzhak’s passport, the theme of freedom and access to freedom is vital to the understanding of this musical. There are material implications to all of the discourse around freedom and race, including the rhetoric used regarding immigration and undocumented people in the United States. For instance, the use of the word “illegal immigrant” or “alien” is a way to persuade citizens of the U.S. that these people should not belong in the country since they are “illegal,” but no person can be illegal. Historian Mae Ngai talks about the impact of what this discourse can mean for existing people:

Americans, both citizen and immigrant, have suffered the consequences of these limits ever since: more than 5.5 million people deported since 1965 (not counting the millions of additional “voluntary departures” and “returns”); 11.5 million now living and working in the shadows; 4 million US-citizen children with at least one undocumented parent; and ongoing agonizing debates over legalization, enforcement, and removal. (3)

The relationship that Yitzhak and Hedwig have is complicated and tumultuous. Yitzhak’s character is a man, but is usually played by a cis woman actor. Yitzhak used to be a drag queen

from Croatia. It's also important to note that he is Jewish, and Hedwig¹² usually makes anti-semitic jokes at his expense as well. Yitzhak is coded as a transgender man who is feminine, but Hedwig does not allow him to present in a feminine way because it undermines their own femme presentation during performances. Hedwig repeats the same quote that Luther (their first husband, and manipulative/abusive partner) said to them: "In order to to be free, you have to leave something behind." Hedwig continues the cycle of abuse onto Yitzhak in order to feel a sense of power that they hadn't felt before. Later in the film when Yitzhak attempts to leave Hedwig, Hedwig tears up Yitzhak's passport. This physically and symbolically means that he can not leave Hedwig. Hedwig has gone through a lot of abuse in their lifetime, but it doesn't mean that they were in the right at all.

The themes of power and freedom apply to not only gender and citizenship, but also relationships. More contributing factors to their place of powerlessness include the learned helplessness in their first romantic relationship with the American soldier. Yet another symbol of how a man, especially in the US military is supposed to save and protect their loved ones, he exploits, and manipulates Hedwig (then, Hansel) into being his wife. In the song "Sugar Daddy," Hedwig has a false sense of agency, thinking they could 'control' their current boyfriend/sugar daddy (Sgt. Luther Robinson, the American GI).

So you think only a woman

Can truly love a man?

Then you buy me the dress

I'll be more woman than a man like you can stand!

¹² They still identify as German, or German-American

This implies that Hedwig is exposing that Luther is working within the gender binary, thinking that only men can be attracted to women, so Hedwig then proves how much of a “woman” they can be when presenting in a femme way for him. This ultimately backfires, because Luther coerces them into getting a sex reassignment surgery in order to marry him and move to the United States. Despite all of this, Luther still ends up leaving Hedwig. And he leaves Hedwig for a cisgender man as well. Even though Hedwig is left fending for themselves in America, they eventually find work through sex work and odd jobs.

As a moment of despair, and hope simultaneously, the song “Wicked Little Town” by Hedwig speaks to the voice in all of us that feels trapped. At this point in time, Hedwig has been abandoned by their husband in the US. Instead of dwelling on the heartache and suffering, Hedwig decides to pursue their dream of being a rockstar. This is something that they do have control over, their appearance and their music. In a casual cafe setting, Hedwig proceeds to sing prefaces the song “Wicked Little Town” with the sentence, “I actually wrote this for a guy to sing.” Hedwig feels as if they have to distance themselves from the person they used to be, even though they wrote the song about living in the town they are currently in. It’s a song that depicts hope in a hopeless situation. They are stuck in this small town, but the comfort of music gets them through:

*The fates are vicious and they're cruel.
 You learn too late you've used two wishes
 like a fool
 and then you're someone you are not,
 and Junction City ain't the spot,
 remember Mrs. Lot
 and when she turned around.*

*And if you've got no other choice
 You know you can follow my voice
 through the dark turns and noise
 of this wicked little town.*

Later in the musical, Tommy Gnosis sings a reprise to Hedwig's original "Wicked Little Town." Placed as a mirror to the song "Wicked Little Town," Tommy Gnosis sings this almost-apology to Hedwig. The second to last song, "Wicked Little Town (reprise)" refers to Hedwig as "*more than any God could ever plan/more than a woman or a man.*" The lyrics imply a strong non-binary nature of the character, and even though Tommy left their romantic relationship due to his own transmisogyny, Tommy now realizes that he was being bigoted and that Hedwig is beyond the labels of man or woman. Even as a Christian, Gnosis now sees beyond the gender binary, and sees above all, that he was in the wrong for stealing Hedwig's songs and making money off of them.

Gender Presentation and Identity

For the most part, when performing or otherwise, Hedwig is feminine. While some drag might be used to convey a role, or for mere entertainment, Hedwig uses the art of drag, makeup, femininity and performance as coping mechanisms as well as an outlet for creative expression and identity. In the documentary, John Cameron Mitchell talks about when Hedwig is at their lowest, instead of self-harm, they choose to create (put on makeup). The idea of femininity as creative expression and coping is depicted within the song lyrics as well as the scene of "Wig in a Box." The music is starting slow in A major, but quickly becomes upbeat with the change in tempo and attitude. Hedwig is no longer sulking and ruminating on their unfortunate

circumstances (that they had no control over), but is starting to work on things they *do* have control over-- their appearance.

*On nights like this
 When the world's a bit amiss
 And the lights go down
 Across the trailer park
 I get down
 I feel had
 I feel on the verge of going mad
 And then it's time to punch the clock
 I put on some makeup
 And turn up the tape deck
 And pull the wig down on my head
 Suddenly I'm Miss Midwest
 Midnight Checkout Queen
 Until I head home
 And put myself to bed*

Their husband (Sgt. Luther Robinson) has just left Hedwig for another man, Hedwig is stranded in the middle of nowhere in Kansas in a trailer park, more of their grandiose illusion of glamorous America fading day by day. Hedwig is forced to “pass” as a woman in the U.S. because that’s how they were able to get their citizenship. So not only are they stuck in this midwestern small town, but they are stuck here as a gender that they may or may not even identify with completely. Mitchell talks about how Hedwig would’ve initially cut theirselves on their arm, they would actually cut off a piece of their hair instead. Having a self-destructive

impulse, especially gender and appearance based symbolizes the gender dysphoria that Hedwig feels and instead of enacting self-harm, choosing to create and “wear a mask” via makeup is a healthier and radical idea.

Although Hedwig may not identify as a woman, this does not necessarily mean that they identify as a man. For example, in terms of “passing,”¹³ when Hedwig is not confronted with the outside world, in the comfort of their own motel room with fellow band members, Hedwig is still wearing makeup, a wig and what would be considered “women’s clothes.” Of course, clothing doesn’t really have a gender. Usually cisgender people assign gender to clothes when trying to sell it. Also Hedwig wears “natural makeup” (aka: makeup that doesn’t look like you’re wearing makeup) which wouldn’t be necessary to wear in the private of your home unless you are not at home with the way you look. Hedwig does possess gender dysphoria of sorts, and this is reflected in not only the “Wig in a Box” song, but as well as “Angry Inch:”

My sex-change operation got botched

My guardian angel fell asleep on the watch

Now all I got in a Barbie Doll-crotch

I got an angry inch

The song initially starts from the flashback of Luther asking Hansel¹⁴’s mother for Hansel’s hand in marriage, and concocting this plan to dress as a women in order to be married (in a seemingly heterosexual way). At first Hansel laughs and thinks that this is too crazy to work, and puts on

¹³ Different than the concept of racial passing, but similar. Instead of being able to ‘pass’ as white, transgender people are expected to ‘pass’ as cisgender. They are far less scrutinized if people assume they were “always a man or woman” and do not get as many invasive questions.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/20/transgender-janet-mock-passing-realness>

¹⁴ Hedwig’s birth name. Hedwig is actually the name of their mother, as the identity they take on to escape to the US.

this beige wig. A look in their eyes almost pleads their mother to want to stop this arrangement and save them from going through with this, but then their mother says that it's a "cut and paste job" and that Hansel can take her name, Hedwig, and her passport. Luther then replies that there is a need for a "full *physical* examination," meaning that they'll see their genitalia, and know that Hedwig is not a cis woman. Hedwig's mother now responds, "In order to be free, we have to leave something behind. And I know just the doctor to do it." This cuts to a creepy looking doctor, and Hedwig in a hospital gown looking disoriented and confused, this cuts to current day with strobe lights and the angry song "Angry Inch." A restaurant patron calls Hedwig a "faggot," and Yitzhak actually protects Hedwig (possibly in transgender solidarity?), while Hedwig dissociates and thinks back to a worse time--when Luther left them in Junction City, Kansas and transitions into the song "Wig in a Box."

Even through all of their trials and tribulations, Hedwig gets through the sadness by way of laughing. From the 1998 production, Hedwig laugh/cries, and asks the audience "Am I laughing or am I crying? I have to laugh otherwise I'll never stop crying," and then repeats this, but switches the words. Much like a sad clown, Hedwig makes self-deprecating humor all the time. There is no question that Hedwig has existential and queer humor. Even through their many jokes in their monologues, like their thesis from university: "You Kant Always Get What you Want, but you Get What You Nietzsche." It reflects their existential crisis.

A lot of dark and sardonic humor is used by the queer community in particular. When the AIDS epidemic happened, millions of LGBTQ folks died, and their deaths were barely memorialized by the public or the government. One of the ways to deal with tragedy is through humor, and this is very existential in nature. In "Either/Or," Soren Kierkegaard proposes this

scenario where he is sent to Heaven, and the saints/angels ask him if he could choose only one thing, what would it be? Love, youth, power? He responds, “Esteemed contemporaries, I choose only one thing: laughter on my side.’ Not a single word one god offer in answer; on the contrary, the all began to laugh” (57). The use of self-deprecating humor is a coping mechanism, especially for Hedwig in order to deal with the sheer amount of hardship in their own life. Whether the audience is spoken to through monologue or through music, the various tones of humor as well as angst is seen throughout the musical.

Hedwig is clearly affected by German philosophers, as well as rock and roll, and arguably, gender as a social construction in itself is inherently existentialist. Questioning of the Self as a constructed gendered subject is important first and foremost. Gender is a very personal experience. But, it also isn’t. You engage with everyone you know with your gender, whether you intend to or not. Your gender presentation, (whether you wear your hair long, or short, if you wear certain colors, if you wear certain styles, if your body language is read as feminine or masculine etc.), says something about you before you’ve even had a chance to speak. Although this seems dramatic, this is the *nature* of living in this kind of ideological society where gender is constructed.

The idea of “authenticity” in existentialism relates directly to gender identity, and questioning one’s own character *despite* outside influences. Gender is socially constructed, but one of the questions that needs to be answered is the material reality of gender and how we perceive ourselves. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* takes a critical look at the construction of gender and how “woman” is seen as secondary to “man”, but deconstructing exactly why this is seen in such ways. Beauvoir writes, “One is not born a woman, but becomes

a woman.” (112). Where Simone de Beauvoir writes about the becoming of woman, that gender is constructed through the social and internal, there is subjectivity within gender. Womanhood, manhood, and everything in and out of this spectrum of what we call gender is defined through all of our unique experiences, and I would say that none of these experiences are universal. Although two women might identify as cisgender, the lives they have led are never exactly the same.

Where people are not born women, but rather become them, Hedwig too is forced into gender identities thrown at them by other people. Until they choose to present and live the way they want to live (and not for convenience or necessity), is when they will also start to *become*. Hedwig was initially born as Hansel, but as the audience learns through monologues, that Hansel always was very androgynous and wanted to be a glam rocker (akin to David Bowie). Hedwig is then forced to take on the identity of their mother, and present in a strictly feminine way, even though they might not want to. At the very end, Hedwig is now wearing only black shorts, is bare chested, and wears the same silver Tommy Gnosis wears as his signature look. This look implies that Hedwig and Tommy have combined and everything that they have learned, while also losing the facade that they were not. Even though Hedwig walks away sans drag, this does not mean that they are a man.

The very last scene shows Hedwig completely naked in a desolate alleyway, and the two halves of the souls (from the song “Origin of Love”) attached again. This “look” represents being complete and being whole. It means that with, or without our clothes and makeup we are ourselves first and foremost. Something that Hedwig exposes though, is that there is no finality in *being*. While Beauvoir implies that there is a “complete-ness” in gender, Hedwig subverts this

concept. While they are a complete individual, they also realize that there is a multiplicity in their being.

The text from Deleuze and Guattari's *Rhizomatic Thought* illustrates this abstract concepts of multiplicity and being in a way that isn't final, thinking about the varieties of existence and how one can contain complex qualities. Deleuze and Guattari write, "Multiplicities are formed by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight, or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (9). Where Hedwig is alone in their trauma, until they create their band, The Angry Inch, and find another transgender/gender non-conforming person¹⁵. Only then does Hedwig begin to understand themselves and the complexities of their own gender, and how the binary falls apart.

To understand the transgender subject, Lucas Cassidy Crawford writes an essay in direct response to Deleuze and Guattari. "*Transgender without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification*" bases their work off of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "Body Without Organs,"¹⁶ looking at not only the theoretical implications of the limitations of our definitions of transgender, but also the geographical and psychoanalytical definitions. Crawford looks into the contextuality of transgender subjectivity (especially with the concept of physical modifications). Instead of seeing sex reassignment surgery as 'dangerous', it's seen rather as a comfort in some aspects. Crawford writes, "As this model configures gender modification as a safe return rather than a risky exploit or experiment in embodied selfhood, Prosser finds relief in the 'transgender ambivalence'" (177). I agree with Crawford's theories and how instead of seeing transgender bodies as being Othered bodies, often scrutinized under the medicalized gaze

¹⁵ Yitzhak, their husband.

¹⁶ Typically abbreviated as "BwO"

(i.e. “Have you had the Surgery?”), the author is asking us to see transgender bodies and existence as a transgender person as a more multifaceted view than just being tormented in the ‘wrong body.’ Much like how Hedwig the character is sexualized and demeaned and interrogated for having a body that doesn’t conform to cisgender standards of existing, there is a need to see different ways of being other than just the binary definitions of men and women. The author is asking us to look into gender as a more abstract concept than just a “born in the wrong body” narrative. Instead of seeing transitions as a linear pattern, or a “journey” with a finished ending, Hedwig finishes with the character walking away completely naked (reborn metaphorically), in silence.

Much like the titular character of *Candide*, Hedwig also leads a disillusioned life with an optimistic attitude, expecting that things will work out for them in the end, but rather they are faced with the harshness of reality. Whereas Candide has this naive point of view that “everything must work out for the best,” Hedwig has this conception of the U.S. and being a rockstar, and none of it ever works out the way either of them had planned. But in a similar light, the main characters both come to the conclusion of agency, autonomy and multifaceted aspects of living. In order to embrace living a life that wasn’t theirs to begin with, they have to make it theirs in their own way. Both of the ideological concepts of Hedwig’s idea of grandeur to Voltaire’s *Candide* and optimism ultimately unpack their similarly skewed ideas of how things should work out and eventually come to the similar conclusion that self-definition is the ultimate goal. This is similar to the idea of facticity from Jean Paul Sartre. Instead of acting in “bad faith,” they start to “cultivate their own garden,” or write new music and create instead of following old paths. Through performance and creativity, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* gives a platform to

explain and critique contemporary understandings of gender identity and expression, and how through a subject's own creative works, can their existence be recognized. Gender is a social construct, but that does not mean it doesn't have material effects. Gender studies and queer theory constantly talk about the power of a gendered subject, or lack thereof. In absence of formal recognition, Hedwig shows a way in which those identities can exist.

Our Origin of Self-Love?

The driving heart of the narrative, and ideology that Hedwig eventually reformulates, is the idea of 'soulmates' based on Plato's *Symposium*. This makes up the song "Origin of Love" and is the entire reason that Hedwig seeks out their 'other half' to begin with. Of course, Hedwig realizes that they are complete and whole in their personhood. They do not need anyone else to define who they are and who they are not. It's increasingly devastating for Hedwig that Tommy has stole a part of their life and their original songs because Hedwig once thought that Gnosis was their "other half." In conversation with philosophy, Holly M. Sypniewski's essay "The Pursuit of Eros in Plato's Symposium and Hedwig and the Angry Inch" looks at the use of Plato's *Symposium* in the show *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, in terms of love, myth, and gender identity. Hedwig refocuses the original myth's conversation about homosexual love to a conversation about knowledge, and self-knowledge (including gender). The knowledge of the Self is something that the film is very focused on, and one of the ways this knowledge is explained is through gender identity and romantic relationships. The myth itself constructs Hedwig's initial ideology about love (needing to find another "half"), and this leads to trauma and failed relationships and power struggles within the character's life, until they detach themselves from the original story.

Another scholar, H. Christian Blood writes about the deconstruction of Plato within *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and the usage of the aesthetics and philosophy. In *The Trouble with Icons: Recent Ideological Appropriations of Plato's Symposium*, Blood writes where Hedwig, themselves, reads Plato's *Symposium* in a wrong way, the audience goes through their journey of self-discovery and the tale unfolds itself. Blood analyzes the use of narrative in this theological way:

Trask's summary of the *Symposium* betrays some obvious disjunctions between the source text and the appropriation. And Hedwig, the character, is herself a poor reader of Plato. Her tattoo shows how obsessively she sees her own confusing life and identity in Aristophanes, yet she seems not to recognize that she herself is denied access to his world, as she fails to fit into its neat, essentialist categories. Aristophanes' history of sexual orientation is predicated upon rigid categories of gender and desire that are mapped directly upon equally inflexible classification of biological sex; as Robert Drake (1998, 48) observes, Aristophanes' scheme leaves no room for bisexuals, let alone individuals who are transgendered, intersex, or some nameless complicated amalgam, like Hedwig. At the same time, Aristophanes' speech bears little resemblance to mainstream Greek ideology (Carnes 1998), and as such poses a provocation to conventional Athenian mores. Hedwig traffics in a radical, queer fluidity that contradicts the essentialist letter of Aristophanes' account, yet Hedwig inherits the spirit, which is as subversive of mainstream ancient Greek sexual ideology as Hedwig is of the contemporary ideology of binary gender. In this way, Hedwig, if not Hedwig, reads Plato well. Hedwig is neither a drag queen nor intersex, nor transgendered, neither male nor female. Furthermore, while "The Origin of Love" appropriates Platonic iconography in an attractive and friendly fashion, it also interrogates the practice of importing Plato into the here and now" (204).

Even though the character Hedwig reads the myth in an inaccurate way, the film *Hedwig* interrogates the myth and the specific categories, and thus reads Plato in a critical way. Further, I agree with Blood in the way that the story of Hedwig embraces all kinds of mythological Blood talks about the various symbolizations and iconography with the myth and how the artist, Emily Huber, deftly depicts the kind of childlike innocence that Hedwig internalized with this myth, when their mother retold the myth as a bedtime story to them as a small child.

The song “Origin of Love” is performed in another Bilgewater, and while Hedwig is performing, there are animations on the side of the screen, depicting their story. It’s a story of humans being attached physically to one another, but the gods getting jealous of our power and striking us, so that we are only halves. Two half faces are present on Hedwig’s hip as a tattoo (and eventually combine at the end of the film). One of the final animations show a young Hansel/Hedwig drawing on the Berlin wall in lipstick saying, “deny me and be doomed.” This character represents the non-binary person that Hedwig *should* be instead of the person they’re trying to be at the time. It’s telling them to embrace all sides of theirself. The song “Origin of Love” and theme of love and soulmates guide the plot. Many of the internal struggles represented in the film itself represents a socratic questioning of the Self vs. the Subject, and establishing any sense of identity, thus making the audience also question their own position in the world.

Eventually concluding that Hedwig must embrace all parts of theirself, concepts of wholeness plays into the theme of multiplicity again. Kierkegaard argued that the Truth never lies within the “Crowd,” which can also be read as dominant ideology. He writes, “A crowd--not this crowd or that, the crowd now living or the crowd long deceased, a crowd of humble people

or of superior people, of rich or of poor, etc.--a crowd in its very concept is untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction" (95). The Crowd doesn't have to be living to be render individuals weakened of responsibility. The Crowd is any untruth that forces the individual to not question their own thoughts and beliefs. To find the Truth, is to look within and have a self-awareness and self-reflexivity. To find one's own personal Truth, one must act as an individual always, and not go with the Crowd. And that the individual must always look inward to find any personal Truth, and never to the "Crowd" (which is something Hedwig eventually learns).

The Midnight Radio and Onwards

Hedwig's Self is defined through music. They become through their own writing and performing of themselves and discover who they are through performance of gender/identity. When Tommy steals that music, Hedwig has to chase him down because he has not only stolen Hedwig's music, but he has stolen parts of Hedwig's identity and how they know to define themselves.

Part of the reason why the music was so important to Hedwig is because Hedwig created that music, and it was based on specific experiences of their life. As a cisgender man, Tommy Gnosis has a privilege that Hedwig does not. He does not have to perform or dress in any particular way in order to "pass," but he dresses androgynously for the aesthetic only. Tommy is exploiting the idea of teenage rebellion and religion, whereas Hedwig has literally escaped from Communist East Berlin, but is labeled as a 'deviant' and not a 'rebel.' Gnosis appropriates

everything from Hedwig, but he is given the fame, fortune and notoriety. In fact, the stage name “Gnosis” itself was a gift and idea from Hedwig to him.

The idea of taking everything from Hedwig, taking all of the pieces away until they are left empty is very much a motif in their song “Exquisite Corpse.” Much like the idea of fragments of body parts being pieced together, Hedwig’s life experiences are pieced together from hope and despair, abuse and survival. Much like Hedwig seeks recognition from a person who has been deemed more powerful (Tommy Gnosis), and as a rock icon in their own right, Hedwig needs to be *seen* to begin with, and in order to be able to be seen they must understand the self they’re trying to be. To be recognized as a whole person, as well as a creative one, is important.

Hedwig also subverts the idea of rock and music itself. While it premiered as an off-Broadway show in 1998, it attracts rock fans, Broadway fans and queer radicals all the same. In another media analysis, Steven Feffer examines Hedwig through the lens of rock music and authenticity. Through “Despite All the Amputations, You Could Dance to the Rock and Roll Station: Staging Authenticity in Hedwig and the Angry Inch,” the author analyzes the play/music of *Hedwig* to show the deconstruction of rock ideology that the show does itself, not to mention disrupting the hetero-cisnormative version of rock to give light to the authenticity of queer-punk-ness for Hedwig. The character Hedwig reframes rock as authentic. This establishes that an “authentic” identity is possible, at least through performance and creativity. In conversation with previous existentialists and gender theorists like Butler, Feffer makes a point of seeing performance as theory.

Where Descartes' philosophy is "I think therefore I am," Hedwig's philosophy becomes, "I sing therefore I am." Hedwig is Hedwig through song. Only when they create entirely new songs ("Midnight Radio") are they a complete and new whole version of themselves, free of previous identities, and ready to start anew. Having a new philosophy towards wholeness does not mean that they are free of the gendering in society, but to be naked at the end of the film reframes this as a rebirth-- a rebirth of identity, love, gender, ideas, and what it even means to be a person again after being defined by other people for so long. Hedwig's mother has told them "Absolute power corrupts, absolutely," so they felt as if they were taught to not seek power, which resulted in their victimhood. Hedwig has never felt like they were in control of their own life.

It is only when Hedwig starts to write creatively (through composing their own music, and performing it) can they seek the power they wish they had previously. If there can be a self-definition to begin with, this lies within the realm of both queer theory and philosophy. Hedwig does gain a certain amount of agency at the end of the film, not being constrained by any other gender roles for the time being. They realize they can present in any way when they are creating their own work and their own performances. In the final song, "Midnight Radio," Hedwig apologizes to Yitzhak and lets him finally wear one of Hedwig's wigs and be on their own instead of controlling his life (much like people have controlled Hedwig all their life). The end of the film is purposely ambiguous. Some audience members might ask themselves, "Was this a dream/fantasy? Did this really happen?" Regardless if the events during and after "Midnight Radio" happened, Hedwig has resignation and achieves an inner peace. It's a metaphysical conclusion, even if the conclusion itself is more open ended. The end of the film,

Hewig walks naked through a dark alleyway in New York and the end credits scroll while “The Origin of Love” plays in the background. We are asked, as audience members, consumers, and humans to reflect on our own existence and the believe in not only love, or freedom but ourselves as well.

And Then I Turn Back to Myself: Self-Reflection and Cultural Context

As a young queer and non-binary high-schooler, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* was a respite for me. Even though I'm a far cry from an East-German rockstar, all of the major themes of wholeness and recognition resonated with me, regardless. Mitchell and Trask want to make clear that even though Hedwig's experiences are not universal, their narrative of finding love and peace is a narrative everyone should be able to relate to (regardless of race, creed and origin). It's important to note that just because people exist as non-binary, it doesn't mean that this is necessarily a functional gender in the world at the moment. While people opt for 'man' or 'woman,' there's no real legal definition or category to be able to 'opt out of' completely. Fluidity exists, and people understand more and more that gender itself is a spectrum, but the option of completely not being gendered in the world doesn't truly exist. But as a young queer and trans person of color, this film was possibility. It's a possibility of an existence that is beyond the contemporary understandings of gender, and regardless of anyone's identity I think people can relate to wanting to be seen. Although this film was from 2001, and the play was originally written in 1998, messages still resound in a way with queer people that certain representations of gender and sexuality might not.

Writing in 2018, I can say that there are several things that are problematic with this film and should not be recreated currently. *Hedwig* was not at all the apex of transgender representation at all. However, taking into account that this was a musical that explored so many different ideas of gender and love in the 1990's and early 2000's, it was ahead of its time. I'm sure there will be future essays, think pieces and theses about the toxic and problematic discourse

of the film, but personally, this musical spoke to me in a way that many queer media sources did not.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch gives a platform to explain and critique contemporary understandings of gender identity and expression, and how, through a subject's own creative works, their existence can be recognized. Gender is a social construct, but that does not mean it doesn't have material effects. Gender studies and queer theory constantly talk about the power of a gendered subject, or lack thereof. The subject is gendered through outside forces, this is part of Being-In-the-World, as discussed in existentialism, but it doesn't have to be a solution. As a cultural artifact itself, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* presents and reflects conversations about the Self, identity, authenticity, gender, and the possibility of non-gendered being. Through the politics of recognition, it's important to be recognized socially and legally as existing, and although gender nonconforming individuals are not recognized legally mostly, they are creatively. Although many academics have discussed gender and identity through queer theory, gender studies and existentialism, the language for non-binary individuals hasn't come as far.

Interestingly enough, in all of the scripts from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, there are two sections in the back, both about being whole. One section is biblical, and one is secular. Both speak to the existential acceptance we all want to achieve. At the end of the narrative, Mitchell wants not only the audience to think about the duality of man, but also the actors themselves to think about their performance and the idea of being whole. While this might be a great creative narrative and idea to think about, the "real" world may not recognize existences that go beyond the typical 'man' or 'woman.' As scholars, we have to think about what the rhetoric actually *does* for trans people. How is it helpful in everyday life? The ultimate goal is that of recognition

in the complexities that exist in all of us, but I would also argue that through various creative acts, media representations, there becomes a “turning point,” where existence (i.e. humanity) is recognized by the majority as well as the marginalized. When Hedwig performs, they exist beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of our society and our standards. Performance reaches beyond the binary, to a simultaneous universalizing and also specific means of communication. For those who seek the interesting rock elements, those who seek out the trans representation, or those who simply want to be entertained by a performer that is pouring out something genuine. Theory asks questions and poses interesting ideas that we, as people in the world, take away in a political and cultural sense. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* asks us to take a look at ourselves, our identities, our bare souls and asks about our whole selves.

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