

# Language, Power and “Queering”: Patrick “Kitten” Braden and the Trouble with *Serious*

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Artikkelissa tarkastelen irlantilaisen ohjaajan Neil Jordanin elokuvaa *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005). Tutkin, miten sana *serious* rakentuu hegemonisen maskuliinisuuden ja sen edustaman väkivallan tiivistymäksi, ja miten elokuvan päähenkilö purkaa maskuliinisuuden ideologiaa yhdistämällä kielellisen ilmaisun ja sukupuolen esittämisen vastarinnan strategiaksi. Kuvailen tätä perinteistä sukupuolidiskurssia hajottavaa tekemistä sanalla ”queer”, joka voi toimia sekä verbinä että adjektiivina. Totean, että päähenkilön sukupuolidikotomiaa rikkova, kielen ja tekemisen avulla tapahtuva toisin toistaminen osoittautuu tehokkaaksi tavaksi tehdä vastarintaa. Myös koko elokuvaa voidaan näin ollen tarkastella queer-tekstinä, joka edistää sukupuolen representaatioiden uudistumista.

**Keywords:** power, hegemony, masculinity, queer, language

## 1 Introduction

Neil Jordan’s *Breakfast on Pluto* (released in 2005, based on Patrick McCabe’s novel by the same title) is a road movie featuring a young gender blender, Patrick “Kitten” Braden (played by Cillian Murphy), in search of his lost mother from a small Irish village to London during the politically heated 1970’s.<sup>1</sup> *Breakfast on Pluto*, like several other films by Neil Jordan thematizes transgressions of boundaries. *The Company of Wolves* (Jordan 1984) introduces an imaginary world of metamorphoses – of strange, volatile carnalities and sexualities. *An Interview with a Vampire* (Jordan 1994) expresses the agony of being trapped in time, a liminal state with no boundaries. Jordan’s major success, *The Crying Game* (Jordan 1992), discusses issues of nationality, race, gender and transsexuality, and 13 years later, in *Breakfast on Pluto* the theme of gender blending is developed further. The film, a story of the development of the young gender blender in the swinging 1970’s, is simultaneously a narrative of resistance

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<sup>1</sup> In this text I call the protagonist Kitten and refer to him with the pronoun “he”, although the use of the hybrid form s/he would perhaps be more appropriate. Providing the name Kitten with quotation marks all through would also be arguable to indicate, following Judith Butler (1990), the constructed nature of the gender identity of the character. However, because of reasons of readability, I leave them out after the first mention of the name.

against the regulatory regime of heterosexuality. The protagonist's unconventional way of doing gender is in the film presented as a vehicle of radical calling into question of patriarchal power and male violence.

Kitten is an orphan left on the doorstep of a priest as a baby by his mother. The mother leaves for London and the village priest, father Liam, who is later revealed to be Kitten's father, finds a foster home for his son. Because of his inclination to cross-dressing, Kitten is throughout his childhood and early teens punished by his environment for his ways of questioning the gender dichotomy. After a tragic incident in which a friend of his is killed, he decides to leave the "contentious little village" to look for his real mother, the "Phantom Lady", as he calls her, who has been "swallowed by the largest city in the world", London. Kitten eventually finds his mother, and in the end also a new, unconventionally structured family.

Narration in the film is linear despite a flashback at the beginning, but this linearity is constructed of instable elements. The narrator in the film is Kitten himself, which disconnects the story from the constraints of the ostensible objectivity of third person narration. The narration contains imaginary sections in which a pair of robins comment on the events, it contains stories in a story composed by Patrick himself, and music is often used diegetically as part of the narration. Consequently, the filmic presentation of Patrick' story is as volatile as his gender identity.

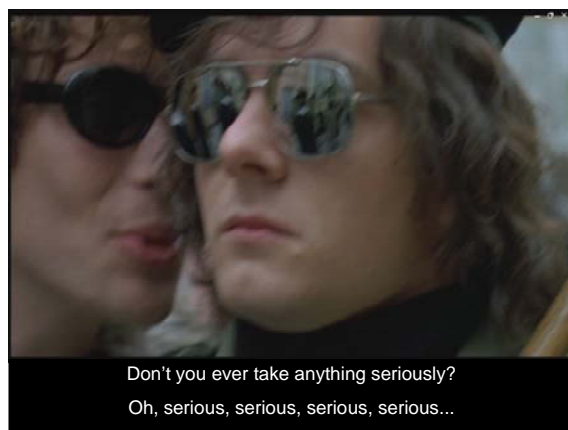
In this paper, my purpose is to examine, leaning on Michel Foucault's (1990) idea of power as always productive of places of resistance, how language in *Breakfast on Pluto* acts as an instrument of power while simultaneously providing for places of redefinition. I focus on one word only – the word *serious* – which is repeated in the film on different occasions, always in one way or another signifying hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and institutionalised violence. *Serious*, in other words, becomes by definition a male concept, the meaning of which is imposed on the gender blending protagonist. However, his fundamental disrespect of the norm of heterosexuality and his constantly transforming, "queer" performance of gender is in the film endowed with the capacity to disintegrate the power relations contained in the definition of the word.

By “queer”, I refer to ways of doing gender that represent, in the words of Donald E. Hall, “a particular threat to systems of classification that assert timelessness for fixity” (2003:14). These expressions embody the capacity of – if not dismantling these systems – at least of levelling criticism on them, thereby “torturing their lines of demarcation, [and] pressuring their easy designations” (Hall 2003: 14). So, the unconventional re-iteration of gender, carried out by Kitten, creates a place from which the justification and the contents of patriarchal power can be questioned. Kitten’s queer performance trades on the blurring of the boundary between the expressions of maleness and femaleness in areas like behaviour, movements, facial expressions, voice, dressing and language use. In this study, language serves as a gateway to the understanding of the subversive power incorporated in the interplay of these intertwined expressions. Due to the scope of the paper, I concentrate on two examples only. In the first one, Kitten suggests a redefinition of *serious* by questioning the central signifier of a group of paramilitaries, their black sunglasses. Second, I discuss the subversive power incorporated in the blurring of the gender dichotomy in connection with queer agency in a scene featuring Kitten doing some “*serious* spring cleaning”.

## **2 Pink sunglasses**

The 1970’s in Ireland was a decade of violence, of shooting and bomb attacks. Violence did not occur only between military groupings, but was spread through the activity of paramilitary organisations as well as common people to the whole of society. Violence is a naturalised constituent of masculinity, and the connection between violence and maleness is constantly made explicit in *Breakfast on Pluto*. The Irish troubles become manifest through violent acts which touch upon the protagonist personally. His childhood friend, Dalek, is blown into pieces by an IRA car bomb, another friend, Irwin, is murdered by his fellow Republican sympathisers. Violence has also a homophobic undertone: Kitten himself is nearly strangled by a gay-hater, and later, he is accused of a bomb attack in a disco when the discrepancy between his body morphology and his female appearance is discovered. When he is arrested, he is brutally beaten up by the police. Through violence, the male characters re-establish their hegemony and assert their power (Connell 1995: 83).

*Serious* is clearly connected with masculinity and violence when Kitten's childhood friend Irwin, after having joined a Republican paramilitary group, marches in the street with his face like stone together with his companions in a military formation (Picture 1). The group displays some obvious characteristics of hard masculinity: besides their disciplined, military-like manner of marching, they also follow a dress code that communicates their belonging to a unified group. In addition to the grey uniforms and black berets, they wear black, easy-rider type sunglasses. An iconic feature of tough masculinity, the black opaque easy-rider sunglasses, becomes Kitten's target. Wearing black, feminine sunglasses, he joins the procession and asks Irwin if he – in case he joined the group – were allowed to wear *pink* sunglasses. When uttered by Kitten, the question highlights the stereotypical imagery associated with soft femininity, the colour pink and moreover, pink sunglasses. By combining the feminine imagery with one of the most prototypical signifiers of hard masculinity and male aggression, the easy-rider sunglasses, and by depriving this symbol of its power by turning it into a parody, Kitten makes use of his place of speaking as a subject in-between, and turns it into a site of contestation of the male discourse of hardness.



**Picture 1.** Masculinisation and contestation of *serious*.

Irwin refutes Kitten's question and replies with a counter question, "Don't you ever take anything *seriously*?", which attaches hi to the discourse of hegemonic masculinity represented by the paramilitary group, and the violence that becomes institutionalized as part of the way of action of the group. R. Connell calls hegemonic masculinity the variety of masculinity that "occupies the hegemonic position in a given culture of

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gender relations” (Connell 2001: 38). Hegemonic masculinity is thus the kind of masculinity that corresponds accurately to the definitions of masculinity central for the preservation of the patriarchal order (Connell 1995: 77). Like gender in general, hegemonic masculinity is not a monolith but a social construction, and as such subject to both corroboration and the effects of corrosive social forces. Through his reciting of *serious*, Irwin not only attaches himself to the Republican group and defines himself in terms of their values, but does even more: first, he consolidates the speech about the group and second, by doing this, he constructs Kitten as an outsider, as someone who shares neither the ideology of the reciter nor the power he gains through his belonging to the hegemonic male communion.

Language plays an essential role in structuring our thoughts, social images, what we intend to express and what we articulate unintentionally. Moreover, as pointed out by Donald E. Hall, language also “provides the base matter of our identities, and the parameters and limitations of our ability to know and act” (Hall 2003: 2). In this role, as the most central element in the construction of social reality, language has become the object of intense theorisation within gender studies during the past decades. Perhaps the best known and most widely debated theory is Judith Butler’s well known performative approach to language and culture, which is based on J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts, and specifically Austin’s (1975: 6) argument that the issuing of the performative utterance is identical to performing the action. Like Austin, also Butler (1993: 225) claims, that the kind of authoritative speech that performatives represent, does, in the uttering, simultaneously “perform a certain action and exercise a binding power”.

So, when Irwin, who associates himself with hegemonic masculinity, defines his gender blending friend Kitten as a person who does not take anything seriously, he not only enunciates a mere neutral statement but a performative invested with the power granted him by the hegemonic status and the ideology which he represents. In so doing he changes the state of affairs and “brings about a new social state” (Kulick 2003: 139). This is an example of how an utterance, a word or a name can, when enunciated by a person with the required authority wield great power (Wilchins 2004: 2). In this case,

the authority does not originate from Irwin himself but from the hegemonic position granted him by his membership in the paramilitary group.

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler (1997: 107) writes about the performative power of the utterance ‘I am a homosexual’ in the context of the US military first, to constitute the speaker as a homosexual and moreover, to constitute the speech as homosexual conduct. In a corresponding manner the utterance “Don’t you ever take anything *seriously*?” cannot be regarded as just a simple question that projects towards a truthful answer. Like the utterance ‘I am a homosexual’, it performs what it describes, i.e. constitutes the speech act as masculine behaviour as defined in the film, and, in addition to that, defines Kitten as not belonging to the category of “those who take things *seriously*”.

Similarly, Kitten’s reaction to Irwin’s critique, “Oh, *serious, serious, serious, serious*”, cannot only be considered empty repetition, a contentless echoing of Irwin’s question, but an elaboration of the different meanings of the word *seriously* by a queer subject. Kitten’s utterance is an example of queered speech, i.e. speech returned to the original reciter in a changed form, re-uttered against the intended meaning and original purpose (Butler 1997: 14). In this way Kitten – whose expression of gender remains highly unintelligible because of the impossibility of pinning it down and naming it – by dismantling the singular meaning given to *seriousness*, a meaning associated with hard, hegemonic masculinity, further calls into question this male culture of violence. Kitten’s power lies in the indescribability of his doing gender, a questioning of masculinity from his place of unnameability. So, if gender itself is treated as language (cf. Wilchins 2004: 35), a system of meanings and symbols governed by rules and regulations, Kitten represents polyphony or an endless deferral of the sign.

Irwin’s interpretation of Kitten’s elaborative reply is an effort to restore the singular meaning of *serious*. His answer, “You will have to, soon enough”, can be regarded as, what Judith Butler (1997) calls “hate speech”, the purpose of which is to harm by producing subordination through language use and by reproducing and consolidating that subordination. The utterance refers directly to aggression; it makes quite explicit

the threat of violence against those who remain outside the hegemonic ideology. However, Irwin’s utterance has already, at the moment of recitation, failed to accomplish what it was meant to do. Kitten exploits the vulnerability of the hateful speech act “to counter the threat” (Butler 1997: 12): his deconstructive reply has already deprived the threat of its illocutionary power and rendered it a mere statement, an item of ritualistic repetition with no power to harm. *Serious*, thus, remains a word signifying the fragmentation attached to it by Kitten, with the consequence, that as the antecedent of Irwin’s utterance, it simultaneously dismantles what it signifies.

### **3 Some *serious* spring cleaning**

Kitten’s linguistic agency turns into concrete action after an accident in which another childhood friend of his, Lawrence, is killed in the detonation of a car-bomb. Instead of canalizing his resistance through individual persons and single speech acts, he now attacks the collective system of institutionalized violence responsible for Lawrence’s death.

Faithful for his strategy of queering, Kitten avoids resorting to a conventional solution and taking up arms, of which he has a whole load secretly hidden by the paramilitaries under his kitchen floor. When Kitten, instead, decides to do some *serious* spring cleaning – with the result that the guns end up at the bottom of the nearby lake – he exploits the “recurrent, eddying, *troublant*” (Sedgwick quoted in Hall 2003: 12) of queer to construct a combination of linguistic and concrete, physical resistance.

First, the word *serious*, established in the film as signifying the very masculine discourse of violence, is now domesticated by associating it with the traditionally female sphere of home through the connection with spring cleaning. By drawing a parallel, at the linguistic level, between this prototypically feminine activity of spring cleaning and the violence of the Irish conflict through the word *serious*, the activists’ craving of power is questioned. The subversive power of Kitten’s way of using *serious* in connection with spring cleaning lies in this ridiculing of hegemonic masculinity,

achieved through the blurring of what we understand as typically feminine and masculine spheres.

Secondly, the linguistic is mixed with concrete action, of actually dumping the guns in the lake. In this delicious scene, the blurring of the stereotypically feminine and the male grows into efficient, concrete resistance. It is, however, noteworthy, that the subject engaged in resistance is unintelligible in the sense that he does not correspond to any story of unified, intelligible femininity or masculinity. He is not in-between but somewhere else, and as such, he represents queer resistance of categorizing, not only in terms of female-male, but also in terms of heterosexual-homosexual. Kitten's expression of gender is, like Carol Queen (2005: 42) writes when describing queer, "all of that but not in a straightforward way". So, when Kitten engages in the typically female chore of spring cleaning – meaning throwing away guns, the ultimate symbols of male power – he does not do it as a woman or not even as a male transvestite, but as a gender-blender.

Throwing away the guns is a powerful comment against violence and simultaneously, taking up of a position of agency. Kitten's agency, however, resists being related to in terms of any binary logic. An act always requires an agent, and it can be assumed that acting against something means acting against a defined target by a definable agent. Kitten's agency, however, can be defined only by his refusal to take up a definable counter-position, and through this refusal, he consequently avoids subscribing to the discourse of violence despite the action he takes. Revenge in the traditional sense of the word through active violence would mean taking up a definable position against the violators, but refusing to become defined by the criteria based on the gender dichotomy which functions as the foundation of the ideology of his opponents, Kitten avoids being included in the discourse of male hegemony and violence. Through his queered agency, Kitten is again constituted in terms of unintelligibility (Butler 1990).



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**Picture 2.** Spring cleaning constructed as a site of resistance.

The spring cleaning scene displays a mixture of images of gender parody. The film makes use of the standard repertoire of gayness based on stereotypical feminine attributes like gestures, a peeping voice, stances and clothing (Dyer 2002: 19, Medhurst 2002: 314–315). Kitten, is filmed wearing a black Michael Jackson like outfit (in itself signifying difference, change and bodily ambiguity) and doing an exaggerated parody of stereotypical feminine body movements when throwing energetically guns into the lake and mumbling away in his thin falsetto voice.

Judith Butler (1990) emphasizes the importance of intelligibility of gender in terms of the heterosexual matrix. In *Breakfast on Pluto*, the protagonist succeeds in making his expression of gender unintelligible up to the point that even when he is found out, the paramilitaries who are about to avenge the disappearance of their guns, give up. This undermines their hegemony and proves the efficiency of Kitten’s strategy of queering.

#### **4 Conclusions**

Although “queer” is generally regarded primarily as a theory of sexuality, it is also a useful tool when making sense of all kinds of expressions of gender difference, of transgressions of boundaries and resistance. Eve Sedgwick’s felicitous description of the nature of queer as a “continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying,

*troublant*” (quoted in Hall 2003: 12) expresses what is most fascinating about queer, its disrespect of essence, stability and even of its resistance to definition.

In this paper, I have shown how a whole ideology can be incorporated in one single word, *serious*, and how this ideology is queered by the protagonist, Patrick “Kitten” Braden, through unconventional expressions of gender. I have shown how language, in this sense, functions as a vehicle of power simultaneously providing for places of resistance for the queer subject. Some critics (Lee 2005; Bradshaw 2006; Soikkeli 2006) have regarded *Breakfast on Pluto* as a reactionary film, in which the representation of transsexuality repeats the familiar popular imagery relying on well known cultural stereotypes. Contrary to them, I find the film a fundamentally queer text with interpretative potential for the problematization of how non-normative expressions of gender are constructed, and perhaps even more interestingly, how these expressions, through different subversive acts can provide for outlets for resistance within the oppressive discourse of hegemonic masculinity so visible in the film. Donald E. Hall (2003: 116) defines queer texts as texts that analyse the oppressive nature of what in society is considered “normal” regarding gender, sexuality and desire. Accordingly, queer texts and their readings are characterized by crossings of boundaries, shattering of categories and constitution of new meanings.

*Breakfast on Pluto*, although accused of a lack of radical redefining potential as regards representations of transsexuality, is part of the policy of reiterating gender differently, with the help of which space is created for new ways of being a human being. Through the story of Kitten, the film invites for new and less hostile or prejudiced attitudes towards people who in their lives cross boundaries, question hierarchies and dismantle power structures. Every sympathetic and constructive representation of difference will eventually, hopefully, lead to less violence and more tolerant attitudes towards our fellow-human beings.

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