

DRAG BEYOND THE BODY: TRIXIE MOTEL AND SPATIAL IDENTITY
AS PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Drag Beyond the Body: Trixie Mattel and Spatial Identity as Performance

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In this paper, I analyze how drag queen Trixie Mattel utilizes fantasy themes to push the limits of drag performance based on overlapping performative principles of art, comedy, gender, and popular culture. I explore the deeper rhetorical implications of the eight-episode docuseries *Trixie Motel* in relation to how social understandings of artistic drag can be broadened according to the four performative dimensions. I start by examining the rhetorical and artistic composition of the Trixie persona for interconnecting relationships between art, comedy, gender, and popular culture to ultimately understand Trixie Mattel as a living mastery of comedic references to camp femininity. Next, I assess how this assumption unfolds throughout the documented creation of the Trixie Motel, a project that continues the Trixie rhetorical fantasy through spatial identity rather than the usual medium of bodily art. I then analyze the underlying implications of the project according to predecessors in *RuPaul's Drag Race* challenges. I conclude with a

discussion on what the *Trixie Motel* project means for drag at large. Trixie's newest business venture into the motel renovation scene suggests two new ideas: first, she has exemplified a way in which drag can be performed without a presence of the body, and second, the definition of drag can now include a wider range of exaggerated performances. Before now, drag has typically been understood as a gendered performance of a persona. The Trixie Motel now broadens that definition to be any performance by any entity that uses fantasy themes to elevate the intersection of art, comedy, gender and culture.

DEDICATION

To my friends, family, and mentors who encouraged me to strive for my full potential in academia and never settle. You are all so fierce.

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2022, world-famous drag queen Trixie Mattel announced that she would be starring in a documentary mini-series chronicling her newest business venture as the first drag artist to renovate a motel. *Trixie Motel*¹ premiered on Discovery+ in June, and the Trixie Motel opened its doors for business the following September. As each episode shows Trixie and her team bringing each of its eight spaces to life, audiences are invited into the creative process of constructing the Trixie fantasy. Trixie, known out of drag as Brian Firkus, continually refers to this unprecedented project as “putting the motel in drag.” She dresses up each space according to a different personality trait in the makeup of symbolic cues within the rhetoric of her persona. The framing of renovation and design as a form of drag not only remains true to Trixie’s branding, it carries underlying implications about the nature of drag and suggests that the experience of staying in a Trixie Mattel-themed room constitutes performance on Trixie’s part. In this paper, I analyze how in *Trixie Motel*, world-famous drag queen Trixie Mattel utilizes fantasy themes to bring drag to a whole new medium, pushing the limits of identity performance and suggesting a broader understanding of drag reliant upon the intersection of art, comedy, gender, and popular culture.

Trixie Mattel’s well-established career prior to the creation of the Trixie Motel is worth noting. Trixie first came into public view by appearing on season seven of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in 2015. She quickly became a fan-favorite, known for her extreme signature makeup look,

¹ For the purposes of this paper, when referring to the Discovery+ television show, I italicize *Trixie Motel*. When referring to the physical place, I do not italicize the name.

Barbie-inspired fashions, dry humor, and humble beginnings from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Originally the fourth queen eliminated, Trixie earned her way back into the competition by winning a second-chance challenge against other eliminated queens. She ultimately placed sixth overall in the seventh season of the show. Three years later, Trixie returned to the franchise on *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars 3* and was crowned as the winner. Outside of her *Drag Race* appearances, Trixie's popularity skyrocketed as she began developing her music career, makeup company, and business partnership with fellow queen, Katya. As of 2023, Trixie Mattel's accomplishments in addition to the Trixie Motel include multiple web shows and live tours with Katya, a podcast, two books, the Trixie Cosmetics company, and four folk-pop music albums. Today, she is known as one of the biggest *Drag Race* success stories and one of the most popular drag queens in the world (Hess, 2022; Olito, 2021; Sim, 2022).

I will be analyzing the rhetoric of the Trixie Mattel character and the Trixie Motel as an extension of her craft. I use the eight episodes of *Trixie Motel* as representations of drag artist Brian Firkus's creative process. Trixie Mattel is often referred to mononymously as "Trixie" and uses she/her pronouns in drag. While Trixie spends a good portion of the show out of drag, I will continue to refer to her in this way for the purposes of this paper because the whole renovation process is meant to be a continuation of the Trixie fantasy.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Trixie Mattel's craft is a complex exercise that must start with the rhetoric of identity performance and the fantasy of a persona. Modern definitions simply understand rhetoric as the practice of persuasion, in close association with garnering compliance from audiences (Herrick, 2005). Aristotle first defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever" (ca. 350 B.C.E./2020, p. 17). For Aristotle, it is not only the message itself that is inherently rhetorical, but also the means to formulate and communicate that message. Furthermore, *logos* is defined as a *reasoned discourse* that proves that a certain argument fits in with the rational world around the rhetor. In the same way, humans use *logos* to form identities that give them a place in reality, and Trixie uses drag rhetorically to comment on the ill-fitting nature of hyper-feminine expectations within the logic of our society.

While Aristotle understands *logos* to be a reasoned discourse where persuasion is used to make sense of the world, the Sophists used *logos* to delight audiences and persuade them of ideas that may not necessarily be true. Michael Gagarin (2001) states that for the Sophists, "in most cases persuasion is in the background and is less important than several other objectives, such as the serious exploration of issues and forms of argument, the display of ingenuity in thought, argument and style of expression, and the desire to dazzle, shock and please" (p. 289). Trixie sits at the meeting point of Aristotelian and Sophisticated thought: she goes to extremes to explore issues of heteronormative expectations through shocking appearance, which then directs

audiences to rationally consider the implications of such expectations. That is, Trixie carefully constructs an identity that is both dazzling and rhetorical.

Identity, and identification with a particular audience, are essential for rhetorical appeals. Trixie uses rhetoric to form her drag identity and tell the story of Trixie Mattel, which itself illuminates social inconsistencies. Renowned communication scholar Kenneth Burke (1945) emphasizes the connection between rhetorical acts and identity, arguing that the logos of storytelling and expression are at the heart of identity, and that both can be broken down into competing tensions. He writes, “Identity like the theme of a play is broken down analytically into principles of opposition which in their variants compete and communicate by a neutral ground shared in common” (p. 413). Following Burke’s line of thought, Trixie’s identity can be seen as the result of a tension between logical belonging and shocking expression. The storytelling element of identity is confirmed by renowned gender theorist, Judith Butler (2005), who asserts that, “Giving an account thus takes narrative form, which not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative voice and authority, being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion” (p. 12). The practice of identity is seen as a narrative practice of persuasion and expression.

Rhetoric becomes a useful tool for communicating performative identity by allowing someone to artistically persuade others to understand who they are. Aristotle states, “generally art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her” (ca. 350 B.C.E./1925, Part 8). That is, identity performance is essentially rooted in reality. In this sense, Trixie performs identity by basing Trixie’s persona on the reality of heteronormativity and gender binaries. She does so by creating a fantasy that is unrealistically hyper-feminine. Bormann (1985) first defined fantasy themes as “the appearance of a group consciousness, with

its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies” (p. 128). Kuypers and King (2005) seem to affirm this idea of cohesive environmental acceptance, asserting that “Participation in rhetorical discourse involves people building citizenship and constructing community” (p. 8). Through fantasy themes, one can form an identity that is consistent among the character’s interactions with others, interactions with their environment, the content they produce, and the way they present themselves. Such consistency allows participants to be fully immersed in the fantasy of the identity’s existence. They interact with other participants to form a group consciousness, a community that maintains the persona by transforming the fantasy of the identity into a distinguishable character. Fantasy themes are the key to drag, an art requiring the creation of a persona and persuasion of an audience to accept and interact with them.

With a foundation of understanding rhetoric, identity, and fantasy, we can attempt to build an understanding of drag artistry. Part of why scholars have been unable to agree on a standardized definition of drag is the ironic limitation of defining a practice built on open-ended interpretation. This complexity is attributed to the conjoining of “two distinct but overlapping cultures,” referring to the LGBTQ+ culture it aligns with but the paradoxically heteronormative constraints to which it falls victim (Baker, 1994; LeMaster, 2015; McCormack & Wignall, 2022). Butler (1985) seems to excuse this tension by asserting that, “Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions” (p. 26). Furthermore, it must “confront and expose the fragility of the heterosexual norm, while recognizing the extent to which its maintenance contains and deradicalizes any dressing-up which uncritically take naturalized codes as a reference point” (Hawkes, 1995, p. 265). More simply put, for both Butler and Hawkes, cultural expectations of gender are meant to

be interpreted, either by maintaining or shattering preconceived social notions. Moore (2013) explains that such interpretation does not require a compromise of inherent identity. On the contrary, drag exists as “the point of articulation for the fully realized threads of identity which are woven into a perceived whole” (p. 16). In other words, drag is how one executes their own understanding of gender into a fully-formed persona. Personas may be an escape or an extension of their core being. Drag, then, is inherently rhetorical: the interpretation of heteronormative culture into a fully-formed character is simultaneously persuasive.

Hankins (2015) argues that drag performance relies on two components: the creator’s intent and audience response (p. 446). These two components align with our established ideas of rhetoric, identity, and fantasy theming. There is a calculated, crafted effort to persuade audience acceptance that the gendered caricature exists as its own identifiable entity. Audiences follow a cognitive chain of reactions that affirm the acceptance of the persona and create a community of participation in the artist’s rhetorical vision. In the case of Trixie specifically, the firm allegiance of a fandom is the mark of a shared reality in which Trixie Mattel is truly the makeup-loving, folk-singing, combination comedy-genius-life-sized Barbie she creates rhetorically.

2. THE INTERSECTION: ART, COMEDY, GENDER AND POPULAR CULTURE

Before looking into Trixie Mattel's venture into the home renovation game, it is important to first acknowledge the versatility and range within her career that set the foundation for such an unprecedented project. Trixie Mattel serves as one of the world's most famous current examples of how drag serves to explore the intersections between different performance qualities. Trixie is the personified meeting point between art, comedy, gender, and popular culture.

Drag relies specifically on art in the form of what Werner (2017) describes as neo-burlesque bodily arts. For Werner, burlesque bodily arts "illustrate inventive ways that bodies communicate symbolically through cosmetic and sartorial styling and through kinesthetic practices" (p. 46). Werner continues, "neo-burlesque offers opportunities to uncover and contend with rhetorical constructions of gender and sexuality" and reveals the "interplay of symbolic practices through common topics of the body" (p. 50). In this way, Trixie Mattel's art is her body and her costuming, which offer commentary on classical social expectations of the female body and style of dress. Trixie's unique styling makes her extremely recognizable and sometimes extremely intimidating to audiences. Her bold makeup look is defined by harsh eyeliner and contours and her fashions are inspired by retro looks of the sixties and seventies. Many people have attempted Trixie's makeup look, but few succeed due to the meticulous exaggeration of features that requires a total embodiment of character.

Trixie's style not only explains why her appearance is a cosmetic art, it also introduces the pillar of comedy. In "Attitudes Toward History," Burke (1984) analyzes burlesque comedy as a unique form of representation that mocks authority by distorting reality for comic effect. He states that the creator of burlesque is "content to select the externals of behavior, driving them to a 'logical conclusion' that becomes their 'reduction to absurdity' (p. 54). However, Burke warns that the "hilariously" burlesque can "convert a manner into a mannerism" (p. 55). That is, the artist must not overuse a particular expression that becomes too predictable, or else they will become less effective and stale. In the case of Trixie's burlesque style and as *Trixie Motel* demonstrates, she is anything but predictable. She becomes a caricature of feminine virtue by driving femininity to a logical conclusion that is hilarious and absurd.

Not only is the burlesque of Trixie Mattel's appearance comedic, but her whole personality is built around her self-identification as a comedy queen. Trixie's live shows always incorporate stand-up comedy that is usually sandwiched in between musical performances and skits. Trixie's comedic live shows continue the rhetoric of the Trixie fantasy: "Stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision" (Greenbaum, 1999, p. 33). Gilbert (1997) adds that "stand-up comedy, like [one-person shows and predating performance art], allows the performer to perform both self and culture—to embody the interconnections and contradictions that such autobiographical performance necessarily entails" (p. 328). Trixie's usual self-deprecating and self-improvisational style is a testament to both identity and cultural barriers, also serving to critique public life (Grossman-Thompson & Salmi, 2021; Waisanen, 2009). People often find humor in the stark contrast between Trixie's bright pink aesthetic and dark comedy, but this

incongruity is exactly what she strives for in her performances. Both traits exaggerate the image and demeanor expected from classical femininity of the 1960s and 1970s. In image, she elevates beauty to the point of an anatomically impossible facial appearance and socially outrageous fashions. In demeanor, she reduces the idea of submission to the point of self-deprecation and perceived misery. The significance of the comedic dimension in the fantasy of Trixie Mattel now becomes clear: Trixie's appearance and performance are comedic ways to give autobiographical accounts that serve as invitations to join her deliberate burlesque exaggeration of an era-specific cultural expectation for gender norms. The performance of gender is often the point of distinction between drag and any other comedic artistry.

The importance of gender performance is highlighted in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the show that initially launched Trixie's career. Edgar (2011) acknowledges that "successful drag, as framed in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, hinges upon the performer's ability to deploy stereotypical notions of femininity through performances of gendered norms" (p. 133). Trixie's burlesque cosmetic artistry is instrumental because "for a woman to be identified as fully, or even acceptably, feminine they must learn and perform a variety of complicated and time intensive beauty practices" (White, 2015, p. 159). Furthermore, cosmetic painting that is considered too imaginative is rendered eccentric (Bartky, 1988). Eccentric painting can then threaten a woman's claims to normativity (Lazar, 2011). The major overstepping of cosmetic expectation with Trixie's burlesque practices is not only artistic and comedic, it is gendered because it is a commentary on rigid practices of femininity (Mann, 2011). White, Bartky, Lazar, and Mann each address the restrictive nature of cosmetic art and discuss the power of normative femininity, which seems to maintain an expectation of gendered realism. Hyper-feminine is still feminine.

The existence of Trixie Mattel is drag and gendered performance because the art of creating her image is comedic at the expense of gender normativity. Marsan (2010) offers a critique on the gendered nature of Cher, which is highly applicable to Trixie's brand: "feminine identity is constructed as a surface value primarily through the excess and the use of false visual elements of femininity such as wigs and glitter that refute a connection between her representation of femininity and her [biological] sex" (p. 61). For both Cher and Trixie, it is the use of falsified visual portrayal that makes their images a topic of gender discourse.

The last dimension, popular culture, manifests itself through Trixie Mattel's inherently gendered referential art and comedy. Pop culture first is understood as a mark of traditions and everyday life of the popular class, with action to all people under a particular government (Flores, 2000; Shiach, 1989). We have already established how Trixie's appearance draws inspiration from the classic Barbie doll. Wagner et. al (2021) argue that Barbie is not even suitable as a toy and is better classified as a cultural icon that perpetuates principles of gender congruity (p. 436). Barbie encourages young girls to dream big while keeping their waistlines small. Trixie intentionally bases her fantasy around a socially influential icon that represents the gender norms that the nature of drag subverts. Trixie's aesthetic has also been known to pay tribute to country and folk artists like Dolly Parton and June Carter Cash, both of whom have been named as influences in Trixie's music career. It also pays tribute to the retro 1960s and 1970s fashions reminiscent of *The Brady Bunch*. Each of these influences are examples of figures in pop culture that uphold values of gender in a way similar to that of Barbie (Marinucci 2005; Scofield 2016). In each context, Trixie maintains the same idea with her fantasy: referencing symbols from popular culture that influenced normalized gender distinctions and

embracing them with the underlying subversive nature of a man performing as a traditionally feminine woman.

Pop culture can be understood as identity-dependent. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1993), popular culture can be defined as an arena where “we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time” (p. 113). Trixie Mattel’s identity relies upon not only gender subversions, but upon identifying and imagining along the lines of already-understood figures. The weaving between burlesque as comedy and popular culture results in a tension best explained by Andrews (2020): “Caricatures offer a paradox. They are deliberately exaggerated, simplified, and distorted images that are nevertheless instantly recognizable provided the perceiver is armed with sufficient knowledge of the original face” (p. 418). For both Andrews and Trixie Mattel, the distinction of specifically “popular” culture invites subversive and absurd commentary. When Trixie unveiled her own Barbie doll, she pointed out how hard it was to fit Trixie’s signature makeup look onto a tiny doll face (Mattel, 2021). Trixie’s look is so burlesque and so absurd that the artifact she mocks cannot even replicate it completely.

Reviewing Trixie’s brand as a significant representation of performative intersections provides the understanding upon which *Trixie Motel* holds implications for the future of drag. The signature Trixie image, which serves as the blueprint for the Trixie Motel, developed out of a desire to exaggerate the notoriously feminine Barbie icon to absurdity and clearly shows our four dimensions at play: bodily art is the tool through which Trixie turns a popular culture artifact into a comic caricature that ridicules gender normativity.

3. PUTTING THE ROOM IN DRAG

In the television show *Trixie Motel*, Trixie Mattel utilizes fantasy themes in her motel to transport her guests to a different facets of her branded persona, allowing guests to get the experience of gendered performance through a physical representation of the Trixie universe. A key component of fantasy theme analysis is the exchange of symbols between humans that facilitates the sharing of a reality (Fordjour, 2021, p. 317). More specifically, Bormann (1985) clarifies that “When participants have shared a fantasy theme they have come to symbolic convergence in terms of common meanings and emotions that can be set off by an agreed-upon cryptic symbolic cue” (p. 132). In the world of drag queens, Trixie’s branding is perhaps one of the most straightforward in the creation of widely-understood symbols: heart-shaped lipsticks, Barbie dolls, and extravagant eyeliner are just a few of many examples. Trixie uses these symbols as the key to embedding her persona throughout the construction of her drag, signaling fans to engage in the world of Trixie Mattel.

Through the fantasy themes created in *Trixie Motel*, different facets of Trixie’s persona converge to demonstrate how drag can be more than a bodily performance. Each episode of *Trixie Motel* documents the renovation process of individual rooms from brainstorming to fruition, with every step relying on Trixie’s dedication to consistency in her identity expression. Through seven bedrooms available for reservation, seven major symbols are used to represent a different side of Trixie as her fans know and love her. There is the Pink Flamingo Suite (using flamingos to represent her Palm Springs happy-go-lucky attitude), the Queen of Hearts Room (playing on the heart-shaped logo that represents the wildly successful Trixie Cosmetics

business), the Atomic Bombshell Room (serving retro-futurism and paying homage to a legendary catwalk outfit from her *RuPaul's Drag Race* days), the Flower Power Suite (dedicated to many of Trixie's iconic 60's-inspired costumes), the Oh Honey Honeymoon Suite (materializing Trixie's famous "oh honey" catchphrase), and the Malibu Barbara Room and the Yeehaw Cowgirl Suite (both of which represent different genres of Trixie's music career). The eighth space is the lobby, which is a baby pink Trixie paradise inspired by Brian Firkus's real-life home. In each instance, meticulous attention to detail culminates in what Trixie calls "putting the motel in drag." The use of symbols and interior décor parallels the way Trixie Mattel would get in drag: where false eyelashes, corsets, and sequined dresses would be used to make Trixie a *person*, custom-designed lighting structures, brightly animated murals, and pink patterned bedspreads are used to make Trixie an *environment*.

Looking at the fantasy creation involved in drag, artists and fans come together and share these symbols, ultimately creating a shared reality and theatrical space as a whole (Sandoval, 2018). In the case of the Trixie Motel, the idea of a theatrical space is taken quite literally, making the shared fantasy a real space that can be seen, touched, and lived in. Williams (1987), however, addresses a key concern about fantasy theming that is worth questioning in the movement between mediums: "The determination of the chaining process is crucial to the development of fantasy themes and the resulting rhetorical vision, as well as the critical analysis from the perspective" (p. 15). In other words, how will a room initiate the fantasy chains that fans need to follow in order for Trixie's persona to be effectively realized? This dilemma is solved by Mohrmann (1982), who describes the cognitive nature of fantasy chains and establishes the cause-effect relationship between symbols and interpersonal realization of the shared reality (p. 111). Mohrmann further asserts that "participation is almost demanded, and the

individual's psychological needs rise to the surface to forge links in the chains of fantasy-work" (p. 113). Applying this understanding, we can resolve that the physical encapsulation of fans into a tangible fantasy psychologically entices guests into her identity, beginning with the embedded symbols throughout the room and seen to completion by the understanding of who Trixie is as people process the new environment. The fantasy theming of the Trixie Motel follows the idea that "performance requires only a body, loosely defined," and that "the antecedence of bodies/matter/substance is the condition of possibility for the intra-actions through which subjects and objects are performed" (Horowitz, 2013, p. 321). "Bodies" is interchangeable with "matter" or "substance" in Horowitz's understanding of performance. We now resolve that the difference between personas expressed through body versus room diminishes: fans are still interacting with tangible marks of the Trixie fantasy that she herself created to share with them.

The Trixie Motel serves as an extension of the intersection between art, comedy, gender, and pop culture by essentially performing the same function as Trixie's overall image. The only difference is that rather than using bodily art as the tool for comedic caricature and popular culture reference, Trixie is using space. Each room refers to a movement or artifact from pop culture and uses the artistry of interior design to exaggerate its effects to the point of physically encapsulating guests in comedy. Barbie (Malibu Barbara Room), *The Brady Bunch* (Flower Power Suite), and Dolly Parton (Yeehaw Cowgirl Suite) all continue to serve as points of inspiration for Trixie. These particular episodes depict a beach day with Belinda Carlisle, a trip to the real-life Brady house, and guest appearances from South African country singer, Orville Peck, and famed Texan social media influencer, Brittany Broski. Every other room is derived from similar influences, except for the Oh Honey Honeymoon Suite, which is Trixie's own self-referential acknowledgment of her celebrity. The Pink Flamingo Suite envisions the same

innocent, cheery, and fashionable Barbie motif but with Palm Springs roots. The Queen of Hearts and Atomic Bombshell Rooms are inspired by other thematic 60s styles adjacent to *The Brady Bunch*, particularly the love-and-peace messaging of the Hippie Movement and the retro-futuristic art movement. The essence of Trixie Mattel permeates the walls of the motel, making each space artistically Trixie-branded.

Perhaps the biggest question about classifying the rooms as drag is the question of gender. However, this question is answered easily when taking into consideration everything we know about the gendered nature of Trixie's comedy and references. There are two primary ways in which gender commentary persists throughout the Trixie Motel: the themes of the rooms and the encapsulating function of the rooms themselves. First, the room themes all draw from gendered artistic influences: feminine Barbie (Malibu Barbie), 60s domesticity (Flower Power and Atomic Bombshell), country queens (Yeekaw Cowgirl), and Trixie herself (Pink Flamingo, Queen of Hearts, Oh Honey Honeymoon, and the lobby). It is even apparent in the way several rooms are named with gendered terms like "cowgirl," "bombshell," "Barbie," and "queen."

Second, the inspirations for these rooms lead into the way the room itself performs gender. The idea of rooms performing gender is possible because gender identity is not constricted to the responsibility of the actor. Yang (2011) argues that "gender is done when we manage and interpret conducts with reference to one's placement in a relevant sex category" (p. 5). From Yang's perspective, gender performance extends from the idea of acting to the idea of producing; when the fantasy theme chain leads the audience to perceive gender or respond in a gendered manner, the initial fantasy is classified as gender performance. Trixie Motel certainly provokes its guests to consider gender and sexuality in their stay. The renovation processes of each room included the demolition of neutral closet spaces to serve as vanity rooms specifically

for cosmetic practices. Suites were refurbished specifically to keep domesticated kitchenette areas. Murals were hand painted in each room to serve not only as focal points but as backdrops for sensual photography. A mirror is positioned on the ceiling directly above the bed in the Queen of Hearts room to enhance sexual experiences. Ultimately, spaces are doing drag by being artistically and comically feminine and also by requiring guest to interact with their own interpretations of gender and sexual identity.

4. CHANGING THE FACE OF DRAG: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In addition to the significance of carrying on the ever-unfolding chain of Trixie's fantasy, the creation of the Trixie Motel has two larger implications for potential changes in the art of drag as a whole: 1) it suggests a new way for drag artists to successfully perform an art that traditionally relies on the body without being physically present, and 2) it broadens the traditional rhetorical definition of drag. Mountford (2005) claims that spaces and their material arrangement considers overlapping questions of speaker, genre, and audience (p. 53). Mountford brings forward the idea that space can address each of these overlapping arrangements in the same way the physicality of a human can. Trixie's rooms are, in a sense, performing drag: the speaker is still Trixie Mattel, the genre is still the art-comedy-gender-pop culture intersection of the Trixie fantasy, and the audience is still the Trixie fandom. The fandom is still consuming media from their shared reality, but the media is room design, which guests can physically engage with from top to bottom and integrate into their social reality (Podkalicka, 2019). Limitations of the body are no longer a concern in giving a performance that relies on the appearance of an anatomically different identity (Edgar, 2011). The success of Trixie Motel proves that drag artists can extend their brand, take on new material projects, and continue to be pioneers in mediums of performance.

The result of extending drag beyond the self leads to the second implication for broadening the definition of drag. While there is no universal definition of drag, it is widely agreed-upon that drag involves the use of costuming, cosmetics, and/or the body to achieve its

rhetorical aims. When we eliminate these factors as constraints, we must find new constraints with which to distinguish drag from other performance genres. I propose that the Trixie Motel implies a new understanding of drag: the utilization of fantasy themes to present an identity through a careful weaving of art, comedy, gender, and popular culture. Following this new definition, other persona-based characters that also address these dimensions may be more clearly considered as drag such as Dolly Parton, Elvira, or The Hulk. Real representations of fictional environments that provoke gendered responses may be seen as being “in drag,” such as Disney World or Universal Studios. Niche forms of entertainment that are highly feminine or highly masculine may constitute drag, like Hallmark Christmas Movies or WWE (Martin, 2016), both of which have already inspired acting challenges on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. According to the logic of the Trixie Motel, anything that intertwines art, comedy, gender, and pop culture through an identity maintained by fantasy themes can be critiqued as a form of drag artistry.

The Trixie Motel is also not the first time that an abstract understanding of drag has been introduced to a large audience, but it is the first time an abstract understanding of spatial experience has been employed as a serious and permanent continuation of an already-established drag identity. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has become known for its often absurd and unique challenges, many of which expect contestants to exhibit comedic skills in improvisation, celebrity impersonation, and performing tongue-in-cheek scripts. Challenges are meant to judge contestants’ competencies in different areas of performance, design, and persona embodiment. Some are more straightforwardly related to common practices of drag artistry, such as makeovers or the “Lip Sync LalapaRuza” tournament challenge, but others lie on the more abstract side of what constitutes drag. Examples include creating and marketing fictional products, producing news segments, and participating in political debates. Each of these challenges fit into a drag

competition because the skills they test are broadened to a judgment of adaptability, approach, and attitude. We even see spatial design challenges in seasons 4 and 5 of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All-Stars*, in which teams must design a club experience and a hotel stay. The initial relation to drag is the same as that of *Trixie Motel*: it tests the ability of a drag artist to commodify drag performance (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017; Marcel, 2014; Schottmiller, 2017). The purpose of these challenges, however, is wildly different and continues to enhance the significance of Trixie's project. The hotel room challenge is theoretical and temporary from the start, used as a prototype to judge artists' imaginative potential. *Trixie Motel*, however, is a real encapsulation offered in real time to real people. While the challenges strive to appease a panel of judges, *Trixie Motel* must actually operate not only as drag performance, but as a comfortable vacation lodge. Trixie deliberately marries the therapeutic effects of drag with the backbone of the hospitality industry, offering a judgement-free space, which, according to Baxter (2022), "boosts attendees' confidence, thus having a positive impact on happiness and mental well-being" (p. 136). While the hotel rooms designed by the teams in *All-Stars 5* judge the implementation of a theme, *Trixie Motel* requires the implementation of an already-existing and already-recognizable persona into a welcoming experience. *Trixie Motel* is an intentional effort to translate and perform, whereas similar *RuPaul's Drag Race* challenges are just another way to practice versatility in a competition in which "the stylistic varieties of drag queens and the skills they must display are too varied" (Berns, 2014, p. 100). While *RuPaul's Drag Race* has already established that spatial identity is compatible with drag, the fully-functioning *Trixie Motel* is still revolutionary.

The completion and resulting success of the *Trixie Motel* also indicates that drag is an ever-changing, ever-evolving practice. *Trixie Motel* holds the key to bring new ideas to the

table. By utilizing her career as a tool for pushing limits and demolishing conventional constraints, Trixie has given drag artists a new reference point in *Trixie Motel* for how to continue progressing their art forward. The Trixie Motel has only given further momentum to Trixie's power; as far as pioneering new vehicles for "doing drag," the possibilities are endless.

CONCLUSION

The Trixie Motel acts as a space for guests to continue participating in the Trixie experience in a way that remakes drag culture and brings fans together in the logos of Trixie's immersive and playful world. Rhetoric, according to the lens of Gorgias, "was thus a multifaceted practice that enables citizens not only to participate in making and remaking their own culture, but to bring people together to bear witness to the logos delivered with excellence and performed in the spirit of play" (Crick, 2015, p. 92). Trixie Mattel is widely regarded as a business powerhouse because of the way she simultaneously juggles long term projects like her cosmetic company, music career, web show, podcast, and live tour with fellow drag queen Katya. It is no surprise that Trixie took on the responsibility to offer a new perspective on drag performance, as her multi-dimensional understanding of her characterization allows for commendable versatility in how she executes her craft. There is a certain irony to the way Brian Firkus uses Barbie as Trixie's muse: Barbie represents a paradoxical subversion and perpetuation of traditional gender roles, and Trixie Mattel's drag parallels this contradictory function. As a campy, ultra-feminine, naturally unachievable body, Trixie sarcastically upholds the heteronormative rigidity infused throughout interpretations of drag artistry. But as an experimental meeting point between multiple performance dimensions and a pioneer exploring new mediums of doing drag, Trixie breaks the boundaries of what is considered drag performance. Artistic fearlessness has always been a distinct part of the Trixie personality. Thanks to the *Trixie Motel* docuseries, audiences get to see the start-to-finish raw construction of the fantasy they voluntarily uphold for the first time so transparently. The undertaking of "putting the motel in drag" did more than bring in money and offer a whole new way for fans to

get the Trixie experience: as the author of a new symbolic meaning of drag, Trixie opened doors to challenge the limits of the current understanding of drag as performance and exhibited the intersection of art, comedy, gender, and popular culture that breathes life into Trixie Mattel.

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