Aquaman: The Eternal Return of the Male Subject

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As if our cishetero patriarchal society lacked hegemonic representations of masculinity, or maybe those who were not abundantly notified simply needed reminding that the male subject exists and prevails. *Aquaman* (2018) is the bulwark that forbids tearing down the gender binary construct. It presents as the healthy carrier of the cis and hetero norm, in retaliation to the current 'overproduction' of heroines and in a historical time in which the push towards subversive representation in superhero media is at its peak.

The titular character of this Warner Bros.-produced film, Aquaman, is half man, half fish. He is the son of Atlanna, queen of Atlantis, who escaped the fate of an arranged marriage ordained by her father and found herself on firm land by the Amnesty Bay lighthouse. The queen falls in love with the lightkeeper, and they soon have a son, Arthur (Aquaman). Followed by Atlantis's army, Atlanna must return home, knowing she will soon be executed for having broken the laws enforced by her father. Arthur stays with his father and as he grows, he discovers his powers thanks to a master from Atlantis who seeks to help him.

Meanwhile in Atlantis, Orm, Arthur's half-brother, takes over the kingdom and wages war on the human world. An old friend of Arthur's, Mera, who was betrothed to the king, joins Arthur and asks him for help to defeat Orm. With the help of Mera and, later Atlanna (who we find survived her fate), Aquaman manages to beat Orm, becoming King of Atlantis in order to reestablish order. Atlanna is reunited with her true love, the lighthouse keeper.

Aquaman is portrayed as the only possible 'true hero' because he adheres to the classic hero construction: merciful and altruistic. For example, in one of the first scenes of the movie, Arthur fights against the supervillain Black Manta (David Kane, Aquaman's historical archenemy) in order to defend humanity from the danger of a nuclear explosion. However, he distances himself from these heroic qualities—and not only because of his superpowers. Aquaman reprises the concept of classical heroism (καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός), and at the same time he is deprived of the emotions characterizing heroes such as Aeneas, Ulysses, Hector, such as compassion and *pietas*.[1] This lack in the contemporary hero's construction mirrors the cultural production of hegemonic masculinity, further intersecting the discursive production that defines true masculinity as the total refusal of the femininity that is considered its opposite. Thus, through this construction, Aquaman is just one among the many 'true' superheroes adhering to the re-productive norms of the cishetero patriarchal system.

Aquaman is the narrated and embodied expression of stereotypical hegemonic masculinity, which aims to portray a single kind of masculinity as desirable. In this sense, female desire is also defined along these terms. It is important to stress how much the desirability of bodies undergoes a coercive flexion that cages the rhizomatic movement[2] of desire: "desire longs to desire,"[3] reducing its creatively queer abilities.

In the bar where he joins his father, Arthur takes selfies with a group of fans, whose burly male leader holds a mobile phone with a pink cover. Arthur amuses himself by posing for the shots

in 'queer poses,' that indeed make light of *his own* masculinity. This representation becomes a caricature because it is depicted in a hyperbolic way. Moreover, this masculinity is totally dependent on the existence of 'lesser' masculinities—Aquaman's clothing exemplifies this. His skinny pants and bared chest unequivocally recall the attire of gay leather subculture. Further, the continuous framing of his wet and mostly unclothed body is a clear reference to the desirability of his constructed body. Using water as an eroticizing element that should mark the difference between the pornographic eroticization of the female body and the non-pornographic one of the male body produces a contradictory representation. This is in line with what Judith Halberstam defines as "prosthetic masculinity" which "has little if anything to do with biological maleness and signifies more often as a technical special effect."[4] In this sense, the attempt of reclaiming a marginal aesthetics has a caricatural effect that undermines heteronormativity, instead of reinforcing its expression. However, this is undermined by the film's larger commitment to hegemonic masculinity.

Arthur's positioning is, in fact, on the side of *otherness*. He is other with regards to humans, because he has superpowers; and he is other with regards to Altantians, because he grew up among humans and presents as such. Howewer, he supports the institutions, applying a kind of justice that manifests itself in the staging of violent repression. Justice, therefore, makes itself known through the use of force, which is not neutral since it is tied to the construction of hegemonic masculinity. In one of the opening scenes, Aquaman faces and kills the gang of pirates supporting Black Manta's siege. Aquaman's 'job' is to fight criminality, but how? By committing other crimes that do not appear as such only because Aquaman is part of that apparatus that is innate in the institutions. His use of violence is thereby legitimized, which in turn legitimizes violence itself.[5] This violence used by Arthur is an expression of the regulative activity typical of bionecropolitical regimes.[6] The representation of a toxic and violent masculinity is the direct result of hegemonic masculinity.

Therefore, if any and all representations of masculinity, in particular heroic masculinity, are constructed through the normative device of heterosexuality, cisgenderism and ability based on the use of force, it is reasonable to assert that masculine representations should be produced that lie outside this device. This may be best done through the uproot and subversion of the heterosexual norm, in order to mine the foundations of masculinity in its inception.

Notes

[1] *Pietas* is the piety and religious devotion found in many classical heroes as a defining virtue.
[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).
[4] Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 3.
[5] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[6] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.