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‘Neither male or female, just Falete’: Resistance and queerness on Spanish TV screens

ABSTRACT

Spanish copla singer Falete is best known for his frequent presence on TV shows, which receive record ratings, and also for the jokes made regarding his appearance. Confronted with normative questions regarding gender and sexuality, Falete’s successful TV career challenges not only binary conceptions of gender but also how we think about TV spectatorship. We argue that liminal spaces, such as the one that Falete inhabits on TV, are useful for unveiling how audiences develop plural and complex forms of identifying with TV stars. Watching Falete on TV, therefore, challenges theories of gender that reify processes of identity formation and identification. In this article, we highlight Falete’s engagement with queer strategies of resistance, such as humour, reappropriation and hypervisibility to resist society’s impulse to name and fix normative identities, but also to gain the audience’s attention and sympathy.

KEYWORDS

Falete
TV spectatorship
queer studies
reception
audience
star

INTRODUCTION

At the crossroads between film studies, visual culture and feminist theory, discussions on how spectators look at and experience cultural products, such as movies, music videos, TV shows and media stars' performance, among others, have focused on debates regarding the gendered gaze. In this context, Laura Mulvey's seminal work (1999) has been key in provoking debate on how we experience cultural products by introducing gender analysis together with reflections on the identification process. Building on Mulvey's work, Jackie Stacey has observed:

Who looks and who is looked at are no neutral phenomena, but rather are cultural practices involving power relations. It has long been recognised that men and women in this culture have a different relationship to the division of *looking* and *being looked at*.

(1994: 7, emphasis in original)

Acknowledging the relevance of the gendered ways in which we look at cultural products and public individuals, we would like consider how this phenomenon plays out in relation to those who are difficult to classify in terms of gender and sexuality. More specifically, we discuss gender trouble within the reception of popular culture, which is often emotional, expressive and embodied, and of course feminized – in contrast to elite culture, which is often understood as distant, intellectualized and mostly male (Bourdieu 1998). Our analysis, deeply rooted in popular culture, analyses the impact of the queer Spanish artist Faletto on TV music audiences. As we discuss later on, the sort of gaze that is involved in the experience of watching Faletto on TV challenges both the gendered perception of who is *looking at* and who is *looked at*. In this sense, the framework that we deploy dialogues with Kaja Silverman's work, who, following Lacanian psychoanalysis, argues that the experience of watching cultural products is a phenomenon closer to the effect of watching yourself on a mirror or a screen (Silverman 1992). In this sense, identifications move back and forth between the spectator that observes, and the subject – in this case, the TV star – that desires to be watched. Watching Faletto on TV is therefore a multisensorial experience. Consequently, our task should not focus on merely analysing images, representations or texts – for example, his lyrics and scripts – but should rather unpack complex experiences, such as watching TV, and the gender trouble involved in such acts of spectatorship.

Our starting point questions the unidirectional understanding of the gendered gaze. To do so, we follow Stacey and Silverman's work by reiterating that identifications are multiple and do not seamlessly map onto the categories of gender, class and sexuality. We consider how Faletto, a nationally known queer figure, becomes a success in Spanish media, and why he has achieved record ratings since the 2000s until the present. We ask: Why is someone largely defined as a sexual outlaw accepted by Spain's mainstream audience? Also, why does this particular figure's gender trouble not necessarily alter hegemonic gender norms? Rather than framing Faletto as a funny TV freak, we highlight that humour and popular culture are possible spaces that gender outlaws can inhabit, in addition to being sources of pleasure for mainstream audiences. We argue that public audiences can re-elaborate contents presented

via Falete's music and his participation on TV shows through multiple complex identifications that demonstrate the joy sparked in the experience of watching him.

This text is organized in a number of sections. First, we briefly introduce the artist Falete to international readers not familiar with his work. Then we discuss laughter by posing the question: Are we laughing *at* or *with* Falete? The use of humour, resistance strategies and the displacement of negative remarks. Later, we discuss the audience's identification and Falete's success. Finally, we offer some preliminary conclusions.

1. Records: *Amar duele* (Love Hurts) 2004, *Putamenteira* (Fucking Lie) 2006, *Coplas que nos han matao* (Coplas that Killed Us) 2007, *¿Quién te crees tú?* (Who do You Think You Are?) 2008, *Sin censura* (Uncensored) 2012.

FALETE, THE COPLA SINGER BEST KNOWN AS A TV STAR

Falete, or Rafael Ojeda Rojas as is shown on his ID, is a copla and flamenco singer born in Sevilla in 1978. Linked to a long saga of flamenco singers, he has published five records,¹ and his work is intertwined with famous female flamenco singers such as Lola Flores, Rocío Jurado and Isabel Pantoja. It is relevant to mention that flamenco is a musical genre that occupies a traditional realm of artistic practice and consumption in Spain. Unlike in other artistic environments, within the flamenco scene there are only a few artists who have dared to come out of the closet. Artists such as Mayte Martín, Miguel Poveda and Falete speak openly about their non-normative sexuality, a disclosure that impacts their careers.



Figure 1: El Gato Verde Records. Photo by Luis Castilla de Sevilla.

2. *Splash! Famosos al agua (Splash! Celebrities in the water)*, Programme on Antena 3, televised on 4 March 2012.
3. See: 'El estreno de 'Splash' arrasa con más de 4,4 millones de espectadores' ('*Splash*' premieres with more than 4.4 million viewers), https://www.antena3.com/objetivotv/analisis/estreno-splash-arrasamas-millones-espectadores_20130305578fe004beb2898948fc6b1.html.
4. See: *El 'Ven a cenar Gourmet'* (10.9%) de Cuatro devora al 'Scoop' (5.5%) de la Sexta ('Come dine Gourmet' (10.9%) on Cuatro devours 'Scoop' (5.5%) on la Sexta, http://vertele.eldiario.es/audiencias-canales/analisis-espana/audiencias-martes18diciembre-venacenaconmigo-gourmetedition-cuatro-falete_0_2077892193.html).

In addition to performing in live concerts and through different media outlets, Falete is often invited to participate in TV programmes that show famous people doing daily life tasks, such as cooking, driving, dancing, etc. In these programmes, Falete receives record ratings. For example, in 2013, Falete participated in *Splash!*² (March–April 2013) – a show in which famous people jump into a pool – which claims an impressive 41.4 per cent screen share and has received up to 3279 comments per minute on Twitter, according to Antena 3 Channel.³ More recently, Falete participated in a show on Cuatro (Channel 4) called *Ven a cenar: TV Gourmet Edition (Come Dine With Me: TV Gourmet Edition 2018–2019)*, in which famous individuals participate in a cooking competition. With a 10.9 per cent screen share,⁴ the programme's second-best rating yet, Falete's appearance coincided with his winning of the cooking contest and his subsequent donation of the corresponding prize to a women's breast cancer organization.

Falete's television presence is very common, to the point that he humorously describes his overexposure on media by stating on 18 July 2014 that 'some artists have a hard time trying to be on TV. For me, the difficult part is not to be on TV' (*Comedy Club 2011–2017*). As it has been said before, his participation comes with record audience rates, whether he wins or loses the TV competitions. In fact, his all-time highest rating was received in conjunction with a show, *Splash!*, in which he lost.

WHAT ARE WE LAUGHING AT?

Typically, most televised interviews with Falete focus on his sexual identity, showing a societal need to fix people's identity, and the difficulties that arise when dealing with those individuals that occupy in-between categories or liminal spaces. Victor Turner used the concept of liminality to identify the 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (1969: 95). In this sense, liminal personae are inclined to elude or slip through networks of classifications that conventionally function in society, in which there is a clear proximity between liminality and queerness. Falete most often confronts the question of 'Are you male or female?' with 'I am neither male or female. I am Falete' (see the interview on the Miami-based TV programme *Esta Noche Tu Night*, aired 28 June 2011 [*Tonight, your night 2008–present*]). Typically, Falete offers an answer that presents his gender expression and sexual orientation as unique, avoiding general definitions. By doing so, he is openly confronting the binary impulse to name and fix his departure from normative identities. Even when he is offered a trans, gay or lesbian identification, he chooses *maricón* (faggot) and other male pronouns that counter his extreme female appearance. In an interview with Bertin Osborne in *Mi casa es la tuya (My Home is Your Home 2016–present)*, aired on the Telecinco Channel on 22 January 2018, Falete spoke about his childhood and coming out, stating that '[The word] gay sounds like a diet. In my home, we say faggot'. Falete linked his openness with his success and popularity with Spanish audiences, stating, 'Often success comes when you express what you are and how you feel. Anyway, what's difference?' (Interview with Angie Calero published in *ABC 2017*).

As discussed, in addition to his musical success, Falete is best known for his participation on TV programmes and for the jokes made about him. On 2014 in a stand-up comedy show, he proclaimed, 'I am a flamenco and copla singer. In the last few years, I probably am the person who has most often been the

subject of jokes and parodies'. Interestingly, although jokes regarding Falete's sexuality are common on TV (e.g. 'The day Falete came out of the closet, his mother could fill it with all her winter clothing, two bed covers, the ironing board [...] or 'Falete has tried all diets, but all at the same time'), the majority of jokes focus on his fatness rather than his female appearance. In doing so, audiences are displacing the insult to a different but also sexist terrain, the fat body, which is another queer embodiment (Levy-Navarro 2009). By reclaiming his femininity, which is extremely visible, and affirming openly his queerness, Falete also participates in the displacement of jokes, saying 'You are more dangerous than Falete in an all-you-can-eat buffet' (Comedy Club Show, aired 18 July 2014).

Another realm for the jokes and remarks made at Falete's expense focuses on his relationships with men. For example, his ex-boyfriend said on TV, 'Falete puts a spell on me, no matter if he is straight or gay'. Following our interest in audience reception, the question of who is laughing at Falete's TV performances is relevant. It would be easy to say, reacting to the many sexist and homophobic remarks, that people are laughing at Falete. But perhaps the answer to this question is more complex. When he tells 'Falete jokes', he is actively refusing to become a victim of sexism or homophobia, among other sources of discrimination. In a relevant interview with Angie Calero (2017), Falete stated:

I have laughed so hard at those jokes. I can laugh about myself. Everything that is said and done with respect does not have to be bad or offensive. I want you to laugh with me, but not at me, because I will kill you [...]! I can laugh at myself. You can laugh about my stuff, my nonsense, my jokes, but not at me.

Therefore, we argue that Falete is not the victim of an industry that is making show business out of his life. His awareness and use of humour shows a queer subject that has agency over his media exposure. For example, he stated in a stand-up show, 'You cannot imagine how difficult is to be Falete. Yes, that Falete, the one in Falete's jokes' (Comedy Club Show, aired 18 July 2014). There is nothing naive in embodying Falete's public persona and telling Falete's jokes on Spanish TV. We argue that by using intentional strategies to resist discrimination, he gains the audience's attention and respect.

In addition, by reappropriating fat-shaming and other negative remarks Falete takes the opportunity to answer his critics with the empowerment provided by his hypervisibility and flamboyant attitude. It is impossible not to acknowledge his female appearance: high heels, dresses, hairstyle, jewellery, long nails and cleavage. His feminine appearance would lead many to think that perhaps Falete is a transgender woman, an impersonator or a drag queen. Instead, the star uses male pronouns and embodies a strong persona that engages and reclaims derogatory terms such as faggot, while also recounting his experience of coming out to his mother, who supported his sexual orientation at age 14.

Another important source of displacement is age. Let us take for example the joke 'What time is it ma'am? I answered: Me, ma'am? I am too young for that!', told by Falete himself at the *Comedy Club Show* (aired 18 July 2014). In this joke, Falete acknowledged not only his intentional femininity but also how others perceive him, embodying a lady-like persona and questioning the direct identification with middle-age women, or *señoras*. Following Judith

Butler's work, Falete's embodiment highlights how femininity, but also masculinity, is not natural, but rather performative (1990). *Señoras* often are associated with respectability, harmlessness and modesty. However, *señoras* are also between the asexual and the hypersexual. So, by identifying with *flamencas* and *señoras*, Falete is choosing strong femininities as role models. This resonates with Ulrika Dalh (Volcano and Dalh 2008) and Itziar Ziga's work (2009), and is also linked to transvestites' femininity. Following Butler (1990), one can argue that these two identities, *señoras* and *flamencas*, clearly have a performative character. Drawing on Jo Labanyi's work (1999), one might add that popular audiences identify with the *flamenca* figure as being a female Roma or also a feminine man, the latter being heavily mythologized.

Finally, the disclosure of Falete's disability on *Splash!* has been another source of public attention and an important point of analysis. Falete's use of hypervisibility and humour to address his gender presentation and sexuality often divert the attention away from the reduced mobility of his arm, which he has had since birth. Our gaze has been focused somewhere else, looking at Falete dressed in his own designs and moving gracefully like a flamenco diva.

HAVING TROUBLE WITH IDENTIFICATIONS

Going back to the discussion of audience identifications, we need to confront previous gender analyses, in which the gaze is always male and intends to control women. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger describes the gendered process of watching TV: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at', and in this relationship women turn into objects of the male gaze (Berger 1972: 47). This brings us to a question: When Spanish and international Spanish-speaking audiences are watching Falete, are they seeing Falete as male or female? How do they identify with him? Are they turning him into an object? Do they watch Falete while inserting themselves into a male gaze, thus seeing him through a lens marked by sexism and homophobia? In our analysis, we emphasize how most audiences find joy and pleasure when watching Falete precisely because he is fighting against norms that are at the root of western culture, including a gender binary, compulsory heterosexuality, beauty standards and ableism. While watching Falete on TV, these categories are somehow in crisis (Garber 1997: 16), with humour and hypervisibility being deployed as successful strategies (Horlacher 2009).

Audiences may not be as transgressive in their lives as Falete is in his, but they surely enjoy the entertainment that emerges as he copes with and challenges what is said about him, and of course, as he plays his music. By challenging classifications and overcoming negative remarks, Falete joins a legacy of gender outlaws that have attracted and seduced audiences throughout modern history. Often the success of individuals who can be considered gender outlaws, who are cross-dressing and gender-bending in comedy shows relies on their ability to appeal to mainstream audiences, allowing for a plural identification that enjoys transgression when embodied by someone else. *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993), *Some Like it Hot* (Wilder, 1959), *Mi querida señorita* (de Armiñán, 1971) or *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982) are examples of extremely successful comedies inhabited by queer subjects who inhabit the in-between. In addition, *The RuPaul TV Show* (1996–98, VH1), *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present) or the Spanish programme *Tu Cara Me Suená* (*You look familiar*) (2001–present Channel 3), are just a few of the successful shows in which participants impersonate and perform gender-bending, thus emphasizing

a particular cultural appeal for crossdressing, the suspension of norms and the joy that accompanies the notion of an ‘upside down world’.

CONCLUSION

Watching Falete on TV unveils relevant queer strategies to cope with discrimination, including the appropriation of negative remarks, the hypervisibility of gender expressions and sexuality, and the use of humour. Within these strategies, we can also identify a resistance to be labelled within the gender binary and to essentialize identity. When Falete uses a singular identity (‘I am neither male or female. I am Falete’), he is refusing monosexual classifications while also simultaneously demonstrating that identities are multiple and constructed (Seidman 1996; Butler 1990). Falete not only embodies a queer space in terms of gender, sexuality, disability and fatness; his successful career on TV helps us to understand the process of being a spectator. Through television and other media, representations, values, lifestyles and social meanings are produced. Consequently, it is relevant to discuss how identities are built through the interaction with others, making explicit the power relationships and the social norms.

Resisting the notion of a gendered gaze that only allows audiences to identify with the same gender – and with the same class, race and nationality – Falete is enjoyed by a more diverse audience that connects with the empowerment and agency of flamenco divas and *señoras*. Wondering whether we are laughing at gender trouble or are having fun with it, we engage with the process in which subjectivities are created. As Falete is showing us, these subjectivities and identifications are more fluid, multiple and complex than expected in feminist and film studies literature.

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Using Media for Social Innovation

By Aneta Podkalicka and Ellie Rennie



This book offers a critical roadmap for understanding and researching ‘social innovation media’ – initiatives that look for new solutions to seemingly intractable social problems by combining creativity, media technologies and engaged collectives in their design and implementation. Presenting a number of case studies, including campaigns dealing with young people, Indigenous peoples, human rights and environmental issues, the book takes a close look at the guiding principles, assumptions, goals, practices and outcomes of these experiments, revealing the challenges they face, the components of their innovation and the cultural economy within which they operate.

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