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“But are as the Angels which are in Heaven” (Mark 12:25): Reimagining a Gender-Ambiguous Heaven in Dorian Electra’s ADAM & STEVE

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Music video still from ADAM & STEVE, Dorian Electra, 00:01:04,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mViZtUHqDg8>



“But are as the Angels which are in Heaven” (Mark 12:25)

Reimagining a Gender-Ambiguous Heaven in Dorian Electra’s ADAM & STEVE

Keywords

Pop Culture, Theological Anthropology, Queer Readings of Biblical Texts, Dorian Electra, Adam and Steve

Biography

Yannick Schlote studied protestant theology in Berlin und Munich. He is working as an academic assistant at the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Munich (LMU). His research focuses on theological and ethical aspects of digitalisation, specifically on narratives concerning artificial intelligence. Furthermore he is interested in popular culture.

The American singer and songwriter Dorian Electra is a queer¹ phenomenon. Their² dandy appearance – their latest album is called *Flamboyant* (2019) – goes hand in hand with their criticism of toxic masculinity and gender binarism. Their stage name recalls Oscar Wilde’s beautiful villain Dorian Gray and the ancient Greek tragic heroine Electra. Their trademark is the lavish use of synthesisers to lower and thereby androgenise their voice while emphasising its artificial alteration. Displaying the fluidity of gender not by its absence but by mixing traits of masculinity and femininity can be seen as the leitmotif of Dorian Electra’s output.

One of the tracks on *Flamboyant*, “Adam & Steve”, is a gay retelling of the Genesis story.³ It turns on the derogative phrase, “It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam

- 1 I use the term “queer” in a broad sense, referring to everything non heterosexual.
- 2 While in the lyrics Dorian uses attributes such as “guy” and “man”, I follow the use of they/their pronouns in Ben Beaumont-Thomas’s *Guardian* interview with Dorian Electra; see Beaumont-Thomas 2019.
- 3 *Flamboyant* (Dorian Electra, US 2017, self-released)

and Steve”, which is used to imply an irreconcilable disparity between Christianity and gay love, i.e. queerness in general. Mischievously, Dorian gives Adam and Steve a backstory with this video (with its main chorus “And God made me just like Adam and Steve”).⁴ Reclaiming derogatory terms and transforming them into positive narratives is one of the tools marginalised groups rely on. The researcher and activist Gregory Coles interprets this reclaiming of words as a sort of exorcism of language from linguistically embedded oppression.⁵ Strangely, the rite of exorcism marks a crucial point in the ADAM & STEVE video.

The Exorcism (1:55–2:20): In its aesthetics this scene heavily refers to William Friedkin’s 1973 cult classic *THE EXORCIST*. Dorian is shackled to their bed, two priests (here wearing steampunk fashion including gasmasks) bend over them, reciting verses and swinging a thurible. Their intent is obvious: the Latin prefix *ex-* (out) in “exorcism” suggests the extrication of whatever power is hidden underneath the surface (mostly in humans, but also in haunted objects and places). The audience is familiar with this motif, aware that the priests are forcing Dorian’s demon to show itself. And indeed, it does appear: something is reaching out and manifesting from Dorian’s body, and it bends in agony. But instead of a demon’s face, one sees feathery wings. The inner nature of Dorian brought to the surface is not demonic but angelic. By reusing this motif of exorcism, Dorian counters Pentecostal Christians who believe in exorcising homosexuality, thought to be caused by demons.⁶ Instead, Dorian establishes themselves, a queer person, as one of God’s heavenly messengers (paralleled in the lyrics “Say I’m an abomination but I’m God’s creation”).

Heaven (2:21–2:48): With Dorian’s revelation as an angel, the scenery switches to heaven. There, Adam and Steve are kissing – the ultimate sign of God’s approval of their bond. Whilst up until now no other person’s face has been shown – just backs or figures cloaked like the aforementioned priests – this changes in the last heavenly scene. In typical Dorian Electra fashion, two angels pole dance next to each other. Just like Dorian, they transcend gender.

In the Bible, the symbol of heaven as a state of self-revelation occurs in several verses on eschatological anthropology. When Christ is asked by the Sadducees what life after the resurrection at the end of days will be like, he

4 ADAM & STEVE (Dorian Electra and Weston Allen, US 2019).

5 Cf. Coles 2016, 425.

6 For one of many examples, see TearsToJoyMinistries n. d.

replies, “For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven” (Mark 12:25 KJV). And in Galatians 3:28, Paul states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Life in an eschatological perspective defies social conformities and attributions of ethnicity, social status, or sex and gender. These categories lose their defining relevance. But instead of forfeiting vision, Paul states, between now and then, world and heaven, people will gain true vision of what is beneath the surface: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). People’s struggling to see through themselves and other people seems to nurture the urge to find clarity only in unambiguousness. As an alternative, a heavenly perspective indicates that true selves may lie in ambiguity itself. Dorian Electra really is a gain for today’s pop music culture.

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Filmography

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Discography

- Flamboyant* (Dorian Electra, US 2019, self-released).