

Cuntification and Camp: Unleashing Queer Agency Through Disney's Ursula

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abstract

Disney's animated villains have long been infused with queer-coded traits, often characterised by flamboyance, theatricality, and a transgressive allure that unsettles the heteronormative order. Scholars argue that such portrayals perpetuate pejorative stereotypes by pathologising queerness as deviance. However, this paper contends that queer villainy can be reclaimed as an act of defiant spectacle, where marginalisation is reconstituted as power through camp aesthetics and performative excess. Using Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) as a case study, this paper interrogates the dual function of Disney's queer-coded villains as both instruments of oppression and emblems of resistance. Inspired by the drag queen Divine, Ursula epitomises a legacy of gender subversion and theatrical villainy, defined by her exaggerated mannerisms, sultry vocal inflections, and seductive cunning. This study further examines Drew Sarich's 2022 Hollywood in Vienna performance of "Poor Unfortunate Souls," which accentuates Ursula's queerness through hyper-stylised gestures and vocal camp. In doing so, Sarich reconfigures villainy through a process I term *cuntification*, an embodied aesthetic that transforms otherness into agency, exalting glamour, audacity, and unapologetic nonconformity as forms of queer resistance. Drawing upon queer theory, camp aesthetics, and performance studies, this paper contends that rather than perpetuating the stigmatisation of queerness, performances like Sarich's demonstrate how villainy can be wielded as an instrument of empowerment, subverting normative readings and celebrating defiant self-fashioning.

keywords

queer villainy, camp aesthetics, performativity, gender subversion, *cuntification*, drag spectacle

Introduction

From its inception, Disney's animated canon has exerted a profound influence on cultural constructions of morality, identity, and desire. The studio's narratives habitually deploy a binary opposition good versus evil, in which princesses embody virtue through demure demeanour, soft palettes, and heteronormative romance, while villains stand as cautionary embodiments of excess, deviance, and moral threat (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe, 2003: 94). Yet woven into this dichotomy is a persistent pattern of queer coding, where antagonists such as Scar (*The Lion King*), Jafar (*Aladdin*), Hades (*Hercules*), and, above all, Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*) are marked by flamboyant gestures, camp-inflected speech, and a gender-ambiguous presentation without ever being explicitly named queer. These semiotic markers function as visual allusions to non-normative sexualities, signalling otherness even as their deniability preserves Disney's family-friendly veneer. The ubiquity of such

figures across decades of cinematic storytelling has established them as a consistent, if often contested, presence in popular culture.

This queer coding is never a neutral act. As scholars such as Benshoff and Griffin (2006: 75) have argued, Disney's villains frequently pathologised queerness by conflating it with deception, moral instability, and monstrosity. In so doing, they have become cultural containers for societal anxieties regarding gender variance and sexual non-conformity. Their exaggerated physicality and transgressive allure serve a didactic purpose, warning the audiences of the dangers that lurk beyond the heteronormative conventions. Yet, the very qualities that render these characters threatening: their theatricality, aesthetic excess, and palpable charisma also generate what Roland Barthes (1977: 9) describes as "jouissance," a surplus of affective pleasure that undermines the text's moral binaries. This affective surplus opens a space in which queer publics can resist normative readings, embracing coded villainy not as a site of shame or pathology, but as a space of subversive potential. This paper posits that queer villainy can be reclaimed as an act of defiant spectacle, where marginalisation is reconstituted as power through camp aesthetics and performative excess.

To interrogate this dynamic, this paper uses Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) as a paradigmatic case study. In sharp contrast to Ariel's demure willowy silhouette and pastel tones, Ursula's voluminous form, lavender skin, and inky black tentacles declare her corporeal excess. She is a figure of magnificent transgression, and her origins are unusually transparent in their indebtedness to drag culture. Animators explicitly modelled her on the iconic drag queen Divine, whose camp-inflected excess and unapologetic femininity constituted a political statement within queer subcultures. Divine, a star of John Waters' transgressive films and a pioneering force in drag theatre, embodied a form of radical self-fashioning that revelled in the grotesque and the glamorous in equal measure. This direct lineage links Ursula to a history of queer performance that deliberately valorises misfit identities and theatrical deviance over heteronormative success narratives, a concept Jack Halberstam (2011: 89) terms the "queer art of failure." Ursula's vocal portrayal by Pat Carroll, which fuses a maternal timbre with seductive malevolence, further enriches this queer-coded characterisation, cementing her status as an icon of theatrical villainy.

The central research question that guides this study is: how can queer villainy be reimagined as an act of resistance through the intertwined lenses of camp aesthetics, performativity, and performance? To answer this question, this paper synthesises insights from three key theoretical frameworks. First, we draw upon Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which argues that identity is

not innate but constituted through stylised, repeatable acts. Ursula's costume, gesture, and voice therefore constitute a set of highly deliberate and stylised reiterations of femininity that reveal gender itself as an enacted rather than a natural state. Her melodramatic poses and exaggerated vocal inflections function as parodic citations of dominant gender norms, destabilising the viewer's expectation of authenticity.

Secondly, this analysis is enriched by a deep engagement with camp aesthetics, as conceptualised by Susan Sontag (1964) and subsequent scholars. Sontag defined camp as an artifice-centred sensibility that delights in irony, exaggeration, and aesthetic theatricality. While her original formulation was cautious about camp's political valence, later scholars such as Fabio Cleto (1999) have emphasised its radical capacity to transform stigma into pleasure and to challenge hegemonic norms from the margins. Ursula's grotesque glamour and opulent sense of self epitomise camp's subversive power. By foregrounding aesthetic transgression, she collapses the boundary between monstrousness and beauty, inviting audiences to question the moral frameworks that categorise her as deviant. The theatricality that marks her as 'other' becomes the very source of her power and her enduring appeal to queer audiences.

Finally, we apply a lens of performance studies to examine how identity and meaning emerge through embodied acts. Richard Schechner's (1985: 93) concept of performance as "twice-behaved behaviour" is particularly instructive; it refers to ritualised gestures drawn from a cultural repertoire and re-enacted with intentional variation. Ursula's signature hand movements, throat clutch, and theatrical strides are not arbitrary, but culturally resonant enactments of femininity and power. Moreover, Taylor and Rupp's (2003) ethnography of drag communities demonstrates how drag theatre repurposes familiar gestures to critique hegemonic gender norms, transforming mockery into political commentary. Through this lens, Ursula's every flourish is a performative intervention, a drag-inflected gesture that reframes villainy as a site of aesthetic resistance.

Building upon these frameworks, this paper introduces the concept of cuntification to describe the hyper-stylised re-embodiment of villainy through glamour, defiance, and audacious theatricality. Rooted in feminist and queer discourses on linguistic reclamation, cuntification extends this reclamation beyond language to encompass embodied performance. Just as Tee Corinne's *The Cunt Coloring Book* (1975) and Eve Ensler's collective chant in *The Vagina Monologues* (2001) reclaim taboo language as a site of empowerment, cuntification reclaims the visual and vocal excess of queer-coded villains. It transforms features once pathologised; such as voluptuousness, theatricality, and expressive vocality—into signifiers of autonomy and communal

resilience. The concept is further illuminated by José Esteban Muñoz's work on disidentification and utopian performatives. Muñoz (1999: 161) argues that marginalised subjects often disidentify with phobic cultural texts, strategically reworking them rather than rejecting them entirely. *Cuntification* is a prime example of this process in action, offering a model for how villainy can be re-appropriated as a form of queer survival. Furthermore, the spectacle of this defiance creates "utopian performatives," fleeting moments in which alternative social worlds and affective bonds can be imagined (Muñoz, 2009: 97).

The ultimate case for this paper rests on an analysis of Drew Sarich's 2022 Hollywood in Vienna performance of "Poor Unfortunate Souls." This reinterpretation exemplifies cuntification in action. By transporting the sea witch from the confines of animation to a live stage, Sarich distils the character's camp sensibility and amplifies her potential as a queer icon. Sarich reconfigures villainy into a triumphant assertion of queer identity, foregrounding the performer's body as the locus of meaning and inviting audiences to partake in a collective re-envisioning of villainy as defiant spectacle. His performance serves as a powerful demonstration of how villainy can be wielded as an instrument of empowerment, subverting normative readings and celebrating defiant self-fashioning.

In merging these approaches, this article contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand how queerness operates within mainstream media, not only as subtext or stereotype, but as a mode of critique and a strategy for resistance. The subsequent sections of this paper will first examine the cultural and historical context in which queer-coded villains like Ursula emerged. A detailed close reading of Ursula's character in *The Little Mermaid* will then explore her bodily presentation, vocal stylings, and lyrical expression. The following section will analyse Drew Sarich's 2022 performance as a site of queer reclamation and resignification, drawing upon the theories outlined above. Finally, the conclusion will contend that through the intertwined lenses of queer theory, camp, and performance studies, characters like Ursula can be seen not as symbols of exclusion but as icons of radical visibility.

Disney's Ursula and the Cultural Context of Queer-Coded Villainy

Disney's animated narratives have historically hinged upon binary oppositions (good versus evil, beauty versus grotesque, normative versus deviant), within which villains perform a crucial dramaturgical and symbolic function. Over successive decades, certain antagonists have manifested a recognisable pattern of characterisation: flamboyant aesthetics, gender ambiguity, and performative excess. Though

never overtly queer, such figures as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) signal queerness through costuming, vocal inflection, gesture, and dramaturgy, rendering them legible as “other” to audiences of all ages (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe, 2003: 92). This semiotic strategy, which deploys a “visual shorthand” to signify deviance without explicit declaration, acquires particular force against the socio-political milieu of the late twentieth century, in which queer identity was pathologized amid AIDS-related moral panics and a conservative resurgence under the Reagan administration (Treichler, 1999: 76).

Ursula’s origins are unusually transparent in their indebtedness to drag culture: the animators explicitly modelled her on the drag icon Divine, whose camp-inflected excess and unapologetic femininity constituted a political statement within queer subcultures (Muñoz, 1999: 161). Ursula’s body, neither wholly human nor entirely monstrous, occupies an interstitial space that destabilises the rigid binaries of gender and species. Her ample flesh, heavy makeup, and voluminous gestures directly contest Disney’s narrow ideal of demure, desirable femininity.

While this lineage between Divine and Ursula is unmistakable in retrospect, the recognisability of this reference to mainstream audiences in 1989 remains uncertain. Divine’s fame, while considerable within queer and underground film circuits, was marginal in broader popular culture. His most successful single, *You Think You’re a Man*, peaked at number twenty-one on the US dance charts in 1982, while his collaborations with John Waters: *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Polyester* (1981) enjoyed cult rather than commercial status. *Hairspray* (1988) brought Divine his widest exposure, yet its success occurred only a year before *The Little Mermaid*’s release and after the character design for Ursula had already been finalised. Consequently, it is improbable that global audiences consciously recognised Divine in Ursula’s features. Instead, the reference operated as what Richard Dyer (1993: 74) terms a form of “coded visibility,” legible primarily to queer subcultural viewers attuned to camp performance traditions. This semiotic subtlety exemplifies how Disney could appropriate queer aesthetics while preserving plausible deniability, a duality that underpins much of the studio’s ambivalent engagement with queerness.

By foregrounding excess through her lavender skin, inky black tentacles, and grandiose movements, Ursula subverts the normative typology embodied by Ariel’s slender physique and pastel palette. This visual disruption is intensified by Pat Carroll’s vocal performance, which fuses maternal cadence with sultry malice, evoking the “queer art of failure” that celebrates misfit identities and theatrical deviance rather than heteronormative success (Halberstam, 2011: 89).

Figure 1: (Left) The drag icon Divine, whose aesthetic influenced Ursula's design. (Right) The animated Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), depicting her voluminous form and theatricality.



Ursula's voice further encapsulates queer-coded subversion. Delivered in a deep, velvety register, her speech blends sultriness with command, conjuring the archetype of the femme fatale while simultaneously reframing it through queer performance conventions. The strategic use of elongated vowels, sudden inflections, and pregnant pauses evokes the drag tradition's vocal stylisation, wherein voice functions not merely as pitch alteration but as a re-embodiment of gender through affect and tone (Taylor and Rupp, 2003: 9). In her signature number "Poor Unfortunate Souls," Ursula deploys a theatrical performance to satirize heteropatriarchal norms. The lyrics adopt a guise of sympathetic guidance, yet her delivery, a fusion of Pat Carroll's sultry malice and a knowing smirk, exposes a profound cynicism towards gendered expectations. She ironically advises Ariel that "The men up there don't like a lot of blabber / They think a girl who gossips is a bore / Yet on land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word." Through elongated vowels and flamboyant gestures, Ursula's performance reveals the inherent absurdity of this patriarchal double-bind, reframing conformity not as virtue but as a foolish, self-defeating bargain. This vocal and physical performance elevates the scene from a simple plot point into a drag-inflected critique of gender itself.

Critically, Ursula's villainy transcends simplistic moral condemnation; it may be read as emblematic of queer resistance. She inhabits the margins and constructs power through manipulation and spectacle rather than assimilation. Her refusal to seek redemption or apology aligns her with a lineage of camp and queer performance that valorises defiance over conformity (Sontag, 2018: 7). For queer viewers, especially those subject to erasure or pathologisation, Ursula's exuberant excess and rhetorical savvy offer an oblique yet potent point of identification. She embodies an "unruly body" that refuses normative containment, affirming the political dimensions of drag and camp aesthetics (Muñoz, 1999: 170).

This reading is further enriched when situated within broader semiotic and cultural discourses. Here, what deepens our understanding of Ursula's queer corporeality is Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the grotesque body, as one that exceeds boundaries: open, excessive, fluid, and always in transformation. One may interpret Ursula's form as a carnivalesque inversion of Disney's sanitised femininity. This body resists classical ideals of closure and purity, instead celebrating hybridity and becoming. Ursula's tentacular form exemplifies this carnivalesque logic, fusing human sensuality with animalistic spectacle. Through this grotesque excess, she momentarily inverts the hierarchical distinctions between human and animal, high and low, purity and impurity. In doing so, she destabilises the moral order of the narrative, creating a space which might be described as a proto-queer figuration: one that revels in openness, metamorphosis, and instability.

Moreover, Michel Foucault's (1978) exploration of the relationship between power and discourse illuminates Ursula's function as a locus of forbidden knowledge: she offers Ariel the tools to transgress patriarchal constraints, only to redirect them toward her own nefarious ends. In this respect, Ursula's intelligence and rhetorical prowess mirror the strategies of subjugated knowledges that Foucault identifies as strategies that challenge regulatory norms by exposing their contingency.

Through this multilayered analysis, Ursula emerges not merely as a cartoon villain but as a densely layered site of queer meaning. Her aesthetics are intentional; her voice is tactical; her villainy is a declaration of resistance. Within Disney's ostensibly conservative narrative framework, Ursula stages a radical *cuntification* of femininity, an amplification so extreme that it exceeds moral categorisation and invites viewers to recognise the performative foundations of gender itself. In doing so, she testifies to the enduring power of camp and drag as modes of cultural critique, even or perhaps especially, when deployed within the most mainstream of contexts.

Cuntification as Resistance

The term “cunt” remains one of the most incendiary and taboo in the English lexicon, its potency deriving from centuries of misogynistic usage that reduces women to their genitalia, thereby reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies (Lacombe, 1994: 27). Judicial recognition of its dehumanising potential has even prompted courts to classify the word as hate speech in contexts of gendered harassment (Methven, 2024: 137; Scheuber, 2022: 136). Early feminist critiques by MacKinnon (1987: 109) and Dworkin (1981: 101) conceptualised cunt as a “linguistic vessel” for gendered violence, embedded within structures of oppression and exclusion. In these foundational accounts, the term’s force lay almost entirely in its capacity to wound, to signal inferiority, and to uphold norms of patriarchal chastity.

From the mid-1970s onwards, however, feminist and queer communities began to enact a linguistic insurgency, reclaiming cunt as an emblem of agency rather than shame. Tee Corinne’s *The Cunt Coloring Book* (1975) pioneered such reclamation by inviting women to celebrate the vulva through playful, self-determined illustration. Two decades later, Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) ritualised the chant of cunt as a performative act of collective empowerment, transforming a private insult into a public affirmation of bodily autonomy. Tracey Emin’s video installation *CV: Cunt Vernacular* (1997), in turn, foregrounded the word within autobiographical performance, utilising self-portraiture to confront and reconfigure the taboo surrounding female sexuality.

Brontsema’s tripartite taxonomy of reclamation: neutralisation, where a term is rendered harmless; value reversal, where its meaning is flipped to signify pride; and stigma exploitation, where its offensive force is retained as a defiant badge; offers a useful schema for understanding these practices (2004: 6). Feminist interventions generally enact value reversal, flipping cunt from an epithet of degradation into a term of pride: “to reclaim cunt is to reverse its value, to replace its negative connotative value with a positive one” (Brontsema, 2009: 9). Conversely, queer cultures often embrace stigma exploitation, retaining the term’s shock value as a deliberate provocation against respectability politics (Pitcan et al., 2018: 166). When invoked in drag performances or cabaret, cunt becomes a linguistic cudgel, its historical violence reactivated for radical self-expression (Taylor and Rupp, 2003: 112).

Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity elucidates the mechanics of this process: identity is not innate but constituted through stylised, repeatable acts. Uttering *cunt* in performative contexts, whether on stage, in digital media, or within art installations subverts its oppressive charge by making visible its constructed-

ness. This performative re-contextualisation is at the heart of *cuntification*, a term this paper advances to denote the hyper-stylised embodiment of femininity designed explicitly to disarm and reframe the word's violent history.

José Esteban Muñoz's notion of "utopian performatives" further illuminates cuntification's emancipatory potential. Muñoz describes these fleeting enactments as moments that suspend dominant norms, enabling participants to envision alternative temporalities and social formations. Within queer clubs or feminist gatherings, the collective articulation of cunt temporarily dissolves heteronormative constraints, producing affective spaces of affirmation and futurity. Such moments enact Muñoz's vision of queer world-making, wherein shame is alchemised into communal pride: "I dwell on and in this stage because I understand it as one brimming with a utopian performativity that is linked to the ideality that is potentiality" (2009: 97).

Muñoz's earlier concept of "disidentification" also enriches our understanding by illustrating how marginalised subjects engage with phobic cultural texts, not through wholesale rejection or assimilation, but through strategic transformation: "[it] is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence" (Muñoz, 1999: 161). *Cuntification* exemplifies disidentification at the linguistic level: performers refuse to discard the slur yet repurpose it as a site of resistance. Drag artists frequently incorporate cunt into stage names, lip-sync numbers, and audience banter, thereby disrupting normative codes of propriety and asserting the value of uncensored expression.

The digital sphere has accelerated and globalised cuntification. Hashtags such as #CuntCulture, #CuntPride, and #ServingCunt on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X catalyse the circulation of memes, spoken-word pieces, and queer cabaret excerpts that foreground cunt as a symbol of radical solidarity (Ilbury, 2023: n.p.; Mack, 2023: n.p.; Godinez, 2024: 3). Musicians and visual artists like Arca, Mykki Blanco, and the performance collective Pussy Riot deploy the term in lyrics, installations, and live streams, aligning it with broader struggles for queer visibility and bodily sovereignty (Famulare, n.d.: 6; Deveau, 2020: 18; Šimek, 2015: 15).

The operability of cuntification can be clarified by situating it within a genealogical continuum beginning with Divine. Divine's cinematic persona, riotous, sexually audacious, and hyper-feminised, introduced what queer theorists have termed the "cunt-factor": a performative aesthetic that weaponises excess and vulgarity to expose social hypocrisy. When Disney borrowed Divine's image for Ursula, it both appropriated and sanitised this aesthetic. The sea witch retained Divine's outline: the arched brows, heavy contour, and sultry cadence, but excised the bawdy

sexuality and profanity that gave it political charge. In Drew Sarich's 2022 live performance, this repressed energy returns with force. His hyper-stylised gestures, vocal flamboyance, and drag sensibility reintroduce the Divine lineage, transforming cuntification from rhetorical flourish into a performative genealogy linking subcultural drag, corporate sanitisation, and queer reclamation.

Framing cuntification as both praxis and methodology, this paper situates the term within three interlocking analytic strata. First, it historicises the term's violent genealogies within patriarchal ideology. Second, it maps the divergent reclamatory strategies: value reversal in feminist praxis; stigma exploitation in queer performance. Third, it embeds these practices within theoretical frameworks of performativity (Butler, 2002: 178), queer futurity (Muñoz, 2009: 127), and subaltern disidentification (Muñoz, 1999: 161).

Applied to Drew Sarich's 2022 drag-theatrical rendition of "Poor Unfortunate Souls," cuntification reveals how Ursula's camp extravagance can be reclaimed as an emblem of queer defiance. Sarich's interpretation, complete with brazen costume, emphatic vocal stylings, and lip-sync dramaturgy, recasts the sea witch not as a vilified other but as a celebratory icon of excess and resistance. Her exaggerated femininity, through the lens of *cuntification*, becomes an act of queer survival, a deliberate re-appropriation of villainy for communal empowerment.

By articulating cuntification as a conceptual lens, this paper underscores language's dual capacity as weapon and remedy. Reclaiming cunt entails more than semantic neutralisation; it transforms a site of historical violence into a generative force for artistic innovation, collective mobilisation, and political critique. In doing so, cuntification not only deepens our understanding of queer-coded villainy in popular culture but also offers a robust framework for analysing how oppressed groups harness taboo to construct alternative imaginaries of power, identity, and community.

Performance Analysis of Drew Sarich's 2022 Reinterpretation

Drew Sarich's April 2022 gala appearance at Hollywood in Vienna reframes Ursula's "Poor Unfortunate Souls" as an act of theatrical revolt. By transporting the sea witch from the confines of animation to a live stage, Sarich distils the character's camp sensibility and amplifies her potential as a queer icon. Where Disney's original dramaturgy positions Ursula within a moral parable of hubris and downfall, Sarich's enactment recasts her excess as defiant artistry. This analysis explores the visual, vocal, and embodied strategies through which Sarich enacts

cuntification, transforming villainy into a potent performance of resistance, and situates these manoeuvres within contemporary performance theory.

Sarich's costuming establishes an immediate dialogue with drag aesthetics. His bespoke black-and-white gown reproduces Ursula's signature silhouette, broad at the shoulders, cinched at the waist, but is rendered in sculpted tailoring that emphasises the performer's body as a site of deliberate artifice. Knee-high stiletto boots, a platinum-blond wig, and exaggerated eye makeup imbue the ensemble with conspicuous theatricality. The high-contrast palette recalls Ursula's lavender skin and inky tentacles, while the glittering fabrics and rhinestone embellishments announce a refusal of naturalism. As Smelik (n.d.: 142) asserts, camp emerges through aesthetic excess that simultaneously delights and critiques the cultural norms it exaggerates. Here, Sarich's garment functions as critique: by heightening the grotesque features that Disney codes as monstrous, he reveals their construction and reclaims them as markers of power.

The minimalist staging further centres Sarich's body as the locus of meaning. A largely bare platform, punctuated only by shifting lights in magenta and violet hues, directs the audience's gaze towards the performer's gestures. These chromatic accents echo the film's underwater palette, signalling transitions in mood and vocal register. In omitting elaborate scenery, the production echoes Schechner's (1985: 93) concept of "twice-behaved behaviour," whereby familiar gestures are re-enacted



Fig. 2: Drew Sarich performing as Ursula at Hollywood in Vienna, 2022. The image showcases the hyper-stylized aesthetic and audacious theatricality described as

in a new context to acquire fresh resonance. Sarich reproduces Ursula's signature clutching of her throat and sweeping arm movements, but in live performance these acts become invitations to collective participation, converting passive spectators into co-creators of meaning. The audience thus becomes part of the *mise-en-scène*, their gaze an essential component of camp affect.

Vocally, Sarich magnifies the operatic undertones latent in Pat Carroll's original performance. The lower register employs measured vocal fry to evoke Ursula's predatory gravitas; the upper register ascends into controlled vibrato, imparting a sense of celebratory extravagance. Where Carroll's shifts from seduction to menace occupy a relatively narrow tonal band, Sarich's extended phrase-shaping and deliberate pauses layer irony atop authority. Drawing on Taylor and Rupp's (2003:

194) assertion that drag voice constitutes a re-embodiment of gendered affect, one observes how keyword elongations such as “yasss,” “pathetic,” and “poor unfortunate souls” deploy rhetoric as both spectacle and subversion. The audience experiences not merely a song but an embodied critique of persuasion itself, as the performer foregrounds the artifice inherent in vocal manipulation.

Movement and gesture likewise articulate a politics of dissent. Sarich transforms Ursula’s animated tentacular poses into drag-inflected choreography: wrists flex into delicate arcs, fingers snap with punctuated clarity, and hips roll in stylised defiance. These actions exploit the disjunction between Ursula’s non-human form and Sarich’s own corporeality, generating humour while underscoring the artificial nature of both gender and species distinctions. Muñoz’s (1999: 161) theory of disidentification is instructive here: Sarich neither wholly assimilates into the animated grotesque nor rejects it but reworks it to disrupt hegemonic conceptions of propriety. His performance constitutes a hybrid persona: a villain, a drag artist, and a diva whose layered identity invites a reconsideration of fixity in both gender and morality.

Audience responses to Sarich’s performance underscore this shift. Reviews on social media and fan-based websites described the rendition as causing spectators to be “OBSESSED with Drew Sarich’s performance” (personinthepalace, 2022: n.p.) and noted that it was “brilliantly performed” (Schedenig, 2022: n.p.). These appraisals highlight how Sarich’s embodiment does not merely imitate Ursula but reanimates her as a living symbol of defiance. Audience-generated content, such as social media clips and reels, further extended the performance’s reach. On platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, commentators frequently observed that Sarich’s Ursula was “one of the best interpretations ever,” praising his “brilliant-talent, charisma” (picolesantos, 2022: n.p.; milaivanova5506, 2022: n.p.). Such responses attest to Halberstam’s (2011: 89) “queer art of failure,” wherein deviation from normative success narratives becomes a source of collective pleasure and empowerment.

The live, ephemeral nature of the gala further accentuates its utopian potential. Dolan (2005: 20) describes “utopian performatives” as temporary disruptions of social order, moments in which alternative relationalities and affective bonds flourish. During Sarich’s performance, hierarchies of gender, morality, and theatrical propriety dissolve as the audience enacts a shared affective response: laughter, applause, and a collective smile. The gala space is momentarily transformed into a queer common, wherein the figure of Ursula transcends her cinematic origin to become a vessel for communal futurity.

Sarich's identity as a cisgender gay male performer adds a further layer of intertextual complexity. His interpretation does not overwrite the drag lineage that informed Ursula's original character design but engages in a dialogue with it. The result is a palimpsestic performance: traces of Divine's camp, Carroll's vocal timbre, and Sarich's operatic training coalesce into a novel articulation of queer villainy. The utopian performatives emphasise this intergenerational exchange, suggesting that each enactment builds upon the past iterations to project new possibilities for resistance and affiliation.

By the final crescendo, Sarich stands centre stage with arms outstretched, a tableau of defiant glamour. Ursula's traditional denouement of narrative defeat is inverted into a moment of collective triumph. Through the lens of *cuntification*, Sarich's performance emerges as an act of cultural survival: an assertion that marginalised expression, when amplified into deliberate excess, possesses the power to confront, transform and endure. In re-inscribing Ursula as an emblem of queer strength, Sarich not only honours the character's camp origins but extends her iconography into new realms of political and aesthetic possibility.

Conclusion and Future Direction

This study has argued that queer-coded villainy is not an inherent pathology but a site of potential empowerment when approached through camp aesthetics, drag performance and theoretical reclamation. By foregrounding performativity and spectacle, queer publics subvert heteronormative narratives, transforming characters like Ursula from cautionary monsters into icons of defiance. The act of reclamation, whether through live performance, fan art or digital activism reveals moral binaries as social constructs rather than immutable truths (Butler, 2002: 5).

The importance of camp, drag and theatricality in this process cannot be overstated. Camp's embrace of artifice and irony allows audiences to engage with villainy as pleasurable exaggeration rather than literal threat (Sontag, 2018: 12). Drag performance, as a form of embodied ritual, enacts what this paper terms *cuntification*; the hyper-stylised reclamation of stigmatised femininity to subvert oppressive language and norms (Brontsema, 2009: 9; Taylor and Rupp, 2003: 182). Together, these aesthetic practices create utopian performatives in which the normative constraints on gender and morality are momentarily suspended, enabling glimpses of alternative social worlds (Dolan, 2005: 20).

While Disney's design choices initiate Ursula's queer resonance, it is crucial to acknowledge that her afterlife as a queer icon emerged through collective reception. As Alexander Doty observes in *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993), queerness often

arises through interpretive practices rather than authorial intent. Similarly, Sean Griffin's *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens* (2000) documents how LGBTQ+ audiences have long re-read Disney texts to construct alternative identifications and communal belonging. Ursula's elevation to queer sainthood owes as much to fan practices of cosplay, drag reinterpretations and digital remixes as to the studio's coding. By embracing her as a camp idol, queer communities exercised interpretive agency, transforming a corporate product into a site of communal self-recognition. This reception history underlines that queer agency lies not merely in production but also in audience appropriation, an insight exemplified by the viral re-circulation of Sarich's 2022 performance across social media platform.

Future research should address several gaps. First, empirical studies employing audience reception methods: surveys, interviews or ethnographic observation would elucidate how diverse demographics experience the reclamation of queer villainy. Second, comparative analyses of non-Western media could uncover different patterns of queer coding and reclamation, enriching the theoretical framework with cross-cultural perspectives. Third, longitudinal studies tracing representational shifts over time would help determine whether reclamation efforts effect lasting changes in industry practices and societal attitudes. Finally, intersectional approaches attentive to race, class, disability, and nationality can deepen our understanding of how villainy intersects with multiple axes of power and resistance.

Ultimately, queer publics' reclamation of villainy through camp and performative excess offers a vibrant model of cultural resistance. By unsettling narrative binaries, rewriting cultural texts and staging performative spectacles, they demonstrate the transformative potential of language and embodiment. When reimagined through camp and *cuntification*, the villain ceases to be a mere object of fear and becomes a dynamic symbol of audacity, solidarity, and collective imagination.

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