

**Plato's lesson on gender: androgyny as a search for totality in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001)**

***A lição de Platão sobre gênero: androginia como busca da totalidade em Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001)***

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**Abstract**

The myth of the Androgyne is appropriated in John Cameron Mitchell's movie adaptation of his eponymous off-Broadway musical play titled *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. This is a cinematic feat as the filmmaker foregrounds the main topic in the theme itself in a lowbrow approach clashing with its two main canonical sources: the Christian myth of Biblical creation and Plato's mythological account in *The Symposium*. The transgender protagonist, Hedwig, is a human divide looking to be symbolically made whole, which she eventually manages to do through her art as rock musician. Thus, Plato's myth of creation finds its natural artistic correlate in glam rock. Musical art is here equated with creation, and the androgynous artist Hedwig, endowed with both female and male psychic principles represents the core of the artistic duality. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is not only an opus about creation in general, but a movie about the myth of the author and his/her intrinsic nature.

Keywords: Androgyne – Creation myths – Plato's *Symposium* – Rock music – Glam rock – *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

**Resumo**

Ao adaptar ao cinema o seu musical off-Broadway *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, John Cameron Mitchell deu nova vida ao mito do Andrógino. Esta adaptação, de título homónimo, é uma proeza cinematográfica pois o realizador evidencia o tópico principal na própria temática da obra numa abordagem popular contrária aos pergaminhos das duas principais fontes canónicas: o mito bíblico da Criação e o relato mitológico que Platão inscreveu em *O Banquete*. A protagonista transgénero, de nome Hedwig, é uma autêntica cisão humana que busca uma totalidade simbólica através da sua arte: a música rock. O mito platónico da criação tem pois por correlato artístico a variante do *glam rock*. A arte musical é aqui equiparada a um acto de criação e Hedwig, como artista andrógina, é dotada dos dois princípios psíquicos (feminino e masculino), representando o cerne da dualidade artística. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* não é uma obra sobre a criação em geral, mas sim um filme sobre o mito do autor e a sua natureza intrínseca.

Palavras-chave: Andrógino – Mitos da criação – *O Banquete* de Platão – Música rock – Glam rock – *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

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## **Plato's lesson on gender: androgyny as a search for totality in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001)**

The myth of the Androgyne is one of the oldest in Western culture but, although it was put to cinematic use by the recognized French *auteur* Jean Cocteau as early as 1932 (in *Le Sang d'un poète*), remained largely ignored in this medium until John Cameron Mitchell brought it to the screen in 2001, foregrounding it in the theme itself. Mitchell adapted the story from his own eponymous off-Broadway stage rock musical, in which he also played the lead role for a while (during the first theatrical season). Although Mitchell uses the myth in both its inclusive as well as divisive possibilities (i.e., the androgyne as a representation of both genders or of neither of them), what is most astonishing in his approach is not the versatility of the undertaking, but the professed lowbrow nature of the enterprise, countering the modern tendency in visual arts by creators such as Marcel Duchamp. The thematic importance of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* must therefore be stressed for its twofold innovation.<sup>1</sup>

The story focuses on an East German male teenager who attempts to undergo sex-change surgery to be able to marry an American sergeant stationed in East Berlin during the Cold War, only to find himself later abandoned in the United States. As an adult transgender rock singer, she turns to an obscure career in music. Having adopted her mother's name—Hedwig—she forms a band which, in autobiographical fashion, assumes the physical handicap she was left with. Indeed, the *angry inch* of the title refers both to the name of her musical band and the remains of her penis, which the incompetent surgeon who did the sex-change operation did not quite manage to excise. Along the way she falls in love with a teenager called Tommy, whom she initiates into the musical scene and with whom she writes and composes an album, only to see her romantic hopes dashed as he dumps her for stardom, running away with the lyrics and the music of their collaborative work. Years later, embittered and lonely, despite the fact that she has a steady male partner, Hedwig embarks on a tour with her band, performing mostly in a second-rate food chain, for reluctant or non-existent audiences, while stalking the now world-famous “Tommy Gnosis,” her teenage former lover, in the hopes of winning a court case against him for copyright infringement.

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<sup>1</sup> The films *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992) and *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes, 1998) successfully broached androgyny before *Hedwig*, but the former was based on a famous novel by Virginia Woolf and was an arthouse work, and the latter specifically depicted the glam musical scene.

This depiction of degradation and confused gender identities hardly seems the stuff myths are made of, and yet the film is an illustration of the mythical roots of the androgyne. No other film has ever paid such a tribute to that everlasting cultural tradition. The present article acknowledges the cultural roots of the film and analyzes its theme, primarily based on Plato's notion of the androgyne, adopting a form that follows the quest of the main character from identity fragmentation to gender wholeness. The end goal is to establish a connection between the androgyne and creativity itself, thus explaining the musical backdrop to the film as an integral and necessary part of the equation. Ultimately, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, despite being set in an environment of trash culture, is an allegory of creation of the noblest kind, and the androgyne is the worthiest creature of them all.

### 1. The Beginning: Androgyny as Perfection

Humanity has always looked for beauty, immortality, perfection. No wonder these ideals have found their way into myths, legends, and religions all over the world and at different stages of socio-cultural evolution. One manages to reunite all the myths that grapple with such ideals into a single psychological and structural narrative: the Androgyne. Frédéric Monneyron mentions the existence of androgynous gods in the most archaic societies of Africa, America, Melanesia, Australia, and Polynesia (1994, 17). However, it is probably the most advanced cultures, notwithstanding their antiquity, that better imprint our mythological imaginary in this matter. In Ancient Egypt, Persia, India, and the Roman Empire, polytheism gave way to a pantheon of founding divinities (Noun in Egypt), twin gods (the pair Fauna and Flora in Rome), and double-principled monsters (the goddess Kali in India, endowed with several arms / the Sphinx in Egypt, part bearded woman, part lioness). However, it was in Greece that polytheism was best translated into mythology and art, since each god was not only the object of a cult as a personified being, but also a decorative object for artists. Of all the Olympian gods, none was as powerful as Zeus, who is said to be able to reproduce by himself (e.g., the god Hermes, messenger of the Olympian gods, was taken from his thigh).<sup>2</sup> Other highly important Olympian gods were Aphrodite, the goddess of love,<sup>3</sup> and both her sons, Eros (aka Love, usually portrayed as a roly-poly non-sexed child), and his opposite Hermaphroditus (the two-sexed teenager); Dionysus, the ultimate “man-woman,” master of the dreadful Bacchae and wearer

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<sup>2</sup> One variant of this god—Zeus Stratios—worshipped in Labranda, was depicted as having four breasts (Delcourt 35-36).

<sup>3</sup> A bearded variant of her, endowed with both physical sexes—called Aphroditos—was worshipped in Ancient Cyprus. In the Roman mythology her equivalent is the bald Venus (Delcourt 50-51).

of a tunic, who was first depicted, namely by Aeschylus, as a virile being and later on portrayed by Ovid and Seneca as a naked, beautiful man with the effeminate looks of a virgin;<sup>4</sup> and the brave and warlike Amazons, daughters of Ares, the god of war. Among the Ancient Greek mortals, some famous androgynes also compose our collective imaginary, such as Tiresias, a blind clairvoyant who changed sex twice in his life, first from man to woman and then back again, on both occasions upon seeing two serpents mating (Delcourt 1980, 60).

According to Monneyron, this recurrence across cultures and times points to an archetypal nature, alluding to human immortality. The Androgyne would be a perfect unity-totality, comprising the coincidence of opposites at all levels (1994, 21). Some rites founded upon this mythology tend to symbolically reunite the primordial lost union. The most relevant and universal of them are marriage (“What God has joined let no man set asunder” is voiced in the Christian ceremony); heterosexual copulation; the use of disguises in pre-nuptial rituals, coming-of-age formalities, and the profane celebration of carnival; and as a general way to alienate the evil eye and other malign spirits (Delcourt 1994, 11-31). Other intellectual and religious sense-making systems also incorporate the androgyne, such as Gnosticism,<sup>5</sup> Kabala,<sup>6</sup> Alchemy,<sup>7</sup> and the Christian tradition of the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Old Testament* (Genesis 1: 26) God said: “Let us create the man in Our image and likeness,” which the narrator reinforces with “[...] *male* and *female* He created *them*” [...] “and blessed them and told them: fructify and multiply yourselves and fill the Earth and submit it [...]” (my emphasis)<sup>9</sup> Then God told them he would give them all the sustenance above the soil, including “all the trees that bore seeds and all the animals in which there was living soul” (Genesis 1: 27-30). At this point, God seems to have created two separate beings, equal in all things and endowed with the power to govern upon the whole Earth and procreate. Having created the world, God rested on the seventh day. But lo, the story takes a step back, and God creates man... again, and the vegetation and the animals, which Adam, the first human, got to

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<sup>4</sup> The same is in fact true of all the Hellenistic statuary (4th century), where the gendered traits were attenuated in both sexes. It is as if, claims Delcourt, an androgynous figure had inhabited the imagination of the Greek artists (89). They produced an admirable synthesis of virility and effeminacy.

<sup>5</sup> The primordial man, Adamas, was made of male Spirit and female Matter (Monneyron 1994, 30).

<sup>6</sup> In the sacred book Zohar (13th century) God is said to be both male (active) and female (passive). The primordial man, known as Adam Kadmon, was created in God’s image and, therefore, equally endowed with the feminine principle (Monneyron 1994, 32).

<sup>7</sup> Psychological androgyny is defined by Delcourt as “a person’s ability to be at the same time aggressive and nurturant, sensitive and stern, domineering and submissive, regardless of gender” (1980, 71, my translation).

<sup>8</sup> For a complete account of all traditions, see Jean Libis (1980, 112-125), Marie Delcourt (1980, 107-132), Chevalier and Gheerbrandt ([1969] 1982, 39-41).

<sup>9</sup> All quotations taken from the Genesis were translated by me. The emphasis is also mine.

name (Genesis 2: 7-20). This time, God created man from the clay of the earth, blowing the breath of life into his nostrils, placing him in the Garden of Eden and clearly forbidding him from eating from the tree of knowledge. Since man had no mate, God decided to create a female “adjunct” to keep him company, “standing as before him.” The Lord induced a heavy sleep in Adam and took from him one of his ribs. From the severed rib a woman was formed and brought before Adam, and Adam said: “This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh [...]” (Genesis 2: 20-23). In this second version of the creation myth, man and woman knew nothing, least of all about sex and love. This version almost reads like a censored tale for children. The question is why include two different accounts of the primordial act of creation in the same section of the Bible? Were they written by different people, considering that the origins of the *Old Testament* are unknown? Or are they two different types of narrative, the second being more allegorical than the first? Either way, the twofold myth of Biblical creation reinforces the importance of gender and its intrinsic duality.

Plato’s tale of the Androgyne, as recounted by Aristophanes in the *Symposium* (385-370 AC), is probably the second most important account of the creation myth in Western culture, right after *The Old Testament*’s. According to Aristophanes, the original creatures were circular and arrogant.<sup>10</sup> He claims that there were three types of “mythical ancestors,” as Jean Libis calls them: the man-man spheres (descendants of the Sun), the woman-woman spheres (descendants of the Earth), and the man-woman spheres (the only ones who possessed a dual nature, and who were descendants of the Moon). They are called “children of these [respective] stars” (Sun, Earth, Moon in the song “The Origin of Love” from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*). By this account, only one third of humanity was originally androgynous and, inversely, it is from this minority that present heterosexuals derive because they are seeking a differently gendered lost half.

Plato’s narrative became known to John Cameron Mitchell, who gave a copy of it to Stephen Trask, the composer of all the songs in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, telling him to read it because he wanted to adapt it for the stage (recounted in Laura Nix’s documentary). Trask read it and loved it. The most famous song in the notorious off-Broadway show that preceded the eponymous film—titled “The Origin of Love”—is a faithful adaptation of Plato’s myth of

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Libis reminds us that the sphere is a symbol of plenitude *per se*, because its closure points to a higher order of Harmony (1980, 111). It is no coincidence, then, that the Universe is made of celestial orbs. However, the circle is also a known symbol of perfection, homogeneity, absence of distinction, undivided totality, never-ending time, etc. (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt [1969] 1982, 191).

the Androgyne, pointing to the notions of beauty, perfection and immortality contained therein. In Aristophanes' account, the round creatures are accused of having "awesome strength, force and pride," (Plato 2015, no. pag.) but in the song the word "they" (3<sup>rd</sup> person plural) is substituted for a significant "*our* strength and defiance," (my emphasis) which implies that the story is being recounted in the first person. Not only is the transgender protagonist, Hedwig, assuming herself as androgynous, but she is also claiming a mythical status for herself. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is not about a real person, but a concept instead.

When the lyrics of "The Origin of Love" state that "[...] the storm clouds gathered above / into big balls of fire" the band pauses to wait for the alleged moment of punishment, looking up as if into the sky, preparing themselves for the retribution guaranteed by Zeus. This style of musical performance makes the story exceedingly poignant throughout the film because the main character's narrative (played by John Cameron Mitchell himself) is *lived* more than performed:

It was a cold dark evening such a long time ago [...].  
It was a sad story how we became lonely two-legged creatures  
the story of the origin of love.

The use of animation in this sequence enables us to access a mythical stage populated by legendary and inhuman creatures (rather difficult to portray otherwise), but also reinforces the godlike and legendary mood of the tale. The deviations from the myth can be attributed to poetic license. For example, Trask's lyrics spread the mythical status to encompass the planet itself

When the earth was still flat  
with clouds made of fire  
and mountains stretched up to the sky  
sometimes higher

and imbue the tale with more nostalgia from the start. Also, there is a wish to inject further androgynous references into Plato's myth: "some Indian god" as well as "Osiris and the gods of the Nile" belong to different cultural traditions and are nowhere to be found in the *Symposium*. However, they help clarify the intention of the director, which is to approach androgyny in the most prolific but culturally sustained way, as a myth of creation. Consequently, the character of Tommy Speck (played by Michael Pitt), the much-desired

paramour and Hedwig's mythical lost half, is introduced as a 17-year-old sexual neophyte and looking as asexual as a late Hellenistic statue. Besides, he is also a religious Christian "freak," as Hedwig observes, always talking about the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Thus, Aristophanes' tale in the *Symposium* is made compatible with the Christian version of the fall of man in the *Old Testament*, as Luc Brisson confirms in the section "Archetypes" of his book *Sexual Ambivalence* (2002), in which he analysis his concept of "dual sexuality" as "a manifestation of anatomy, religion and metaphysics" (quoted in OKell 2005, 48).

According to Jean Libis (1980, 112), being "de-naturalized" by Zeus, humans are victims of a catastrophe, one aspect of which is the loss of their intellectual potency and knowledge. They might not have known anything about love specifically, resulting in an inability to reproduce, but, apparently, they were supremely knowledgeable. It is no coincidence that once the boy Tommy is introduced by Hedwig to the music world, he adopts the stage name of Gnosis (the Greek word for knowledge). During the performance of the song "The Origin of Love," the film director crosscuts between animated images and shots of the band playing. As illustrative as the animation sections are, it is in the live performance that the key moments of the tale reside. For instance, Hedwig's close-up shots of looking into an apparent void as she vocalizes the line "It was before the origin of love" turn her into the primeval androgyne. A split screen in the image introduced at a certain point of the song highlights her inner division and implicates all the viewers of the film, some of whom could literally be her missing half, others metaphorically so because, according to Aristophanes' tale, everyone is incomplete. "The last time I saw you, we were split in two [...]," sings Hedwig. Ronit Kark confirms that psychologically androgynous people (i.e., people who are endowed with "psychological androgyny," made of "masculine" and "feminine" traits present at the same time) may belong to either the male or female sex (2017, 2).

## **2. The Middle: Looking for the Other Half**

The East and the West, usually divided by ideology, find a common ground in the myth of Androgyny as played out in both the theme and the narrative of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* in both its stage and film version. The main character is a human divide looking to be made whole. Hedwig's identity problems have a symbolic nature resonant with broader cultural values and social issues, as one member of her band announces onstage. Indeed, "[she] is a mixture of East and West [having migrated to the Eastern side of the Berlin wall in Germany and back again], slavery and freedom [to and from social mores and patriarchy], man and



woman [the amputation of most of *her* penis is compensated by the permanent use of female wigs], trunk and bottom [her two different anatomical parts, one false, one real]” (the brackets are mine). These dichotomies make her peculiar in society, where she is looked upon as an aberration,<sup>11</sup> and peculiar in her private life, where she is psychologically alone, despite being married to the backing vocalist Yitzhak (played by Miriam Shor). For most of the film, Hedwig’s transvestism is an imperfect androgyny because the psychological principles are separate (“I had to change name and assume a disguise” as Hedwig sings in the 4<sup>th</sup> song of the film). In fact, as already mentioned, some ancient disguising rituals are rites of passage, rather than permanent conditions.

In Hedwig’s case the dual nature of androgyny is, in fact, a dialectic since it stresses the irreconcilability of her condition, perpetually separated in two. Hedwig is simultaneously man *and* woman, not a “man-woman” as the ancient Greeks conceived of it (not to be confused with Aristophanes’ account in *The Symposium*). Hedwig is also unlike the god Hermaphroditus. According to the Latin poet Ovid’s colorful tale recounted in *The Metamorphosis*, Hermaphroditus, the beautiful and young son of the gods Aphrodite and Hermes, was literally fused with the nymph Salmacis, who, inflamed with lust for the youth, embraced him forcibly as he was bathing in a river, asking the gods to never let them separate again. Physically, Hedwig does not have both sexes; she is not a hermaphrodite. On the one hand, her “botched” sex-organ removal surgery left her with some undesirable flesh, enough to consider her physically male. On the other, her breasts are fake, and she removes them when she goes to sleep, preventing her from being a *de facto* woman. No information is provided as to the status of her internal reproductive system, which would be unsuitable to what is essentially a mythical tale with allegorical underpinnings. Her fabricated female appearance and name correspond to her *social* identity. She looks and acts like a woman in order to be empowered. When as a teenager sunbathing in the nude she is given gummy bears by the American sergeant Luther, who was stationed in East Germany, she says she feels the taste of power in her mouth, knowing that Luther is smitten with her.<sup>12</sup> She was intrinsically androgynous and underwent the sex-change operation for social reasons: to get away from Western Berlin.

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<sup>11</sup> In the chapter significantly titled “Monsters,” Brisson “defines the dual sexuality as a radical mutation with which no life is possible, and consequently identifies both the androgyne and the hermaphrodite [which he wrongly coalesces into one] as shameful” (quoted in OKell 2005, 46, the brackets are mine).

<sup>12</sup> Luther’s and Hedwig’s wedding announcement is painted on the Berlin wall in animated images. This, as well as other mural inscriptions, reveals the coalescence of irony/stand-up comedy ludicrousness and tragic undertones of pathos. There is a cartoonish dimension in this film that, nevertheless, corroborates its mythical status.

During most of the film the feminine principle is made dominant, but not without a sense of frustration. Hedwig's behavior becomes increasingly erratic until she adopts violent male traits, especially in gender-charged situations. For example, she attacks a member of the band for putting a bra in a dryer, where it could be damaged, and she rips Itzhak's passport to prevent him from going on the Polynesian tour of the Broadway stage musical *Rent*, playing Angel, one of the leading characters who often appears in drag throughout the performance. Hedwig's rejection by Tommy—whom she considers her creative and mythical soulmate (“Songs exploded out of us,” as she says)—frustrates her, notwithstanding the fact that she is legally married to Itzhak, next to whom she sleeps in a symbolic reenactment of copulation. Itzhak, however, whose role in the film is played by a woman impersonating a male character, is not the best love object for Hedwig (inversely played by a male actor in drag), because he has the wrong gender identity. Itzhak craves wearing Hedwig's blonde wigs as an approach to the feminine qualities that society and Hedwig (from whom he hides this proclivity) deny him. He does not have the strength to play up his inner femininity. He is as gentle and fragile as the stereotypical woman. He could never complete Hedwig because he is not whole himself. At the end of the song “The Origin of Love,” in a most revealing voice-over, as she lies in bed with Itzhak, Hedwig remarks: “It is clear I must find my other half. But is it a ‘He’ or a ‘She’? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complementary?” In other words: will this missing half be physically a man or a woman? According to Aristophanes' account, will it be a child of the Sun (a man-man), or rather part of a man-woman compound, the original Androgyne? As she is saying this, the camera tilts across her half-naked body and passes over a tattoo on her thigh depicting two half circular beings, very close to each other but not entirely linked. As the camera, mounted on a crane, attains an almost vertical position over the bed and the couple on it, Hedwig voices the following doubt: “Or can two people, actually, become one. *Again?*”.

Hedwig's life story has all the traces of discrimination, be it sexual (she looks like a transvestite) or social (she feels and behaves like a woman). The film's first song, starting as early as the third shot, is about Hedwig's inner and outer division. Coming from East Germany, she sees fit to compare herself to the Berlin Wall, a portentous symbol of division. She thrusts opens a cape that resembles the colorful graffiti on the Wall itself, as if she was opening a pair of butterfly wings, transforming herself from a larva into something beautiful. As the song goes, just like East Berliners, “[she] was born on the other side”—in this case, the other side of a social role—and just like the Wall, she is “reviled, graffitied and spit upon” and, now that

her virility is gone, just like East Berliners, she does not know who she is anymore. However, she is still waiting for a real outcome, her defenses have not tumbled. Unlike the Wall, she remains standing: “Enemies and adversaries / they try to tear me down.” Later on, another song points to a healing process that has not gone full circle. Indeed, the mythical wound left on the original round creatures who were divided into two halves is symbolically manifested in Hedwig through the marks the surgeon who performed her vaginoplasty left her with:

I’ve got it all sewn up  
 A hardened razor cut  
 a scar upon my body.  
 And you can trace the lines  
 through misery’s designs.

She is merely “a collage,” “a montage,” as she sings. All the while she wanders incomplete, looking for a way to mend herself. She never steps out of character: she always wears a blond wig, even for bed. There is a sense of a journey, as laborious as the search for the Holy Grail. The film’s protagonist undergoes a sort of penance, as Aristophanes’ round creatures in the tale of the *Symposium* were forced to roam the Earth looking for their other halves.

There is always a sense of the mythical throughout the film, as when the band plays a concert in a wilderness with no audience attending and we hear, on the soundtrack, a crowd applauding. Similarly, observed from afar (via an extreme long shot), the portable toilettes placed on the hilltop seem like giant monoliths, somewhat reminiscent of Stonehenge. At another gig, when a corpulent male patron insults the members of the band as “faggots,” Hedwig throws herself up in the air and like an angel devoid of wings—not coincidentally, the angel is another androgynous figure *par excellence*—she hovers over an imagined scene of restaurant chaos, with food items and people being thrown back and forth. Time appears to stop during these shots, which are accompanied by soft piano music, the exact opposite of the punk rock of the song that had just played. Later in the film, another song, this time a romantic ballad, takes place at an imaginary site: a secluded corner of Hedwig’s psyche where she finally is ready to accept the truth. Tommy Gnosis, standing on a bare stage set up in a bare studio, bathed in blue light matching the leather trousers he is wearing, sings:

You were much more  
 than any god could ever plan.

More than a woman or a man.  
 [...]
   
Show this wicked town  
 something beautiful and new.  
 You think that luck has left you there.  
 But maybe there's nothing up in the sky but air.  
 And there's no mystical desire.  
 No cosmic lover pre-assigned.  
 There's nothing you can find that cannot be found.  
 'Cause with all the changes you been through  
 It seems the stranger's always you.  
 Alone again in some new wicked little town.

The moment of recognition is staged as a crosscutting between Tommy, bathed in blue, and Hedwig, bathed in a red light, both miles apart from one another. Indeed, an extreme long two-shot reinforces the distance between them in the empty studio. Both are bare-chested, in perfect emotional sync for the first time.

What is achieved here—and which could not be (re)gained before—is not Paradise, but knowledge. Ironically, Tommy had grasped this long before Hedwig, thus proving that his stage name was not misplaced. Years before, while talking about Adam and Eve with Hedwig, who was nanny to his sibling, he had observed:

I mean, what kind of God creates Adam in his own image and then pulls Eve out of him to keep him company? And tells them not to eat from the tree of knowledge? I mean, he was so micro-managing. So was Adam. But Eve! Eve just wanted to know shit. She took a bite at the apple, and she found out what was good and what was evil. And she gave it to Adam so he would know. 'Cause they were in love. And that was good... they now knew.

Tommy was not convinced by the first version of the creation of Adam and Eve contained in the *Old Testament*, preferring the second one, but with a twist. For him, Eve is superior to both God and Adam, and chooses to eat the apple, because she was driven by intelligence and love. That is, the most important attributes allegedly gained from the fall of man were already in Eve *in potentia*. She is the real sacred life force. There is an innuendo here that God should have been female. That is perhaps why, following a musical performance with the Korean sergeants' housewives, Hedwig wipes the sweat off her face and throws the cloth to the young

Tommy, who was becoming mesmerized by her. He looks at it and sees an imprint of Hedwig's make-up, in an allusion to Saint Veronica's veil (or *Sudarium*), onto which Jesus's face was imprinted on his way to Golgotha.

### 3. The End: The Love of Art, or Creation as Totality

Ultimately, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is about creation. If the Greek and Christian mythologies are explicit, the same cannot be said of its more artistic implications. In one scene in which Hedwig is jamming with the young Tommy, she tells him she believes love is immortal because it "creates something which was not there before." Naughtily, the boy asks her if it is *procreation*, or maybe *recreation*, to which she answers, very seriously and pensively: "Maybe just creation." They proceed to kiss for the first time (having already been together for six months) because the boy asks her to "breathe in [his] mouth." Hedwig, who is Tommy's muse and mentor, infuses him with the breath of creativity and Tommy Gnosis is indeed created. In so doing, she behaves like a miracle-worker (a thaumaturge, as potent as God, breathing life into unanimated creatures). She invented herself originally as an androgynous creature and, in this moment, she turns Tommy into a rock 'n' roll icon.

When Hedwig kisses Tommy, the boy resorts once more to his Christian-based clichés, but this time Eden has a different meaning than usual in the film because he has just been infused with the breath of creation: "When Eve was still inside Adam they were in Paradise. When she was separated from him, that's when Paradise was lost. So, when she re-enters him again Paradise will be regained." More than physical creation or the biblical myth *per se*, one must think of this scene as a reference to the more symbolic union of opposites as advocated by Carl Gustav Jung: a union of psychic principles, made up of *anima* and *animus*. The Swiss psychiatrist perceived women as an inspiration for men: "[they] can show him that which his own less personally accented feeling would never have discovered" (1982, 87). According to Jung, women can also be a source of information for which men have no eye. For instance, Hedwig grooms and trains Tommy. Jung claims that man also possesses an ingrained feminine side to him: "Thus the whole nature of man presupposes woman, both physically and spiritually" (1982, 88). Due to cultural repression, men usually hide their feminine side, projecting it instead into a female companion, a wife, who is the last of a long line of women forming the male collective unconscious (beginning with the mother). This feminine principle in man (called *anima*) is based on the unconscious, and naturally opposed to the conscious behavior men adopt in society (which Jung terms *persona*), lest they should be ostracized.

Whereas the *anima* is a “personality” (Jung 1982, 97), the *persona* is like a “mask,” a second skin, to avoid criticism. Without this conformity, men would fall into neurosis, but in art all excesses are permitted.

Art is creation and all artists are somewhat androgynous, for in them the male and female principles are more balanced than in other people. Donald McKinnon, in trying to establish what makes a person creative, observes that “creative males give more expression to the feminine side of their nature than do less creative men,” (1962, 16) which translates into, among other things, “openness of feelings and emotions, a sensitive intellect and understanding self-awareness” (McKinnon 1962, 16).<sup>13</sup> They are, therefore, in tune with the more feminine traits of their *anima*. A similar contention is made by the psychologist and professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, for whom

a psychologically androgynous person in effect doubles his or her repertoire of responses and can interact with the world in terms of a much richer and varied spectrum of opportunities. It is not surprising that creative individuals are more likely to have not only the strengths of their own gender but those of the other one, too” (1997, 71).<sup>14</sup>

The trio of rockers Lou Reed,<sup>15</sup> Iggy Pop,<sup>16</sup> and David Bowie<sup>17</sup>—whom Hedwig indicates as her childhood idols and refers to as “the crypto, homo rockers” who “left a deep impression on her [adult self]”—are mentioned throughout the film and appear in photographs and other visual media. Plato’s myth of creation finds its natural artistic correlate in glam rock, with its excessive and provocative attitude on stage, as well as the performative cult of spectacle, theatricality, carefree playfulness, camp style and dandyism, which include an overtly androgynous look composed of heavy make-up, platform heels and above-the-knee boots, glittering and tight clothes, generally flamboyant, tailor-made costumes, etc. Alwyn W. Turner claims: “The playing with sexuality was deliberately provocative” (2013, 13) and many of the rockers were, indeed, gay or bisexual. Glam rock performances are, in a way, a masquerade, because there was always an emphasis on staging and style; as such, they

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<sup>13</sup> To these traits, Ronit Kark adds kindness and empathy (1) as was generally perceived in the study of psychological androgyny in the 1970.

<sup>14</sup> Psychological androgyny is defined by the author as “a person’s ability to be at the same time aggressive and nurturant, sensitive and stern, domineering, and submissive, regardless of gender” (1997, 71).

<sup>15</sup> Lou Reed was the author of the famous song “Walk on the Wild Side.” Hedwig sings a small portion of it during a remembrance of his childhood in East Berlin.

<sup>16</sup> Iggy Pop is nicknamed the “Godfather of punk” and is known for his bare torso performances, which is the inspiration for the final appearance of Tommy Gnosis in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

<sup>17</sup> Bowie’s alter ego at the beginning of the 1970s, Ziggy Stardust, remains to this day the most iconic figure in glam rock.

correspond to an artistic second skin. In fact, not only does the term “glam” derive from glamour, but the lead singers would also create characters or roles to try out in a public arena (Turner 2013, 12).

Glam rock is a good setting for the approach to creation from an artistic standpoint.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* becomes not only an opus about creation in general (the myth of origins and love), but a film about the myth of the author and its power as a demiurge. The film grows into an allegory of art and spectacle, where the love for an alleged better half that would complete the human being turns into the love of the artist for their art and the longing for recognition. As a creator, the artist is whole, because he or she is endowed with both the female and masculine inner principles that make for the best art. Hedwig, empowered as female through the full use of her *anima* faculties, is also empowered as an artist. In the fifth song of the film, which is staged as an integrated musical, where the characters naturally slip into each song as a derivation from a real everyday-life situation, Hedwig admits this masquerade: “I put on some make-up” [...]. “Suddenly I’m this rock pop star of stage and screen and I ain’t never coming back.” Re-inventing herself with an artistic identity is the solution to real-life problems. This entire song is an allegorical representation of spectacle. The different wigs she wears in this musical piece, together with the motif of show business, become an alternative form of subverted *persona*-lization, because what she is revealing is her *anima* and not her ego (*persona* in Jung’s nomenclature). Itzhak enters, dressed in an apron with breasts, and offers Hedwig another wig on a platter. It is presumably the latter’s birthday, and the band shows up, playing first outside her trailer and then stepping inside it. The number is filled with metaphorical allusions to screens, which reinforces the show business motif: windows, through which some band members are seen playing; mirrors, in which Hedwig, wearing several of the wigs, is reflected; and an imitation of a karaoke screen. Eventually, the side of the trailer collapses and the vehicle transforms into a stage where the whole band is seen performing, this time in white clothes representing a positive mirror-image of their decadent life on the road playing in restaurant gigs at the nearly bankrupt food chain Bilgewater Inn.

The importance of spectacle is clearly conveyed during what, for the protagonist, is her moment of recognition, and takes place, as does most of the film, on stage. Right before being

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<sup>18</sup> Although most of the songs in the film, as well as the looks of some of the band members, belong to punk rock, glam rock is the presiding creative influence and the dress and behavioral code to which the Hedwig character herself adheres. The commercial peak of glam rock dates only from June 1972 to December 1974 but influenced rock style for decades after that.

flooded by mental images of her past and all the people that had left an “impression” on her (father, mother, Luther, Tommy), interspersed with musical and technological mayhem going on during the performance, she sings:

Inside I'm hollowed out  
 outside a paper shroud.  
 And all the rest's illusion.  
 That there's a will and a soul  
 that we can wrest control  
 from chaos and confusion.

The illusion here is not that she is hollow, but the very opposite: she is endowed with an ego or *persona* and, furthermore, a soul (*anima*). Hedwig thought of herself as a woman throughout the film. This symbolic wholeness is, nevertheless, flawed, because it primarily operates at a social level. One must go inwards, into the core of human psyche, where, according to Jung, the unconscious resides and where the true femininity is located. Symbolically, the moment when Hedwig rips her female garments from her body—her “mask” as it were; *she* becomes an *it*. The film points us towards what Jung had termed “the *union of opposites through the middle path*” (Jung 1982, 106), which he deemed unrealizable in Western culture, at least until 1953, when he came up with the concepts of soul and ego, i.e., the social outward “*persona*” and the inward unconscious thrust he called “soul.” Indeed, when Hedwig disrobes herself, taking off the wig and the fake breasts, he-she assumes itself as the true androgyne: a fusion of male and female without disguises contained in a rather asexual-looking body, very much like the Ancient Greek statuary in its late Hellenist period, reputed for its beauty and perfection. Hedwig is no longer an aberration, and he-she stands no longer at a divide. He-she is content with the male physical body he-she has; his-her femininity lays elsewhere.

The very last song of the film strikes an altogether different chord. The scene opens on a close-up of Hedwig's forehead, upon which we can clearly see a silver cross, the sign of knowledge (imparted to Tommy), but also the mark of a newly acquired synthesis. The band is dressed in white and Hedwig, in bare torso and shorts, sings:

Breathe.  
 Feel.  
 Love.



Give.  
 Free.  
 From your heart to your brain.  
 Know that you're whole.  
 And you're shining like the brightest star.

He-she hands the wig to Itzhak in a symbolic transmission of outwardly feminine power, recognizing (and accepting) his-her former lover's duality, whose hand he-she had previously touched in a symbolic communion. He-she sings joyfully, supported by the entire audience and declares himself-herself, proudly, a misfit: "All the misfits and the losers / well you all know you're rock 'n' rollers." But of all the musical artists, he-she pays special tribute to the female ones: Patti, Tina, Yoko, Aretha, Nona, and Nico. Last but not least, himself-herself: "and me." He-she ranks his-her nature alongside all the other female artists in recognition of his artistic female side. Finally, in the very last scene of the film, he is seen standing naked, back to the camera, on a New York street alley at night. The camera passes by his hip in a close-up before tilting to frame the whole street where he walks bare, as if reborn. We distinctly see a revamped tattoo: instead of two round creatures, separated into halves, but complementary, now we perceive a perfect sphere with one pair of eyes, one mouth and one nose. In short: the round perfection and the circle of infinity.

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