

Dr. Marc Lafrance (Montreal)

Guest Lecture:

The Dark Side of Camp:

Making Sense of Violence Against Men in Christina Aguilera's "Your Body"

Date: 07.05.2015, 18.15-19.45 Uhr

Venue: Göttingen Center for Gender Studies (GCG)
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

In her video for the hit single “Your Body” (2012), Christina Aguilera is represented as a ruthless femme fatale who murders her lovers in cold blood. Beginning with the warning that “no men were harmed in the making of this video,” the clip shows Aguilera on a carnivalesque killing spree as she lives out a vivid and often vicious road trip fantasy. Set in an unmistakably American landscape of lowbrow consumer culture and trailer park chic, the fantasy begins with Aguilera hitchhiking by the side of a road, having sex with the first man who picks her up and setting his car on fire while he is asleep within it. Shortly thereafter, Aguilera is seen making her way to a pool hall, where she lures a second man into a bathroom stall, undresses him and bludgeons him to death. And finally, Aguilera is shown seducing a third man into a motel room where she dances suggestively in front of him before dealing him several lethal blows to the head with a baseball bat. Though they sound gruesome, all three of the murders are represented in ways that make them appear both palatable and playful; that is, the smoke from the car explosion is bright pink and looks like cotton-candy while the blood in the pool hall and the motel consists of either pastel blue paint or pink confetti.

There is, as MTV’s James Montgomery explains, no “actual violence” in the video. Instead, it is filled with “almost surreal gore” which makes it appear less “brutal” and more like a “cartoon.”

Through its use of bursting color, overblown costuming, quirky props and stock sets, Aguilera’s video transforms that which is deeply disturbing into that which is readily consumable. In the words of cultural critic Susan Sontag, Aguilera’s video “converts the serious into the frivolous” and, as a result, turns heinous acts of homicide into a humorous series of innocuous events. In this chapter, we explore both the operations and effects of this conversion: that is, how it happens, what it means and, perhaps most importantly, why it matters. In doing so, we consider Aguilera’s video in light of what Sontag, among others, calls “camp.” Considering the video in this way allows us to reflect on how its uses of camp—or, put differently, its aesthetic choices and its stylistic strategies—do very particular kinds of political work. Our reflection focuses, therefore, on the following questions: First, what stories does the video tell us about gender and sexuality in present-day America?

Second, how are these stories made intelligible and meaningful through historically specific constructions of race and class? And third, how is camp put in the service of telling these stories and what are the broader consequences of how it does so? Ultimately, we argue that thinking critically about the video requires that we question not only its uses of camp and how they are bound up with its representations of violence but also how they implicate the viewer in a politically problematic viewing experience.