

OUT OF THE BLUE, by Dennis Hopper

Jade Penancier

Cebe and the Identity Construction 'Do It Yourself' in Dennis Hopper's *Out of the Blue* (1980)

1. Cebe and the Punk D.I.Y

Before being a kind of tutorial abounding on the Internet, the concept of D.I.Y (the acronym for "Do It Yourself") is a key component of the punk subculture. What first stroke me in *Out of the Blue* is the strength with which Cebe (interpreted by Linda Manz) seizes the DIY practice through her punk aspirations. Besides her homemade Elvis jean jacket and her hand poked tattoos, Hopper shows her struggling to build her whole personality at home, with what's to hand. All the illustrations of her DIY initiatives make her story all at once touching, hilarious, and heartbreaking. Throughout the sixteen years old's perspective, the director shows the chaotic path through self-construction in an adult world where innocence is dead, lacking of any reliable or inspiring adult models, whether feminine or masculine. Cebe is left on her own with some cigarettes, a drum, a teddy bear, and a couple of Elvis Presley's records.

Indeed, Cebe's hearts and ears seem to belong to Elvis Presley, whom she mourns and admires as much as punk icons like Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten. This contradictory double passion for old rockabilly and for punk rock translate her two-sided personality. On the one side, her obsession for Elvis' sad songs stands for Cebe's inner deep vulnerability: beneath her tough punkette style, she remains a child

struggling with the earlier traumas of her father's car crash and sexual abuse. On the other side, to survive Cebe embraces a punk identity as a way to "*subvert normality*" (the motto she repeats all throughout the movie). In that sense, the movie is a perfect precursory illustration of Virginie Despentes' discourse on the punk subculture in *King Kong Theory* (2006). Just like in Despentes's semi-autobiographical work, *Out of the Blue* pictures the punk spirit as a way out of compulsory codes of femininity. To quote Despentes, "*Punk rock is an exercise of breaking up established norms, especially the ones concerning genders. At least because it moves away from standards of physical beauty. [...] Being a punk girl necessarily implies to reinvent femininity*" (1). For the French writer, her immersion in the punk milieu in her teenage years enabled her to grow outside of the "girly box", and escape from codes of femininity she rejected.

Cebe embodies the rebel punk disruption conventional femininity. The scenes shot in Vancouver where she fearlessly hitchhikes on her own illustrate the subversive essence of the punk culture. For example, the improvised concert hall becomes a place where people break down many boundaries: between concert and party, between performers and spectators, and, finally, between masculine and feminine genders. As a result, the scene showing Cebe immersed in this emancipatory environment is one of the only depiction of the young girl's authentic enthusiasm and freedom of expression.

2. Cebe Towards Agency: Exploring Unruly Spectatorship

Cebe is also the perfect representation of what I call an unruly spectator: instead of simply watching performances, she becomes an active character by attending and directly taking part in various artistic

performances. While she is permanently infantilized or molested in the various social circles she evolves in, she manages to get agency becoming an unruly spectator. In two scenes in particular, Cebe is an unruly spectator because she crosses the line between audience and performers:

1/ During the punk concert earlier mentioned, she takes advantage of the weak barrier between the musicians and the public to follow the drummer of the band in the backstage. The musician finally lets her jump on the stage and play the end of his riff. This scene clearly subverts the stereotype of the teenage fan girl, since Cebe is taking up the challenge to show her DIY music skills.

2/ The other scene of unruly spectatorship is one of my favorites, and happens at the movie theater. It constitutes a sort of *mise en abîme*, as we see Cebe and her two friends going to the movie theater for the screening of a classic Hollywood romance. Instead of passively watching the movie, the three girls make fun of the mushy love scenes depicted on the screen while playing with pop corn and smoking inside the cinema room. This disrespectful behaviour at the movies stands for a larger tendency of the girls (especially Cebe) to reject heteronormative norms shown in mainstream cultural products.

3. Cebe Becoming the King, or Masculinity D.I.Y

The last crucial aspect to mention in Cebe's DIY identity construction is her relation to transvestism and gender costumes. In the movie, costumes and clothing play a key role in the complex construction of Cebe's gender identity. Hence, the question of masculine and feminine cross-dressing is central to the movie's treatment of social constructions of gender identities. Indeed, the movie starts and ends

with Cebe dressed up as someone else; she takes on a series of costumes including the clown, the lolitesque baby girl, and Elvis Presley.

In the opening scene, we see Cebe and her father Don on the front seat of the truck before the road accident. At this moment, Cebe is dressed up as a burlesque clown—the script does not tell why—hiding her facial features to the point she appears genderless. I read this first gender costume as the gender indeterminacy of childhood, when one does not (always) consciously feels the social pressure of gender stereotypes.

Cebe takes her second gender costume the two times she is reunited with her father (in the prison's visiting room and at his welcome home party). These two scenes are the only ones in which she is conventionally dressed as a girl. At the occasion of these two encounters, Cebe's mother literally "dresses her up" as a girl, with a whole feminine paraphernalia of lace and ribbons. Such a girlish masquerade makes sense at the end of the movie, with the discovery of Don's incestuous desire for his daughter. Hence, Kathy, the mother, supports the patriarchal rule of the family dressing her daughter as a Lolita to satisfy the father's sexual fantasy.

In this context, Cebe unsurprisingly display a tomboy attitude, and ultimately transvestite herself at least for two main reasons. First, Cebe's everyday life tomboy dressing style signifies the latent absence of the father, allowing her not to be a/his girl. The adoption of features conventionally identified as masculine is her way to escape from the feminine paraphernalia imposed by the mother, in reality suggesting her acceptance—or at least her denial—of the father's unacceptable desires. In other words, Cebe's everyday performance of masculinity is a way to forget she was her father's fantasy.

The second reason needs a further analysis of the two last family scenes, both showing Cebe enclosed in her room while her parents are vehemently arguing downstairs. During the first one, she puts on a white night gown and applies red lipstick, as if she was finally trying to cope with her family's and society's "feminine demand". The night after, when she guesses her father's intention to "offer" her to his partner in crime Charlie, she goes for the opposite costume. The movie illustrates with a disarming accuracy the young girl's attempt of DIY drag (K)ing. When Don and his partner in crime Charlie break in her room and catch her during the cross-dressing process, the latter exclaims "She's a dyke!", drawing a connection between her appearance and her supposed homosexuality—which, as a reminder, we barely know anything about in the movie. Charlie's remark mimics the heteronormative society's prejudices, automatically associating one's practice of cross-dressing with their sexual orientation. Yet, Cebe's final cross-dressing goes much further: it is the consequence of her distress and the struggle she undergoes in her self-construction process. As her father, or the chief masculine figure in her life, is in reality a source of trauma, she has no other choice than re-appropriating this harmful source of masculinity. Quite expectedly, she chooses to become the King, the embodiment of perfect and unreachable masculinity. On the symbolical level, as the rock star is already dead, the cross-dressing announces like an omen the fatal outcome Cebe chooses in the end of the movie.

The final scenes are manifestly puzzling and bleak, because they compile depictions of incest, sexual abuse, parricide, and finally suicide. Yet, I would like to end the article with a highlight on Cebe's agency. Until the very end, the movie depicts her as a truly active agent of her existence. Rather than a failure, I would like to interpret

her choice for death as the climactic and flagrant proof Cebe is unable to grow up "doing it herself". The DIY identity construction reaches its limits when we realize from her perspective the world she evolves kills any form of innocence. The final scenes of the movie perform a reversal of the Oedipal myth, in which Cebe-as-The-King also implicitly dresses up as Oedipus Rex, ready to kill the patriarchal figure. Her penultimate disguise also reminds me of the Little Red Riding Hood. The still frame shows her sitting on her bed in a pristine white dress, looking down at her father with her two legs wide apart. While he tries one last time to abuse her, she compels him to see and smell the most inner part of her body, remembering the Wolf dressed at the grandma of the fairytale when he asks the young girl to come closer to see her better. This time, Cebe is both the victim and the Wolf, with the source of evil kneeling next to her bed, too drunk to escape from her revenge. The symbolical rewriting reached its climax when the bed sheets turn red from the dead father's blood, both symbolizing the passage from childhood to adolescence (with the periods) and from adolescence to adulthood (with the crack of the vaginal membrane). The final revelation indicates Don's awful behaviour stole these two life stages from his child.

Jumping inside the dilapidated truck with her mother to make it explode, Cebe is still punk, perfectly echoing Neil Young's emblematic song of the soundtrack "It is better to burn out than it is to rust".

(1) This is the French original version of this quotation: "*Le punk-rock est un exercice d'éclatement des codes établis, notamment concernant les genres. Ne serait-ce que parce qu'on s'éloigne, physiquement, des critères de beauté classique. [...] Être keupone, c'est forcément*

réinventer la féminité". Desportes, Virginie. 2006. *King Kong théorie*.
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