Melodramas of Subjectivity: James Baldwin, Lyle Ashton Harris, Ming Wong

Damon R. Young

Nos désirs nous sont soufflés—théâtralement et vulgairement: dictés et dérobés
—Anne Garréta

Melodrama is one of the most expansive modes of modern culture and one of the least valued.[1] Associated by definition with popular, as opposed to high, culture, the designation of an artwork as "melodramatic" functions as an aesthetic judgment that situates it outside the realm of the classic, deeming it ephemeral rather than enduring. Where the classic implies an ideal adequation of form to content, "melodramatic" evokes formal and affective excess, an indulgence in sentimentality and/or a perverse embrace of artifice. In melodrama, form puts itself at the service of affect, becoming self-conscious but never quite self-reflexive; for at the same time, melodrama is an inexorably narrative mode, one in which affect is itself enchained to narrative. Melodramatic form is what millennials might call

This essay has benefited from the generous readings and suggestions of Jennifer Nelson, Stephen Best, D.A. Miller, Cole Moore, and Mario Telò. I am grateful to Jack Halberstam and Camille Robcis for an invitation to present an early version at the "Queer Studies: Here, There, and Elsewhere" conference at Reid Hall in Paris.

[1] Melodrama is often approached as a genre—originally, of live theater and more expansively, in the twentieth century, of cinema. So expansively, in fact, that many scholars of melodrama have come to refer to it as a "mode" that operates across many different genres. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) and *On The Wire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987). The discussion of melodrama that follows often more specifically refers to the cinematic genre Brooks (ix) calls "domestic and familial melodrama," following the lead of Thomas Elsaesser in his classic essay (speaking of classics), "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in the Gledhill collection. For the purposes of this essay, melodrama is both a genre and a mode, and I use both terms without dwelling on the distinction. See also John Mercer, *Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

"extra," yet not in a way that would transcend its narrative function in order to critically comment on its medial conditions of possibility. For this reason, melodrama, a specifically modern mode, fails to "accede... to the dignity of modern art."[2]

Not unrelated to this failure, the open secret about melodrama is that it enjoys a marked—if anecdotal—affinity with gay masculinity in particular, naming a genre or mode beloved, though not exclusively, of gay men. In his amusingly titled *How to Be Gay*, David Halperin relates this affinity to the (historical) dismissal of gay desire as unnatural and undignified, a cultural status resonant with melodrama's combination of theatricality and emotional intensity.[3] In this essay, I will argue that cinematic melodrama is indeed a genre that has helped shape queer subjectivity and queer aesthetics in the twentieth century, giving aesthetic (though not often narrative) form to gender-dissident ways of being, feeling, and embodying.[4] Far from being definitionally opposed to the classic, melodrama, in short, is a classic queer genre, a queer form of the classic. Insofar as queerness names a desire that is cause and effect of a schism within the social, it resonates with melodrama as a genre that gives narrative shape to desire's misalignments, its belatedness, unrequitedness, insatiability, and ultimately its ineffability, transposed into an intensity of surface effects, behind which something "remains invisible."[5] Hence the role of *melos* in melodrama, which depends, writes Peter Brooks, on "the desemanticized language of music, its evocation of the 'ineffable,' its tones and registers" in order to signal the limits of a form that becomes hypertrophic in its very futility, its inadequacy to a desire that fails to clarify, like ghee from butter, into articulability.[6] Something in the formal evocation of desire's ineffability must resonate with queers, especially those, as one says, "of a certain generation" who grew up feeling every stirring of desire as a disaster waiting to happen.[7]

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[2] This is how Geneviève Sellier describes the doxa around the French New Wave, as the film movement that consecrated the idea of the film *auteur* and elevated cinema to the status of high art—precisely through its formal innovations that subordinated narrative to a properly, and self-reflexively, formal project. See Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema,* trans. Kristin Ross (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 2.

[3] David Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Or, as Richard Dyer puts it, the combination of "theatricality and authenticity" comprises a "gay sensibility" that "holds together intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity." Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004), 150.

[4] For an inverse (but not incompatible) argument about the homoeroticism of the classical, see Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). On the aesthetic queerness of cinematic melodrama, see also Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[5] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 123.

[6] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.

[7] Whether this means—for men of my generation—the imagined risk of contracting HIV, or more generally, being subjected to homo- or transphobic violence. Halperin locates in this perceived

But there is something else that bears remarking about melodrama's appeal to what Richard Dyer calls a "gay [male] sensibility," namely that it does so primarily through a focus on women protagonists, and female performers.[8] (In *Imitation of Life*, Lana Turner gets top billing, as does Julianne Moore in Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*, etc.) While one of the narratives that bolsters homophobic discourse in France and elsewhere construes homosexuality as a pathology of sameness—the narcissism of a failure to relate, erotically, to difference—melodrama provides a generic occasion for gay men's culturally mandated and culturally reviled (and for that reason often disavowed) identification with women.[9] The fantasmatic identification with women afforded by cinematic melodrama (and its live arts relatives, opera and the Broadway musical) is at once an identification with the fictional protagonist facing the obstacles daily life poses to her fulfilment and with the virtuosic but sometimes precarious performance of the actress who incarnates her.[10] The femininity of both, as Dolores McElroy has observed, is marked by the contradiction between "public success" and "private failure," where the failure in question includes the failure of heterosexuality to successfully set limits on her ambition, circumscribe her desire, or provide a reliable structure for its satisfaction.[11] Melodrama rarely gives narrative form to gay male

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disqualification from a simple pathway to social recognition and advancement the seeds of a gay sensibility: "*homosexuality itself, even as an erotic orientation, even as a specifically sexual subjectivity, consists in a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world,*" *How to Be Gay,* 13, emphasis in the original.

[8] Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," 150.

[9] On the narrative of sexual difference as constitutive of the social (and/because of non-narcissistic "love") in France, see Joan Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). For a repurposing of the same narrative in the elaboration of an ethics of "homo-ness," see Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). The topic of gay men's identification with women— which Halperin grapples with in *How to Be Gay*—is a dangerous one, because it risks repeating a pathologizing discourse that goes back to the 19th century and associates homosexuality with "inversion." I mean "men" and "women" in a non-biologistic sense, as cultural positions that sometimes bolster themselves by making recourse to biological discourse but that also include trans identities, and also nonbinary gender to the extent that the latter can be seen to function in the mode of determinate negation.

[10] On the Broadway musical and gay men, see D.A. Miller, *Place For Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); on the opera diva and gay men, see Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1994). These forms have in common the reliance on music to convey the narrative affect that cannot be expressed by words alone. On gay men's identifications with screen divas, see the contributions by Alexander Doty, Brett Farmer, and Ed O'Neill to *Fabulous! Divas: Part 1*, a special issue of *Camera Obscura*, vol. 22, no. 65 (2007).

[11] This description might pertain either to the fictional protagonist (Bette Davis's Eve in *All About Eve*), or the actress who incarnates her, or both, given that the figure on screen is both at once. The diva has her origins in 19th century opera, and names a "cultural position" marked by "the elaboration

subjectivity—rarely tells stories about gay men—but rather equips it with an affective language via an intense, imaginative and vicarious investment in femininity as a site of domestic and existential struggle, of abjection transfigured into glamor. In this way, melodrama facilitates and invites cross-gendered identifications.

My interest in the queer identifications that make cinematic melodrama so appealing arose while teaching a class on James Baldwin, in which we read his 1976 film-centered memoir, *The Devil Finds Work*.[12] To the surprise of many of the students in the class, the first words in the book are "Joan Crawford," and the most important figure of identification for the young Baldwin discovering the cinema turns out to be another white, female star of melodramas, Bette Davis.[13] At the very beginning of his film-going career, watching the film *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, Baldwin finds himself rapt in the spectacle of Davis's "pop-eyes popping.... [H]ere before me... was a *movie star: white*: and if she was white and a movie star, she was *rich*: and she was *ugly*" (7, emphasis in the original). The chain of colons in this description generates a sequence of affinities that reverses from obvious (movie star, hence white, and rich) to unlikely: she was white, yet "ugly," yet rich. "Ugly" interrupts the seamless alliance of white-rich-movie star, an ugliness the young James associates with a certain intensity, both affective and physiognomic, that characterizes Davis's eyes, which are also seductive and thus introduce, precociously, the first intimations of sexuality to the biographical story. Davis's "pop-eyes" recall, in near-homophony, the "frog-eyes" that James's father attributed to him, meant as an insult for his mother; an insult that, defying patriarchal misogyny, James deflects back to its paternal source: his father "must have been stricken blind" if he couldn't see that his mother was "the most beautiful woman in the world" (7). Frog/pop-eyes, stricken blind; these ocular figures convey, at the outset of Baldwin's text, an Oedipal drama of maternal attachment and paternal rivalry. Such filial dynamics are the very subject of the melodramas for which Davis would become famous. The actress, "ugly," "rich," and "white," serves as conduit in a circuit of familial desire, resentment, and identification that allows the young James to take his subjective bearings in a world full of obstacles to his flourishing.[14]

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and performance of feminine desire that is not dependent upon, and usually makes little or no appeal to masculine desire, or the reciprocation to be found in the heterosexual couple form." Dolores McElroy, "Arias for an Untold Want: The Queer Desire of the Diva Film," in Ron Gregg and Amy Villarejo, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[12] James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Vintage International, 2011 [1976]).

[13] The whiteness of the heroine of cinematic melodrama is a function of Hollywood's history of white supremacy and anti-blackness, but her racial signification can be complex, as Baldwin shows in his discussion of Bette Davis and Sylvia Sidney. On Baldwin's cross-racial identification with Davis, see Jane Gaines, "Green Like Me," in *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago University Press, 2001).

[14] If Davis's presence on the screen makes her a movie star and rich within the terms of a cultural imaginary, Davis was an unusual actress not only because her appearance was at odds with normative standards of Hollywood beauty, but also because she specialized in playing working class characters—a vulgar waitress who dies, in poverty, of consumption in her breakthrough role in *Of Human Bondage* (1934), an out-of-work actress in *Dangerous* (1935), and the girlfriend of an

It is from Davis, and her eyes, that Baldwin learns that what he thought were his "infirmities might be forged into weapons" (8). Baldwin continues that it would be a "long long long long time before I would begin to realize what I myself was doing with my enormous eyes," the hyperbole of "enormous" and multiple repetitions of "long" textually evoking the drive of a sexuality they project into a narrative future (*ibid.*). The eyes that offer a path to subjectivity also metonymize sexuality: James's incipient queer sexuality takes shape, awaiting the deferred moment of its realization, through a circuit of identification that includes both his mother—via his father's insult—and Bette Davis's eyes. The eyes are at once his, his mother's, and Davis's; eyes thus serve as a figure of foundational solidarity between gay men and women, across racial and imagined class difference ("rich" vs. poor), a solidarity mirrored in the formative relationship he narrates with Orilla "Bill" Miller, the white woman who takes him under her wing (and whose nickname is already on the side of gender trouble).

A queer, and gay male, affinity for the melodramatic performance of feminine subjectivity underpins the works of visual art I investigate in this essay, which forms part of a trilogy on queer aesthetics.[15] Melodrama offers, in these works, a set of aesthetic terms for the formalization of subjective experience marked as queer. Subjectivity is at once the mechanism of the works' production—they are self-portraits—and their content; their subject, so to speak, is the fraught and painful process of self-fashioning that subjectivity names, forged here in an identification with a figure of spectacular femininity (the diva) or, as I will argue, with the femininity of performance itself.[16] Like Joan Copjec, I propose to "take seriously the common assumption that melodrama is somehow 'female' specific," though my interest is in the ways these works deterritorialize the gendered referent: reinvesting, reappropriating, and denaturalizing—in other words, queering—it, as Copjec's use of scare quotes around "female" already implies.[17] In so doing, I also draw on Brooks's argument that highlights the historical relation of melodrama to psychoanalysis. Both melodrama, as a mode of fiction, and psychoanalysis, as a therapeutic modality, offer an expressive apparatus to a recognizably modern subject, forged in the crucible of the conjugal family, even as the works I discuss in this essay are just as recognizably postmodernist.

The discussion that follows focuses on works by two visual artists—US photographer Lyle Ashton Harris and Berlin-based Singaporean artist Ming Wong—that I approach as synecdochic of a queer tradition of what Harris calls "performative self-portraits," dating

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incarcerated criminal in *Sing Sing*. Although Baldwin remembers her as "rich," her spectacular embodiment of specifically working-class struggle and her alignment with positions of gendered social marginality may facilitate his identification.

[15] See also Damon R. Young, "Queer Seriousness," *World Picture* 9 (summer 2014), and "Ironies of Web 2.0," *Post-4* 2 (May 2019).

[16] The word diva is declined in the feminine; in his introduction to *Divas*, Alexander Doty advances the idea of her male counterpart, the *divo*—but the unconvincingness of that term is an index of how strongly determined the diva's gender is.

[17] Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman*, 114.

1. Performative self-portraits: Claude Cahun, *Untitled*, 1928.

back at least to Claude Cahun's Surrealist photographs.[18] Harris and Wong's performative self-portraits call attention to moments where the feminized and racialized subject strains at the limits of her endurance, depleted by the impossibility of reconciling the world's contradictory demands—the very subject of melodrama. They depict her at moments of near-collapse or exaltation, where she shines with transcendent intensity at the threshold of dissolution. At the same time, they stage subjectivity as a repetitive practice of studied cultivation and rigorous self-discipline.

In the context of this special issue, I emphasize the way these works create deviant genealogies of cultural attachment and value, producing forms for the endurance of queer and minoritarian life, and replacing "subjective universality" as the basis of aesthetic judgment with subjective overinvestment. Like other works of queer art, these works function not only as self-portraits but as counter-archives, artefacts of minoritarian knowledge that make possible unanticipated kinds of endurance—both of works that might be deemed unserious, and of imaginative modes of self-fashioning and (dis)identification.[19]

[18] And passing, perhaps less queerly, through the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Tracey Moffatt, though the relation between these explicitly queer works and those feminist works is one I hope to discuss in a future essay.

[19] The reference here is to José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of the dynamics of minoritarian identification with majoritarian forms of culture and identity, which he calls disidentification. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University

In this way, they are queer classics and they produce (by citing and restaging) an archive of queer classics. But this is not a romantic or utopian rescue. Even as the works stage counter-hegemonic forms of becoming, they also put on view a world in which desire and identification—thus subjectivity itself—are routed through the commodity system of the culture industry, in which the image's opulence, as a commodity and a fetish, is the very source of its queer appeal. A similar doubleness defines the melodramatic diva: she is at once ordinary and exceptional, a suffering protagonist and a movie star, "rich." Like her, these works are caught within a system whose beyond they evoke through the hypercathexis of its surface effects.

Billie, Boxers, Better Days: Lyle Ashton Harris's "performative self-portraits"

In Lyle Ashton Harris's Polaroid series *Billie, Boxers, Better Days* (2002), the artist appears alternately as Billie Holiday, Josephine Baker, and a boxer, thus alternating between categories of professional bodily performance (singing, dancing, boxing) and their associated gender positions, while drawing attention to the overdetermination of race within each. Amber Musser, in her discussion of *Billie #21* (Fig. 2), observes that rather than revealing anything about Harris or about Holiday, the image depicts a "private reverie."[20] If the eyes are the window to the soul, Harris/Holiday's closed eyes evoke an interior world whose contents are inaccessible but whose affective intensity is transmitted through the surface qualities of the image. For Musser, the image embodies a "sensual excess"—for example in the open mouth that, however, does not speak; what sensuality "exceeds," in Musser's account, is precisely language as a semantic system. Instead, the sensuality ramifies in the textural qualities of the image: "the fur's fuzz,... the low haze in the background," as well as in the glistening, reflective properties of Harris/Holiday's pearls, lips, and teeth. I would add that the gaping mouth—either emitting sound or seeking to incorporate something outside the body, an ambiguity preserved by the image—opens the body onto a blackness that also engulfs the figure from the outside: internal vanishing point meets precarious boundary between figure and ground. Musser writes that the image does not simply depict "Harris performing as Holiday, but [rather] Harris using a citation of Holiday to move toward an *embodiment of hunger*" (15, my italics). Hunger, then, as an abstract but bodily quality, denoting and metonymizing a subjective desire that may be at once specific and general,

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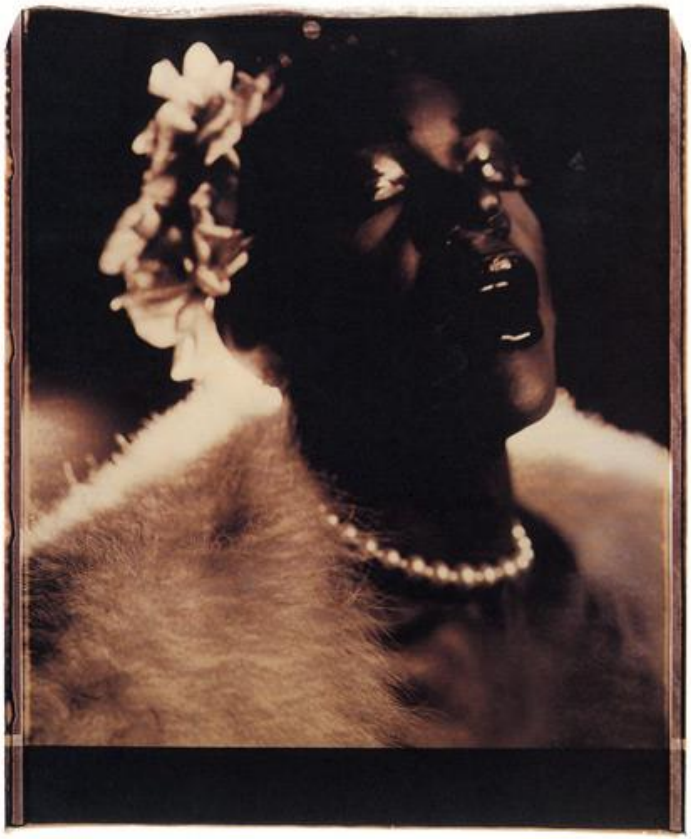
of Minnesota Press, 1999). "Minoritarian" means those living outside of the dominant identity categories of white, heterosexual hegemony. For some self-appointed guardians of a traditional Left, this definition wrongfully elevates identity at the expense of class politics. But the theoretical fantasy of a domain of economic materiality independent of the "merely cultural" tends to bolster the gender and sexual norms whose central role in structuring relations of production and reproduction, for example, it disavows. See Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text* 52/53 (1997), 265-277.

[20] Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 1. For Musser, *Billie #21* is exemplary of what she calls "brown jouissance," a "fleshly mixture of self-production, insatiability, joy, and pain" (5). The discussion that follows (both of Harris and Wong) draws on Musser's conception of brown jouissance, though in slightly different terms.



2. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Billie #21* (2002, Unique Polaroid, 24 x 20).

unites Harris and Holiday or turns them into an assemblage, under the twin signs of "insatiability and vulnerability"—qualities that define the melodramatic diva.

Though it is comprised of an image of Harris in drag, Musser does not read *Billie #21* as camp. She reads it instead as an image of "labor" that concerns not the production of commodities but the "production of selfhood" (13). This is a production that depends on the specific properties of photography as a technology of the imaginary: the image does not stage a confession or revelation of subjective interiority but rather an identification, in the register of the visual, across historical distance. Like melodrama, the Polaroid uses heightened aesthetics to evoke feelings (for Musser, "ecstasy" and "hunger") that exceed language's capacity to symbolize them; its visual qualities synesthetically register what Fred Moten describes as the "suffocated desire and lost object[s]" that can be heard in Billie Holiday's voice.[21] At stake here is a melodramatic self-fashioning, a melodrama of subjectivity. If it sounds far-fetched to call a still image melodramatic, I mean it in several senses—first, in the way the image visually evokes *melos*, the music referenced in the Greek etymology of melodrama. (*Melos* also means "part of a body" or "limb." It thus evokes a fragmentation that will be equally important in the readings that follow.) Second, in that it centers a feminine subjectivity that is at once glamorous and vulnerable, spectacular and tragic, as do the cinematic

[21] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 104; also quoted. in Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 1.

melodramas of the mid-century (the period of Holiday's stardom).[22] Third, the image shares with melodrama its distinction from realism, its heightened use of artifice to arouse an emotional response. In these ways, Harris produces an image of melodrama in the throwaway or degraded media form of the Polaroid, albeit without melodrama's narrative engine. In the place of any time-based narrative, the only narrative content of this melodrama is the self, distilled into a punctual image of a nevertheless complex temporality, both boldly facing the future (confronting the future face-forward, as it were) and mourning the losses and injuries of the past, an assemblage-self that is neither Harris nor Holliday but both at once, in a shared incarnation of hunger, affective intensity, performative virtuosity, glamor, and wounded retrospection. This assemblage is produced through an incorporation of the racialized feminine not in the mode of camp or postmodern citation (a "representation of a representation," as Kaja Silverman says of Cindy Sherman's works) but as an affectively saturated relation to the gaze in a society of the spectacle.[23]

In the artist's own description of the series, he emphasizes the work's critical function as a staging of the "ambivalent negrophilia" that permeates European modernism.[24] Racial difference enters the visual field in the mode of the stereotype, a word whose seeming neutrality conceals its perverse, erotic charge.[25] *Josephine #17* and *Memoirs of Hadrian #17* (Figs. 3 and 4) channel the eroticism tinged with violence that conditions the Black body's appearance in the historical field of white supremacist spectacle. In both images, the visual field converges, just below center frame, on the genitals; the arms in *Josephine #17* create a vector that frames, and thus highlights, the artificial banana which stands as a prosthetic in place of the penis. This doubling, concealing and artificializing of the sex organ multiplies gender ambiguity: as Josephine, the banana is a fetish, standing in for the ("missing") penis whose absence it both conceals and advertises.[26] But this double movement that defines the fetish is subjected to a further turn of the screw, since the advertisement for absence is itself a cover story; the absence it ostensibly compensates for is here a veil that conceals, while also therefore invoking, the "real" organ beneath. The penis is thus generated in the mode of double negation, displaced into a system of signification and

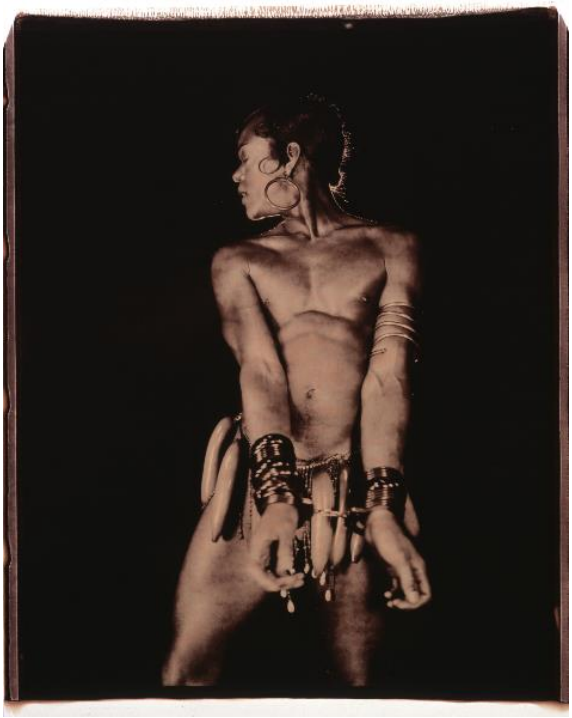
[22] Though the anti-blackness constitutive of the Hollywood system meant that Holiday, as a Black performer, could never herself appear as the lead in a midcentury cinematic melodrama.

[23] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 219. The work, like Sherman's (but unlike Guy Debord's), reveals spectacle to be feminine in its cultural construction.

[24] From the artist's website, https://www.lyleashtonharris.com/series/billie-boxers-better-days/.

[25] This sexualization of Blackness relates to the "pornotroping" of Black "flesh" discussed by Musser (*Sensual Excess*, 5-13), drawing on the work of Hortense Spillers.

[26] See Freud, "Fetishism," *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, 152-53. As Silvia Lippi comments, "The fetish reveals the true nature of the phallus: an agitated nothing underneath a pair of panties, a camouflaged gap," in *The Decision of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 74 (trans. amended).



3 (left). Lyle Ashton Harris, *Josephine #17* (2002. Unique Polaroid, 24 x 20).

4 (right). Lyle Ashton Harris, *Memoirs of Hadrian #17* (2002. Unique Polaroid, 24 x 20).

dislodged from the register of biology. But if the banana effects this negativization of biological sex, it does so as a grotesque racial signifier, distilling the dialectic of the natural/artificial, presence/absence of the penis, into a specific figure of Blackness, in the register of animality. In *Billie #21*, Harris/Holiday's closed eyes withhold her own gaze from the field of vision; similarly, in *Josephine #17*, Harris/Josephine turns her head sharply away from the camera, the eyes once again closed in a "private reverie" that suggests not so much an inaccessible interiority as an intensification of experience at the limit of the subject, an ecstasis.

In Harris's photographic series, the artist's performances alternate between diva femmedom and hyper-masculinity. That alternation, insofar as it thematizes gender as performance, is itself feminine—in Joan Rivière's sense of "femininity as masquerade"—as well as queer in its denaturalizing of gender. But this denaturalization, via an exposure of gender as masquerade (made literal in the images of masks in other works in the series), is not in the service of irony; as I mentioned above, what Musser describes as the "embodiment of hunger" achieved through the Harris/Holiday assemblage is not camp, in spite of its gender play and use of drag. The queer attachment to the spectacular image of "public success"/"private failure" in the incarnation of Billie Holiday is one whose sincerity is expressed in the carefulness of the image's construction, the attention to detail and gesture,

the disciplined labor of becoming-Holiday that the performance requires and documents. These are images of queer seriousness.[27]

Melodrama and Subjectivity

While "melodrama" functions abstractly in the Harris series—its drama removed from narrative and its *melos* synesthetically rendered—the works of Ming Wong I will turn to next take it up literally, as a film genre. According to Brooks's famous account, Rousseau is the first to use the term melodrama, in reference to his play *Pygmalion* (first performed in 1770), which in a key scene sets pantomime to music. For Brooks, melodrama is a mode that arises in tandem with the French Revolution, the dawning nineteenth century, the modern phase of bourgeois capitalism, and the "final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch)" (15). To this, we might add that melodrama is the theatrical form that historically accompanies the rise of bourgeois interiority; both find their anchoring texts in the corpus of Rousseau (*Pygmalion* and *The Confessions*, respectively). We can draw a connection in this regard between media forms that seem counterposed: to the interiority expressed in the letter and the diary (hallmarks, in Habermas's account, of the eighteenth century) corresponds the exteriority and publicness of melodrama as a theatrical form that would ramify across genres to become, in Brooks's words, the cultural mode that "perhaps... alone is adequate to contemporary psychic affect."[28] The domestic and Oedipal dramas that shape the bourgeois subject who would later end up in psychoanalysis find theatrical expression in melodrama, especially in its twentieth-century cinematic apotheosis as "the woman's film," never far removed from the ambient diagnosis of hysteria. Psychoanalysis and melodrama share in their centering of the family as the formative site of psychic life. If psychoanalysis offers a dominant explanatory account of this modern subject, for Brooks, melodrama and psychoanalysis are twin apparatuses of a bodily semiotics.[29]

For film theorist Linda Williams, cinematic melodrama is a classic "body genre," a genre that aims at producing a bodily response, and is characterized by "stylistic and/or emotional excess ... in contrast to more 'dominant' modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative."[30] (Among the body genres Williams analyzes, which also include pornography and horror, melodrama is the most protean and expansive.) The gendered connotations are already evident in the opposition of "emotional excess" to "goal-oriented narrative," but this gendering is also explicit: in these body genres, it is women's bodies that "have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain" (4, emphasis in the

[27] Cf. Young, "Queer Seriousness."

[28] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, xii.

[29] In both, writes Brooks, "Embodied signs are symptoms, to be deciphered and read." Peter Brooks, "Psychoanalysis and Melodrama," in Carolyn Williams, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 280.

[30] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4 (summer 1991), 2-13; 3.

original). In melodrama, women embody embodiment itself, as a locus of desire and suffering (desire as suffering); they carry the burden of "surplus embodiment," in Lauren Berlant's terms, as the condition of visibility in a public sphere whose ostensible abstractness is premised on their exclusion.[31] Melodrama's focus on feminized embodiment is one of the features that degrades its cultural value. Moreover, the gendering extends to the audience—domestic melodrama, or the "woman's film," belongs to that "mass-marketed intimate public" imagined to also consume pulp romance, homemaking magazines, and talk shows, all elements of what Berlant, scare quotes intact, calls "women's culture," comprising texts that cultivate a (vague) sense of belonging.[32] The low cultural status of melodrama and these other media forms derives from the gendered modifier, indicating both a presumed female (or feminized) audience and the bodies onscreen, whose affective range nevertheless marks them as something other than fetishized objects of a male gaze.[33] In the twentieth-century texts of "women's culture," women appear as something other than sex objects, even as the challenge of navigating the conflation of social capital and sexual desirability that defines the place of women under patriarchy is part of the texts' narrative focus.

The degraded cultural value of melodrama also pertains, in Williams' analysis, to its dependence on a kind of mimicry. "[W]hat may especially mark these body genres as low," writes Williams, "is the perception that the body of the spectator is *caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry* of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female" (4, my italics). The viewer of melodrama dissolves in tears, in an involuntary affective mimicry forged through a feminine identification, whereas the viewer of classical Hollywood cinema (and most other films) is typically "sutured" into the position of a male protagonist. (Highlighting the conflation of on-screen and off-screen tears, Williams points to the "long-standing tradition of women's films measuring their success in terms of one-, or two-, or three-handkerchief movies" [5]). At stake is the implicit

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[31] See Lauren Berlant, "National Brands, National Body: *Imitation of Life*," in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). Whereas whiteness and maleness are nonqualities of the universal, women and racialized subjects are "imprisoned in the surplus embodiment of a culture that values abstraction" (111). For this reason—as both Lora and Sarah Jane understand in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*—"physical allure is the capital a woman must use to gain a public body" (137). The argument is concordant with the one made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* that being "for-itself" is the privilege, in a patriarchal society, of the unmarked, i.e. (white) male, universal.

[32] Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 5 and passim. The "woman's film" is the object of an extensive literature in film studies, for example in Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Classic "women's films"—whose scholarly revaluation redeemed that phrase while also ironizing it somewhat—include *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), among many others, including those directed by Douglas Sirk, discussed in this essay.

[33] I mean a structurally male gaze, as described by Laura Mulvey in her classic analysis of classical Hollywood cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In film studies, the "woman's film" interested feminist critics precisely for the ways it evaded the norms of the paradigm Mulvey described, from within the same historical production context.

5. Overidentification: Ming Wong, still from *Next Year / L'Année Prochaine / 明年* (mixed media installation and single channel HD video, 2016).

charge of a feminized (over)identification, the displacement of cognition and will by involuntary bodily mimicry, recalling the deviance Plato associated with mimesis (and thus with art) in the *Republic*, but with a twist: here the issue is not that art is a copy of the real, but that the spectator is a too-close copy of the art.

If melodrama is (implicitly) charged with provoking an involuntary mimicry, a failure of critical distance, an overproximity, Ming Wong's works literalize that charge by turning the overidentification with feminine spectacle into a performance of actual incorporation, as in this image from *L'Année Prochaine,* in which Wong's face as Delphine Seyrig in *Last Year at Marienbad* is spliced into Seyrig's image in the same pose (Fig. 5).[34] In so doing, the works create an archive of "classics" that aspires to no generality and avows its subjective (over)investment. At stake, often, is a queer appropriation of narratives and images of a heterosexuality revealed to itself be overwrought and factitious. Generated through mimicry, the works also offer a perverse revision of the ideas of generation and genealogy that ground fantasies of social and biological reproduction and that constitute the narrative contents of melodrama (which turn around the affective dramas of filial and parental

[34] Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), whose temporality Wong's title (*Next Year)* reverses, is itself often described a parody of Hollywood melodrama, evoking the genre's aesthetics while confounding its narrative comprehensibility. Wong's works frequently take up works of arthouse cinema that are informed or influenced by cinematic melodrama, without themselves fully belonging to that category (*Teorema*, discussed below, is another example).

relations in the domestic sphere). Transforming the narrative of heterosexual filiation into a solipsistic performance of mimicry, precisely by redoubling it, these works embrace (rather than rejecting as homophobic) the cultural association between male homosexuality, femininity and narcissism. They stage a melodrama of subjectivity not on the confessional model of revealing intimate secrets, but as a fraught process of identification, incorporation and mimesis across linguistic, racial, and gender difference. The body that takes shape and displays itself in these works is at once the fantasmatic projection of an image appropriated from the culture industry and the locus of the most intensely personal affect. Already marked by the "surplus embodiment" that defines the subject of melodrama and other women's genres, the body in Wong's recreations is doubly marked by a surplus that derives from its racial and linguistic difference. Its speech is accented; the bodies in these works, in the very effort to become their model, call attention to their difference from it.

If the status of a work as classic, as I suggested above, derives from what appears as its ideal adequation of form to content, here the relation of form and content is troubled by the overpresence of a subjectivity that fails to recede into the unmarked or universal. The personal—whose original constitution through the incorporation of an external image is here revealed—turns back on and contorts that image, disrupting its narrative momentum via the stalled repetitions of the process of subjective inscription. In this sense, Wong's appropriations perversely honor melodrama's vocation as a genre *about* the process of subjective inscription. In so doing, Wong's works reveal how melodrama is a queer form of the classic, a genre of overmarked subjectivity in which "surplus embodiment" overdetermines the form/content relation.

Generation, genealogy, mimesis

The subject of melodrama is genealogy—the family, inheritance, filial duty and its transgressions, motherhood especially. Its narratives concern the psychological dramas of reproduction and the private sphere that organizes its social function. This is, of course, a sphere from which queerness has historically been excluded, by definition: the drama of biological reproduction is the drama of mothers and fathers, marriages and lineages. But while heterosexual filiation is the very subject of melodrama, melodrama also tends to render it factitious since, as Copjec observes, a "sense of inauthenticity... is a primary characteristic of the genre."[35] Melodrama, then, seems to already queer its narratives of heterosexual reproduction by heightening (and thus exposing) their artificiality, reflected (literally) in the recurrent trope of mirrors.[36]

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[35] Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman*, 116.

[36] Melodrama is also famously generative of its own queer genealogies. Consider the three or four generations of homage to Douglas Sirk which form a canon of queer cinema: Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) reprises Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), as does Todd Haynes's later *Far From Heaven* (2002), not to mention François Ozon's homage to Fassbinder's take on melodrama in *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (2000). Ming Wong in turn renders homage to all these cinéastes in the 2010s, continuing the chain of queer appropriations of Sirk.

In what I take to be the first ever work of queer theory, in 1972, Guy Hocquenghem characterizes homosexuality as the "ungenerating-ungenerated, the terror of the family in that it produces itself without reproducing."[37] Hocquenghem quotes a French prefect of police: "Those people, even though they don't procreate, they have a tendency to multiply!" In this imaginary, the homosexual comes out of the family but is not *of* the family; he (for Hocquenghem, it is implicitly he) comes as the end of the family line, "the artistic end of the species."[38] A proliferation that does not pass through filiation is what anti-gay activists in France and elsewhere are afraid of, but Hocquenghem celebrates its capacities to generate horizontal rather than vertical or hierarchical forms of alliance. (In this sense, Hocquenghem's "homosexual" desire achieves the aims of the French Revolution, replacing hierarchy with *fraternité*.)

In French cinema, a recurrent figure of homosexual desire is thus the orphan: Sentain (Grégoire Colin) in Claire Denis's *Beau travail* (1999), for example, who says he has no father and no mother, or Alain Delon in *Plein soleil* (1960), who similarly appears out of nowhere, a gratuitous supplement to the heterosexual couple, with no reference to any family of his own.[39] These films create a mise-en-scène of sameness, imagined as a masculine self-replication and multiplication (sometimes literal mirroring) that interrupts or rejects Oedipal filiation. Leo Bersani's reading of *Beau travail* locates in its movement sequences an invitation to "stand up and simply leave the family tragedy by which Western culture has been oppressed at least since Oedipus's parricide"—an invitation to become orphans.[40] (For Bersani, echoing a Hocquenghemian theme, a horizontal relationality based on physical correspondences eludes the vertical, generational, Oedipal relationality that produces, he argues, so much fantasmatic and real violence.) At stake here is a formal mimicry, a mimicry of movements to the side of personal identity and the family inheritance that shapes it. To the homophobic history of figuring homosexual desire as sameness and replication, mimicry, and narcissism, queer theory responds by transvaluing the same terms in order to escape the Oedipal family and the deathly social model of what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism."[41]

Wong's works, in entering fully into, indeed incorporating, their melodramatic sources, embody a kind of queer mimicry that does not fantasize an escape from the family but rather embarks on its delirious affective investment. And in contrast to contemporary theoretical attempts to go beyond the subject (which sometimes include queer theory), Wong's works evince an interest in melodrama as a genre of intensified subjectivity—where

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[37] Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 107, trans. amended.

[38] Ibid., trans. amended.

[39] See Damon R. Young, "The Form of the Social: Heterosexuality and Homo-aesthetics in *Plein soleil*," in *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[40] Leo Bersani, "Father Knows Best," in *Thoughts and Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13.

[41] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).


6-7. Ming Wong as Aschenbach and Tadzio in *Life and Death in Venice / Leben und Tod in Venedig / Vita e Morte a Venezia* (three-channel video installation, 2010).

the difficulty of being or becoming a subject (raced, gendered, aged, caught up in a web of family and economic and emotional relations) is writ large, but in a way that is ambivalently serious and ironic.[42]

Many of Wong's works consist of remaking key scenes from source films that he considers milestones in his own life (thus the selection itself constitutes a form of self-portraiture), chosen for their embrace of artifice, or in his words, their "theatrical style" and "strong visual sense... camp, melodrama, heightened emotions."[43] His works are often literal self-portraits in that, in many cases, Wong himself plays every role in the film. This adds a comic element to the melodrama: the recurrence of Wong's body in the place of every character amounts to a gratuitous proliferation of Wong-ness, a perverse insistence of the artist's body, which tips over into the uncanny. For example, in *Life and Death in Venice*, a 3-channel video installation at the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2010, Wong plays both Aschenbach and Tadzio from Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971), incarnating both subject and object of desire, the former associated with aging and melancholia, the latter with a youthful body that evokes the beyond of a timeless Platonic ideal, as in Tadzio's parting gesture, pointing towards the endless horizon, recreated by Wong (Figs. 6 and 7). The source films are in different languages, including Italian, French, German, Swedish, Cantonese, Japanese, Malay, and Turkish. In some of the works, such as *Life of Imitation* or *In Love for the Mood* (both 2009), other actors step into the roles from classic melodramas. But most often, it is Wong who occupies all of the work's possible spaces, in front of and behind the camera.

The uncanniness reaches its apotheosis in a scene from *Devo partire. Domani* (2010), a remake of Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), in which Wong kisses and has sex with himself (Figs. 8 and 9). Here, as in *Life and Death in Venice*, Wong remakes scenes from a classic queer film and comically literalizes the discourse that characterizes homosexual desire as

[42] Recall Dyer's description of a "gay sensibility," cited above, that "holds together intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity" ("Judy Garland," 150).

[43] Email exchange with the artist (Dec 2, 2018).


8-9. Shot-reverse shot: Wong on Wong in *Devo partire. Domani / I must go. Tomorrow* (five channel video installation, 2010).

narcissistic.[44] *Teorema* is Pasolini's first film to explicitly thematize homosexuality, and it is one that ostensibly brackets his Communist commitments in order to focus the drama within a bourgeois, nuclear family, which it thrillingly "queers" by having each member of that family sleep with a handsome visitor played by Terence Stamp. [45] Wong's remake takes up the film as a queer landmark but queers it further—first, through the uncanny image of the self having sex with itself, a parody of the discourse on homosexuality I mentioned earlier (which sees it as a form of self-obsession to the exclusion of love for the Other), and second, through raising to a higher power the original film's embrace of what Freud called the "constitutional bisexuality of each individual."[46] Wong's film dramatically deflates Freud's comedic remark, in a letter to Fliess, that "every sexual act [is] an event between four individuals"![47] Here, every sexual act is an act between one individual. Finally, Wong's work queers its model through its act of "ethnic drag," throwing into relief the overarching whiteness of the European arthouse tradition.[48] But Wong's remake of *Teorema* is less a work of critique than of homage: his works attest to, and depend on, a love of their objects,

[44] Such a discourse is implicit in a recent book by Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of the Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2021), which makes resonant the familiar association between homosexuality and "a complete redefinition of politics in terms of subjectivity" (169), i.e. a kind of counter-revolutionary decadence, associated with "neoliberalism," and implying a rejection of collective, class politics. Foucault's turn to the self at the end of his career is often portrayed as exemplary of this political failure.

[45] For a reading of the film as a melodrama, see Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

[46] Freud, *Ego and the Id*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Norton, 1960), 26.

[47] Freud, letter no. 113 to Fliess, August 1, 1899, quoted by James Strachey (ed.) in *The Ego and the Id*, 29 n. 15.

[48] See Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) and also Sieg, "Remediating Fassbinder in Video Installations by Ming Wong and Branwen Okpako," *TRANSIT*, vol. 9, no. 2, at https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2qs5b2f3.

an appropriation bespeaking an attachment, much like Baldwin's imaginative appropriation of—and identification with—Bette Davis, or Lyle Ashton Harris's of Billie Holliday.

If Wong's works parody the idea of (gay) narcissism, multiplying the self to fill all possible spaces, they also expand the self into a literal multiplicity, a protean entity able to encompass all the various positions in Pasolini's "theorem" of the bourgeois family. In all of his works, the "narcissistic" self is nevertheless entirely other-directed, becoming a vessel, copying behaviors and repeating them; subjectivity is performative, in the sense of an actual performance, but also in the sense Judith Butler uses the term to describe the reiterative nature of gendered and raced identities, produced through actions that do not express any interior essence or truth but create the impression of that essence through repetition.[49] Wong, then, gives us self-portraiture as an object lesson in two of queer theory's landmark concepts: performativity and disidentification. The latter describes the way the minoritarian racial and gendered subject, in José Muñoz's words, "recycle[s] damaged stereotypes as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation."[50] Such disidentification is something other than what Wendy Brown once called a "wounded attachment," an identity formed in the posture of injury. A disidentification is a creative work of self-invention in relation to a set of social norms that fail in their interpellation.[51] This work is required of the minoritarian subject, but Wong's artworks reveal that the labor of "self-production" (Musser, 5) is not a practice of solipsism; the term "identification" already summons up a collective.

Rosalind Krauss once wrote that the "medium of video is narcissism." For Krauss, this narcissism is embedded in the technology of video's present-tense transmission, and in the mirror-like reflection of the live video feed, the "very terms of which," she writes, "are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self."[52] There is something assuredly queer about the narcissism Krauss attributes to video. Though she doesn't say so directly, the queerness inheres in the elision of any "separation between subject and object" (59) —we are back in the domain of queer mimicry, discussed above. This collapse of distance between subject and object also ejects subjectivity from its temporal inscription: in the "feedback coil of video," temporality is "submerged," resulting in a "weightless fall through the suspended space of narcissism" (58-9). Paralleling the collapse of object cathexis into self-reflection, the temporal span of genealogy collapses into the real-time "feedback coil" (57) of an eternal and "weightless" present.

But in Wong's work, video is the medium of a queer narcissism that multiplies the levels of temporal inscription: not only does it melodramatically narrate the production and disruption of the family line, it performs the historicity of the subject's shaping through the encounter with films that form part of a personal narrative—Wong chooses films that recall "my own travels, movements, milestones in life..."—and that are themselves from and about

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[49] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[50] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

[51] See for example, "The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Crème Davis's Terrorist Drag," in *Disidentifications.*

[52] Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (spring 1976), 57.

10. Ming Wong, *Angst Essen / Eat Fear* (single-channel video installation, 2008).

the past. Temporality is multiplied, rather than effaced, and the "weightless fall" becomes the heavy work of eking out a position within a world against whose resistance the subject takes its shape. Similarly, mimicry is not only the collapse of the subject-object relation; it is also the laborious enactment of the self's expansive self-difference.[53] In Krauss, video narcissism is troublingly queer in that it evades object-relations; but in Wong, narcissism is queer in a capacious way that includes heterosexuality while reveling in the artifices of its cultural construction and narration; this narcissism does not exclude but incorporates object relations.

This dynamic is on view in Wong's much-commented *Angst Essen*, a 27-minute single channel video loop based on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 melodrama, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, itself an homage to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) (Fig. 10). In the video, Wong performs all of the film's roles in German, including that of the protagonist Emmi, an older, German cleaning woman who begins a relationship with the titular Ali, a Moroccan immigrant (played, in the original film, by Fassbinder's ill-fated lover, El Hedi ben Salem), her friends and children. In the first place, this film makes explicit the queerness of a genealogy embedded in cinematic melodrama as a genre: in the lineage I mentioned earlier, from Sirk to Fassbinder to Haynes and Ozon, melodrama is shaped by a history of queer

[53] Or, as Homay King puts it in an article on Wong's *Persona Performa* (2011), Wong's works "define identity as a time-based work in progress." See Homay King, "Tenuous Frames: Ming Wong's *Persona Performa*," *Film Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 2 (winter 2014-2015), 104.

spectatorship.[54] But Wong's film also demonstrates that this queerness—far from escaping the family—is fully imbricated with the family, and cannot simply "stand up and walk away from" it, to return to Bersani's phrase. By acting out every role, every position in the family, Wong literalizes the statement that the family lives within us.

In *Lerne Deutsch mit Petra von Kant* (2007), made shortly after Wong's relocation to Berlin, the artist meticulously recreates Margit Carstensen's performance in the climactic final scene of Fassbinder's 1972 lesbian melodrama *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Wong's videos often document Wong's or other actors' submitting to a linguistic pedagogy, generating some—perhaps camp—pleasure in the disparity between the source language and the actors' approximation of it. But at the same time, the performances are impressive acts of impersonation, in which Wong or another performer copies the original film actors' rhythms, intonations and gestures in a detailed and frequently virtuosic way. We can see that this is not just a parody: there is a disciplined labor that informs the pleasure of the performance, driven by a fandom which cathects to the point of incorporation. Wong's work is about the fine observation of details, a pedagogy in the nuances of personal and cinematic style. Becoming a self here, as in Musser's reading of Harris as Holiday, is a labor of self-production for which the work is imitation. The self takes its coordinates from outside, modeling itself on something exterior. In so doing, it expresses not only an anxious solicitude about the terms of its interpellation, but the heterogeneous shape of its own desire.

Sometimes—as in *Biji Diva!* (2011), Wong's exuberant performance as Turkish music and film diva Bülent Ersoy, performed in tandem with Wong's mother—this incorporation occurs in the register of joy. More generally, though, Wong's works allegorize the laborious and frequently painful process through which we take up positions as racially marked, gendered, speaking subjects, within a social field shaped by postcoloniality, migration, racism, and xenophobia (also a theme of Fassbinder's *Ali*).[55] There is toil in the disciplined repetition; there is also shame at its necessary failure, at the gap between Hochdeutsch and Wong's accented approximation in *Lerne Deutsch* and *Angst Essen*, between the model and its incorporation. The incorporation is never fully successful, and in the mismatch between so-called "original" and its imitation there is a small space that it would be wrong to call a space of freedom, since the imitation is compelled—one has no choice but to *fit in*, as in Fassbinder's film—but, on the flip side of its shame, of a pleasure in the necessary failure of things, signs and modes of social being to be self-identical, a failure that contains a certain liberation from the tyranny of the self-same.

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[54] For a related account of queer inheritance forged through an intergenerational cathexis of art objects, see Whitney Davis, "Queer Family Romance in Collecting Visual Culture" *GLQ*, vol. 17, no. 2-3 (2011), 309-329.

[55] Feng-Mei Heberer writes that Wong's work "intimates the possibility of a playful affiliation between differently minoritized subjects both within and beyond the national realm." Feng-Mei Heberer, "The Asianization of Heimat: Ming Wong's Asian German Video Works", in Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar, eds., *Asian Video Cultures: In the Penumbra of the Global* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 199.

In *Life of Imitation* (2009), Wong restages the devastating scene from Sirk's archetypal melodrama, *Imitation of Life* (1959) which condenses to a sublime essence the genre's aesthetic and narrative machinery of maternal devotion, rejection, and suffering. In this climactic scene of emotional drama, Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore) tracks down her light-skinned daughter, Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner), who is working as a dancer and passing as white.[56] Finally having accepted that the only way to grant her daughter her independence is to participate in her fantasy of whiteness, Annie avoids blowing Sarah Jane's cover by telling her white roommate that she "used to look after Miss Linda" (Sarah Jane's assumed identity). "Well, get you! So honey child, you had a mammy!" chimes the roommate, casually enunciating a stereotype whose brutality Sarah Jane must accept precisely in order to escape from its hold. Sarah Jane plays along: "Yes—all my life." The overdetermined word is all the more grotesque in its distortion of "mommy" since that is the meaning it here conceals; the two women perform a kind of blackface (mommy becoming mammy) in order for one to grant the other the possibility of an escape from the violence of American anti-blackness. In a film whose very title announces it, imitation has finally come to saturate the relationship between Sarah Jane and Annie and produce its only possibility of authenticity. Moments earlier, Annie asks Sarah Jane for one last favor before leaving her alone forever: "I'd like to hold you in my arms once more, like you were still my baby." The phrase "like you were" transforms the maternal relation into a simile, life into its own imitation. But the ontological status of this performance quickly becomes confused, reaching peak emotional intensity in a series of tight close-ups that alternates between Sarah Jane and Annie in their final embrace. "Oh Sarah Jane, my baby! My beautiful, beautiful baby!" Annie's "performance" of maternity functions like the banana in Harris's performance of Josephine Baker, flaunting its inauthenticity in order to cover over the truth of what it renders artificial.[57] As the music swells, words degenerate into stammerings in a quintessentially melodramatic evocation of language's inadequacy to emotion: "Mama, mama, mama!" The resonance of the repeated word-becoming-sound echoes all the more loudly when, the roommate having interrupted their embrace, Sarah Jane, now again as Miss Linda, mouths it one last time, silently, the soundscape preserving the illusion of the women's nonintimacy while the visual image reveals its emotional toll. Though it is stating the obvious in a genre that, as Copjec writes, "wears inauthenticity on its sleeve," performance is here the only form of truth.[58]

The irony of this scene, highlighted in Wong's remake (which reproduces the original shot sequence), accrues to the failure of Sarah Jane's performative utterance: "I am white!"

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[56] On Kohner's whiteness (playing a Black character who "passes") and the racial complexities of Sirk's film as well as its earlier sources, see Barbara Mennel, "Ming Wong's Imitations," *TRANSIT*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2014), at https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4fron8bw.

[57] It thus functions like the utterance in Freud's joke about the Jews at the train station: one tells the other he is going to Krakow, and the other replies: "Why do you lie to me?" The man really is going to Krakow, and so the truthful statement is designed to be interpreted as a lie. In Lacan's reading, this illustrates the abyssal quality of language. See Young, "Ironies of Web 2.0".

[58] Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman*, 116. This inauthenticity, writes Copjec, "is not based on the assumption that just beyond our reach there hovers an ideal we have failed to attain, but on the conviction that the world is not based on any ideal support."

which, by sheer force of saying it, does not become wholly true either of Sarah Jane in the Sirk film or the ethnically Malay, Indian and Chinese Singaporeans who portray her in *Life of Imitation*. The body produces its own resistance, the performers here trapped in what Homi Bhabha once called "the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white.'"[59] The relation between desire and constraint in the subject's painful encounter with a social world is the great theme of melodrama. In Wong's works, the pathos lies in both the successful and the unsuccessful dimensions of the performance, in the tension between the two—especially for the racialized, diasporic subject.[60]

In *Life of Imitation*, the casting of male-identified performers of multiple Singaporean ethnicities translates the racial melodrama of Sirk's *Imitation of Life* into a larger post-colonial context, and it extends the film's narrative of racial "passing" to gender passing as well, with gender and race both functioning as axes of hyper-visibility or invisibility for queer, diasporic subjects.[61] In the original *Imitation of Life*, Sarah seeks to escape racialized surveillance by disavowing her Black mother and passing as white, and this disavowal causes the full mother-daughter pathos of melodrama to erupt. In multiplying the iterations of racial and gender difference, Wong's works highlight melodrama's "fusion of the social and personal."[62] But whereas melodrama turns social tensions into personal ones (Elsaesser), this queer appropriation does the reverse—it takes the personal drama of melodrama and by multiplying it, puts it in a larger social/political context, bearing on the uneven global flows

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[59] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry And Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 91. As Bhabha also wrote, "mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its 'otherness,' that which it disavows" (ibid.).

[60] In an argument that resonates with Bhabha's account of colonial mimicry, Heberer writes: "The performer's failure to pass as white—after all, the comic relief relies precisely on the fact that the artist never fully coincides with the original—becomes the questioning of whiteness as incontestable origin" (205).

[61] See Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practice of Queer Diaspora* (New York: NYU Press, 2018). As Mennell puts it, "Wong inserts global subjects into the bifurcated racialized American discourse and highlights the transnational quality of such canonical and widely circulating texts [Sirk's melodramas]" (23). In other works by Wong, the failed attempt at racial "passing" through a mimicry of language and accent moves in other directions: in *Four Malay Stories* (2005), Wong (who is ethnically Chinese) plays sixteen characters from Malay melodramas by post-war film star P. Ramlee; in *In Love For the Mood* (2009), a white New Zealand actress plays both leading actors from Wong Kar-Wai's Cantonese language *In the Mood for Love*, in multiple takes across which she noticeably advances in her ability to pronounce the lines and mimic the vocal inflections of the original performances. The scene she rehearses is one in which Maggie Cheung's character is herself using Tony Leung's character as a stand-in for her husband, rehearsing a confrontation in which she will accuse him of adultery. The elements of Ming Wong's oeuvre are all here in Wong Kar-Wai's film: sexuality at the core of the subject, and the idea of *repetition*, including in its French (theatrical) meaning, rehearsal.

[62] Christine Gledhill, "Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama," in Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xxii.

of bodies and cultural forms, shaped by a colonial history that makes Western culture central even as it depends on a movement across borders it then disavows and polices.

What is nevertheless at stake in this queer appropriation of melodrama (an appropriation already embedded, as I argued above, in melodrama's history) is the very question that animates it as a genre that formalizes subjective experience: what does it mean to assume a subjectivity whose terms one has no choice but to accede to, shaped through the violent but also animating intimacies of domesticity and filiation, and circumscribed by the quotidian and the structural forces of a brutal social and economic system? In Wong's works, we see the salience of Freud's comment in *The Ego and the Id* that the ego is impinged upon by three things: the id (the drives that fracture the subject); the superego (the law; the compulsion to get the performance right); and the outside world (the impossibility of its success, the resistance of the body and the tongue to their entrainment).

While a number of influential, contemporary critical discourses attempt to do away with the subject—dissolving it into de-personalized affects and intensities or turning to an "object oriented ontology"—Harris's and Wong's works are *about* the psychologically intense subject, in its entrapment in a racializing image-repertoire and in its postmodern saturation with media and technology, shown here to be subjectivizing. Like Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, Wong's self-portraits do not consist in a self-presentation or confession of interiority but an exterior labor of transformation of the body via the incorporation or appropriation of cultural forms or stereotypes. In showing their power to determine the subject's horizons, these performances also keep those forms alive as dearly loved, and repeated, objects of subjective attachment.[63] Musser's description of Harris's *Billie #211*—in which citation "moves towards an embodiment of hunger"—is more apt in relation to Wong's work than the postmodernist concept of pastiche. *Billie, Boxers, Better Days* evinces a love of its models, caught up as they are in highly circumscribed frames. Similarly, like Sherman's works, Wong's are about a passionate love of a cinema that offers equally circumscribed frames for the feminized and racialized subject. Although melodrama is often considered a genre of inauthenticity or artificiality, in these works desire is *authentically* at stake, and the way that it is at stake is what makes them queer films, queer works. But while this desire is subjectivizing—it is what is most uniquely one's own, what shapes the intensity of experience as subjective—it is also theatrical, scripted, belonging to a common register. As Anne Garréta has observed in an essay on autofiction: "At the very place one imagines most radically escaping the world—in the abyss of desire—it insinuates its laws, its comedy, its empire." Garréta goes on to use a theatrical metaphor ("nos désirs nous sont soufflés") which means both that our desires are whispered to us as if by an offstage prompter, and that they are for that reason in one sense "stolen" from us.[64]

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[63] Bringing to mind Judith Butler's commentary on Freud's definition of the ego, in *The Ego and the Id*, as "a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes" which "contains the history of those object-choices." See Butler, "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 133.

[64] "Là même où l'on croit le plus radicalement lui échapper – dans l'éperdu du désir –, [le monde] insinue ses lois, sa comédie, son empire. Nos désirs nous sont soufflés—théâtralement et vulgairement : dictés et dérobés." Garreta, *Pas un jour* (Paris: Librairie générale française), 147.

This is what emerges in Garréta's writing as the "irreducibly mimetic, mechanical and performative character of desire."[65] Wong's works capture, and stage, this double valence of desire, as what is both most and least "ours," most intimate and most alien, subjectivizing and machinic. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger writes that the artwork "lets the earth be an earth": it reveals the stony properties of stone, allows the materiality of the world to surge forth in the context of the work that brings it out. Similarly, Wong's works let the self be a self, precisely in the oscillation or tension between the deeply intimate and the theatrical, the machinic and the unaccountable, the aesthetic intensity of the image and its lingering sense of a "not-all."[66] In so doing, they reveal the status of melodrama as the queer form of the classic, registering self-production as the necessary and repeated labor of the minoritarian subject.

Subjectivity in these works emerges in a process of mimesis; it does not emanate from within, as it did in the "century of the letter."[67] It is formed in a relation to the camera's gaze, in the society of the spectacle. The subject is formed through a performative incorporation of a set of norms—thus the works, as I have argued, offer an allegory of subject formation—letting the self be a self, in the register of melodrama (melodramas of subjectivity). Habermas argued that the bourgeois interiority that emerged in the eighteenth-century novel was bound up with the function of the family within a free-market, largely pre-industrial capitalist liberalism. In film melodrama, the family, ostensibly providing an emotional refuge within now fully industrial capitalism, assumes the textual and narrative form of its maximal affective saturation. The massive transformation of global capital in the era of post- or neocolonial finance and technology entails a reconfiguration of our media technologies *and* our subjectivity, as well as the status of the family.[68] Harris's work and Wong's take the measure of a historical self—forged in relation to racialized and gendered spectacle—at the moment of its transformation.

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[65] Marie-Chantal Killeen, "Esquives, pièges et désaveux: 'Les Anti-confessions' de Nelly Arcan et d'Anne Garréta," *Études françaises*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2017), 171-187; 184.

[66] This is a reference to Lacan's table of sexuation from Seminar XX (*Encore*), in a connection it would be interesting to develop in another context.

[67] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), 48.

[68] On the former, see Kris Cohen, *Never Alone Except for Now: Art, Networks, Populations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), and John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* (New York: NYU Press, 2017). On the latter, see Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2019).