

**CINEMATIC DRAG: LAYERS, COLLISIONS, AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF MEDIUM  
AND FORM IN SCREEN BASED PRACTICES OF QUEER PERFORMANCE**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the medium of drag performance, aiming to bypass the omnipresence of Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity. In arguing that Butlerian theory has had deleterious effects on artistic research of the medium, leading to reductive analyses that approach artists and performers through the false binary of resistance and assimilation, this project instead proposes a methodology predicated on viewing drag primarily through the lens of formal analysis and visual and cultural media theory. My investigation of drag explores the multivalence of form and medium in drag, building on the frameworks of theorists such as Caroline Levine and Renate Lorenz, arguing that this approach enables an assessment of drag as a layered, multivalent, and hybrid set of practices that collide and overlap with the formal logics and affordances of other mediums. As a means of demonstrating the viability of such an approach, this thesis explores drag's relationship with the cinematic medium through overlapping forms, theories, and histories.

Within the hybrid and fluid space of what I term *cinematic drag*, I explore the works of particular drag artists, performers, and queer filmmakers through the formal schemas of gesture, genre, and worldbuilding. Exploring the importance of gesture in drag and cinema, I turn to the theories Laura Mulvey and Giorgio Agamben for a re-assessment of drag and movement in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). I then turn to the concept of genre, using film and queer theory to explore the layers of drag and masquerade in Pedro Almodóvar's queering of the melodramatic genre. Lastly, I examine the nature of narrative and temporality through the lens of worldbuilding, turning to the ideas of Elizabeth Freeman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Laura U. Marks to observe the confluence of film and drag form in the work of Sin Wai Kin. Far from avoiding the political capabilities of drag, this thesis ultimately proposes that in viewing drag as an artistic medium first, the ensuing political and social analysis becomes all the more abundant.

## **Lay Summary**

This thesis explores the artwork of queer artists, performers, and filmmakers whose work incorporates elements of the mediums of film and drag. In approaching these examples, I use the formal and artistic nature of drag to explore its relationship to cinema, arguing that previous analysis of drag has favoured the political and social relevance of drag at the expense of formal analysis. One of the costs of overemphasizing the measure of political resistance inherent in drag performances is the under exploration of the formal convergence between drag and cinema. To establish my argument, I approach my artistic examples through the formal categories of gesture, genre, and narrative.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Maxim Greer.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction: Beyond Gender Performativity: Reapproaching Drag through Medium and Form

### 1.1 *Cinematic Drag: A Proposal for Realignment in Drag Studies, Queer Theory and Art History*

Drag and other Queer artistic practices involving transformation and masquerade are beholden to the material and abstract concept of the layer. Altering the surface boundaries creates a second skin of sorts, a mask that transforms faces, bodies, and objects. Folded within this aesthetic coating are layers of artistic strategies, material and ephemeral, hybrid and remediated, that speak to the complex formal operations of drag and queer masquerade. The complexities and layers of form in queer masquerade are partly cultivated by the role of appropriation and remediation.<sup>1</sup> Drag appropriates cultural and organic forms from a hybrid range of visual and non-visual media—bodies, faces, hair, makeup, clothing, style, speech, mannerisms, gestures - transforming them and remediating them through masquerade.<sup>2</sup>

In one of the few art historical theorizations on drag—especially those centering form—artist and writer Renate Lorenz sees the medium as not about the representation of identities; instead, Lorenz describes how the “constitution” of these forms and structures occur by

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<sup>1</sup> I will sometimes use ‘masquerade’ or ‘queer masquerade’ interchangeably with ‘drag’ throughout this thesis. My choice to use ‘masquerade’ over the availability of ‘performance’ or ‘queer performance’ derives from the formal and material dimensions that this thesis aims to get at when exploring these artistic practices. Masquerade points to masking and the material use of a mask or the use of costuming, a unifying formal aspect across practices of drag and masquerade whereas performance does not necessarily imply as such. When discussing performance, I put emphasis on the ‘form’ in *performance* and aim to think of formative matter, objects, and tools as Sin Wai Kin does when they describe their use of drag as “performative technology.”

<sup>2</sup> Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, Vol. 2 (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2012), 22

“reconstructing it on one’s own body.”<sup>3</sup> For Lorenz, drag is less about a rejection of norms (gender, sex, sexuality, ideology) than it is about drawing connections between objects and forms either “natural and artificial, animate and inanimate” that produce and constitute hegemonic gender and identity categories.<sup>4</sup> Drag is not necessarily a repudiation of these forms nor is it restricted by them; instead, drag aims to suspend and transcend “any dichotomies between “true” or “false” and “normal” and “other.”<sup>5</sup> Further, and prudently, Lorenz also points to the medium’s temporal register in its capacity to use forms such as “costumes, wigs, makeup, props, posed photographs” as observations of the historical production of bodies in order to “take up expectations, evidence, stereotypes, and violent histories without facilitating their repetition.”<sup>6</sup> While Lorenz is working from the legacy of queer and feminist theory, noting the importance of the ideas of American philosopher Judith Butler on drag and gender performativity, using form as a means of exploring the politically radical capacities of drag is at odds with dominant trends that largely arise out of Butler’s work.

Drag’s prevailing academic footnote, of Butler’s own, is that the cultural practice of drag helps to prove gender as a social construct, then made to seem real through what Butler calls “gender performativity”—a series of repeated, ritualized acts.<sup>7</sup> To Butler, drag’s use of imitation and impersonation through modes of dress, speech, and embodiment helps to reveal the constructed nature of categories of gender and sex.<sup>8</sup> Writing a thesis in the field of art history

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 21-2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 186-7.

and with an emphasis on queer theory and history, I argue that Butler's centrality in research on drag detaches it from the art historical lens and from understanding the formal and political complexity of the medium.<sup>9</sup> I argue that overemphasizing certain schools of continental philosophy and critical theory (Butler) has had a dislocating effect on the medium—when we talk about drag we almost always think of gender performativity and Butler.

Additionally, despite many critiques, notably those waged by Trans Studies theorist Viviane Namaste, Butler's theory has infused into the discourse an insistence toward a perpetual tracking and evaluation of the level of resistance in any given drag act or performance, all the way up to the contemporary reception of the cultural phenomenon of RuPaul's drag empire, further invoking binary critical takes on 'good' drag (subversive, resistant, deconstructive) or 'bad' drag (reductive, assimilationist, reifying). As queer theorist Jasbir Puar has pointed to, this is indicative of a recurring trend in academic research on the cultural production of queer, racialized, and other 'resistant' communities, wherein resistance to power (state, racial, gender) is tracked, located, and then reconsidered in regards to how it resists assimilation.<sup>10</sup> While oppression and power are important questions that this project continues to consider, pondering whether a work "fails" (in a non-Halberstam sense<sup>11</sup>) to adequately resist certain structures is

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<sup>9</sup> Art historian and performance theorist Amelia Jones also questions the predominance of Butler in the discourse of performativity in the recent book *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*.

<sup>10</sup>Puar has said as much that the preoccupation with subversion and resistance in queer theory has had a paralyzing effect on the field, who in 2008 said "As cultural workers invested in social justice, we are so beholden to locating resistance and tracking its paths. I wonder what would happen, what new creative thinking and activism would emerge if we would put that mandate aside, just for a moment." See: Jasbir Puar, Ben Pitcher and Henriette Gunkel. "Q&A: Jasbir Puar". 2 May 2008. Dark Matter. <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/05/02/qa-with-jasbir-puar/>

<sup>11</sup> I am referring to Jack Halberstam's theory of queer failure, wherein failure is proposed as the inability to align or succeed in heteronormative and heteropatriarchal culture as a pursuit towards countertuitive forms of resistance and as a way of questioning complicity and assimilation. Though

not a precondition; rather, it is a privileged way of academia piling pressure on marginalized artists while overlooking the complex systems that their cultural production traverses.

Moreover, while much is made about drag's capacities to deconstruct and dismantle gender, sex, and other hegemonic identity categories, my thesis calls for an emphasis on art historical and other visual and cultural studies approaches. By attending to the formal processes at play in drag, I will argue that drag is not inherently about deconstruction and dismantling as much as it is about using productive (re)construction and (re)production through a transgression and transformation of readymade cultural forms, binaries and categories. Building on the work of Lorenz, as well more recent scholarship by art historians Julia Bryan-Wilson and Amelia Jones, my thesis aims to explore the formal and material aspects of drag through the overlapping and layered roles that form and medium have to push further toward a realignment of tendencies that overemphasize performance theory and political subversion over artistic strategies. Indeed, far from decoupling political and social aspects from drag, an aim of this thesis is to see the formal operations of drag as a complex system of artistic and political strategies for queer artists such as Sin Wai Kin, who calls their use of drag a "performative technology" that does the "work of worldbuilding."<sup>12</sup>

Given the baggage of theory on drag, and my desire to pivot towards viewing drag as a complex system of form and medium, the escape hatch I propose is to think about drag chiefly

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there are particular overlaps with the framework I am invoking here, through its complexity and nuance, Halberstam's work bypasses the predicament I describe that weighs a cultural value of an artwork or artist against their ability to resist power. See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2011.

<sup>12</sup> See Sin Wai Kin (then still using Victoria Sin) make the comments on this artist panel. "Artist Talk | Body Work: Performance and Practice." Art Basel, Hong Kong, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_OpvZNqEZMY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OpvZNqEZMY)

as a medium, with specific forms and affordances, that is itself formed and transformed through collisions and overlaps with other mediums and cultural forms. For the purposes of this study, I will limit my examination to drag's collision and collusion with the cinematic medium. As I intend to unpack throughout this project, the relationship between cinema and drag is found in layers, through their overlapping histories, theories and forms. Using visual analysis and attending to art historical and cultural studies theories of form and medium, this project will explore how queer artists, performers, and filmmakers working within the boundaries of drag and cinema reveal rich and complex sites of formal remediation and cultural transformation. These sites of exchange and collision become their own kind of medium, a hybrid system of formal logic I will call *cinematic drag*. In some cases, *cinematic drag* explores the relationship between drag and cinema through a genealogy of gestures, genres, and temporalities within iconic films such as *Paris is Burning* (1990) and in the melodramatic cinema of Pedro Almodóvar. In other cases, particularly more contemporary examples such as Sin Wai Kin, all of the constellations of cultural forms and artistic practices I label *cinematic drag* emerge to support the credence of drag as a layered and multi-disciplinary practice of queer worldbuilding.

## **1.2 Literature Review (1) - Drag in Discourse: Subversive Practice, Discursive Trope, and New Developments in Queer and Feminist Theory**

The legacy of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as the primary entry point for studies of drag has anchored the medium to trends in queer and feminist theory. A possible shift in the discourse around drag might come with the recent publication of Ash Kayte Stokoe's 2019 book *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo*. Stokoe's monograph provides a thorough overview of research and writing on drag within queer and feminist French and Anglo-American

discourses and offers the first attempt at a formalization of a field dedicated to ‘drag discourse’. Using a transfeminist approach, Stokoe aims to dispel with the conventional narratives that traditionally characterize drag - the notion of drag as either upholding or subversive to gender norms, the idea that drag is about performing as the ‘opposite sex’ and, perhaps most famously, that drag can reveal the ideology of gender performativity.<sup>13</sup> For Stokoe, these narratives have a narrowing effect on drag analysis, leading to the form and content of a “performance – including lighting, sound, gesture, movement, and techniques” being overlooked. Stokoe suggests that there has been a kind of reification of Butler’s writing on drag and that Butler overemphasizes feminine drag performance.<sup>14</sup> Stokoe also discusses bell hooks’ critical article “Is Paris Burning?” and, while Stokoe finds importance in hooks’ “astute” discussion of whiteness within drag subculture in Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, there are glaring issues in hooks’ analysis.<sup>15</sup> In particular Stokoe pinpoints hooks’ misunderstanding of transgender subjectivity—that not only male-identified people can perform as drag queens—and generalization of drag through the judgment of one singular object to represent a vast and multi-disciplinary medium.<sup>16</sup>

I diverge from Stokoe in their insistence on locating theatre and theatricality as the defining lens through which to observe drag.<sup>17</sup> While I agree in drawing the traditional (and conventional) line of theatre and drag, which grapples with its historical delineation, the centrality of performance

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<sup>13</sup> Ash Kayte Stokoe. *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo* (New York: Routledge, 2019, 6, 43-44. On page 6 of their monograph, Stokoe describes their transfeminist method as coming from A. Finn Enke, Sam Bourcier, and Julia Serano. Transfeminisms are the combination of feminist and trans studies methodologies, the latter of which Stokoe identifies through a few general concepts such as the questioning of the gender binary system (man/woman) and critiques of policies of gender assignment at birth.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 57-8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 3.



and artifice, and the emphasis on gesture, I believe this approach leads to a narrowing of the artistic research on drag that prevents one from considering what happens when drag departs the traditional associations with the stage (or is depicted through another medium or indeed through particular formal collisions, such as with cinema).<sup>18</sup> Stokoe does not generally consider questions of drag *that approach it as an artistic or creative medium first of all*.

Stokoe also points to the contributions of feminist scholar Viviane Namaste, who was sharply critical of Butler's frequent blind spots and misrecognitions of trans identity.<sup>19</sup> Namaste is perhaps best known for her criticism of Butler and other figures in American feminism for their erasure and misrecognition of trans issues. As Namaste points out, Butler's famous critique of Livingston's documentary was a failure in its approach to understanding the intersection of violence, trans subjectivity, and sex work.<sup>20</sup> In her critique of Butler, Namaste also identifies a seeming discrepancy between a cultural performance and lived reality - namely that "drag" performance was often analyzed as equivalent to the subjectivity of trans and gender-nonconforming members of the ballroom community. Certainly there are overlaps and these terms and identities were muddled at the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>20</sup> Viviane Namaste, "Undoing Theory: The "Transgender Question" and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory," *Hypatia* 24, Volume 3 (2009), 11-32. 3. At the core of this is Butler's seeming dismissal of the specific and integral fact of sex work to the lived realities of trans women. Namaste holds that Butler and other feminist scholars and activists often cast the root cause of the murder of trans women as largely being due to gender transgression, a "failure to pass." Namaste asserts otherwise, claiming that it is the nature of the precarious and dangerous work as sex workers that often puts these women in danger. In invoking sex work, Namaste reveals the double-blindness to Butler's approach to transgender subjectivity, through a dual erasure of the causal relationship between sex work and violence as well as the general prevalence of sex work as a daily reality of the lifeworlds of transgender women. To Namaste, this represents not only epistemic violence, moreover it is evidence of Butler's complicity in the "broader social relations of global capitalism" in the failure to account for labor and capital's relationship with the daily realities of trans women, particularly those of colour. 11-32

time of Butler's writing,<sup>21</sup> but as Namaste observes in her 2000 book *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, trans identity was only acceptable in the gay bar if it remained on stage, to be consumed in the spectacle of drag performance.<sup>22</sup> Further, Namaste argues that Butler confuses the joyful competition and artifice of masquerade and spectacle of ballroom for the material reality of figures such as Venus Extravaganza.<sup>23</sup> Namaste's interventions into Butler's high theory points to a stunning failure to consider formal and contextual aspects of drag - such as space and the ability to distinguish between artistic medium and lived reality.

Following Butler, ideas of form and genre and a presupposition of drag as a medium begin to emerge. A significant contributor to drag discourse is José Esteban Muñoz, whose case study, in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) on Vaginal Crème Davis provides one of the best theorizations of drag as an art form. Muñoz provided many details and specificities that were lacking in Butler's writing on drag, in particular, the nuances of queer racialized experiences as part of the Queer of Colour movement. Observing the layered performance strategies of Davis, Muñoz develops his theory of disidentification wherein queer subjects disidentify by resisting "the interpolating call of ideology that fixes a subject within state power apparatus."<sup>24</sup> Muñoz's approach to queerness and gender non-conformity sidesteps the (early) Butlerian binary opposition between subversion and reiteration of heteronormative power.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Muñoz identifies a tactic of appropriation in the work of Davis, using drag and punk

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<sup>21</sup> Also see Stokoe's discussion of this conflation in *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Viviane Namaste, *Invisible lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people* ( Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

performance to assume seemingly opposed identification models from dominant and queer subculture.<sup>26</sup> Value arises from Muñoz’s invocation of a classifying system of genres and styles of drag, drawing formal and visual distinctions between ‘glamour’ and ‘clown’ drag.<sup>27</sup> Part of Davis’s “drag terrorism” is its antagonism of generic constructions of drag style, transgressing these boundaried forms as much as she revels in the parody of their formation. Muñoz also cites continental philosopher Felix Guattari’s apparent appraisal of drag’s political possibility to allow bodies to “break away from the representations and restraints on the social body.”<sup>28</sup> Muñoz agrees with Guattari but holds that the constraints of the social body can still enrapture certain approaches to drag, with the hybrid and complex intersectional approach of Davis as capable of evasion through disidentification.<sup>29</sup>

Contributions to drag discourse also arise from well-known contemporary scholars such as Jack Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman. Halberstam’s 1998 book *Female Masculinity* features a questioning of the marginal status of drag kings in relation to the predominance of drag queens in queer cultures as well as in academic discourse on the medium.<sup>30</sup> Freeman’s influential 2010 book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* builds on ideas that identify the temporal component of drag performance. Temporality and history are indeed facets of drag performance drawn out by Freeman to critique elements of Butler’s work on queer performativity.<sup>31</sup> For Freeman, Butler’s insistence that drag is based on a performance of citations as “copies” of a non-existent past

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 231.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 63.

form or body seems to disregard “pasts that actually signal the presence of life lived otherwise than in the present.”<sup>32</sup> From Butler onward drag often was invoked as a kind of broad analogy for the performance of any identity, which bypassed more formal and medium specific analysis.<sup>33</sup> With shifts in the discourse, the affordances and formal qualities of the medium began to gain currency along with a rising interest in alternative understandings of drag beyond gender performativity.

### **1.3 Literature Review (2): Scarcity and Crises of Interdisciplinarity: Art Historical and Visual Studies Approaches to Drag**

As a topic of study in the field of art history, drag presents challenges to easy classification. Like its bigger and more widely studied sibling, performance art, drag’s ephemeral qualities seem to resist any static, probing art historical gaze that other more traditional optically experienced mediums such as painting, sculpture, photography, and film permit. This is not to say that some of the most well-known studies of drag have come from these aforementioned mediums, such as the photographs of Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe, the experimental films of Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, and Jennie Livingston’s documentary film *Paris is Burning*. In these instances, I hold that drag is often located as the subject matter, captured and legitimated only through documentation in other media. Art historians including Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy have looked at drag as an object of study but often with a focus on performance studies and embodiment. One could argue that practices of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>33</sup> What I describe here are statements found in culture that position any kind of performative behaviour as “doing drag” or “going in drag”...we might even recall Butler own statement of “I’m off to Yale to be Lesbian.” The merging of the culturally specific forms of drag with broader performance theory had the effect of generalizing the medium. See Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993). 310.

drag resist the art historical lens because of its hybrid, unfixed, and fluid nature, which challenges the tendency to identify, track, and classify artistic disciplines. The scarcity also arises from drag's interdisciplinary status, which sees its prominence in the fields of queer and feminist studies on gender but that might lack an artistic methodology, while the remainder of studies on drag are strewn across distinct discourses such as theatre studies, cultural studies, and media studies each with their own scholarly apparatuses. I argue that where art history and other overlapping visual culture studies have use value is not in the more colonizing arm toward classification but rather in the engagement with ideas of form and medium to get at the complex and layered ways that drag functions to *queer* narratives and produce alternative possibilities of viewing and conceiving collective and individual experience.

Fortunately for this thesis, recent art historical research points to a renewed interest in drag that offers nuanced and expansive analysis. Julia Bryan-Wilson 2017's book *Fray: Textile Art and Politics* included a case study on drag, focusing on the costumes and stage production of The Cockettes.<sup>34</sup> Bryan-Wilson's study is a welcome inclusion of research on drag in art history; although drag is mostly engaged as a side piece to the author's more central research on textiles, Bryan-Wilson's method, to centre the social politics of a particular medium (textiles), shows a *particular* adherence to the formal logic of medium specificity - albeit through an inversion of the supposed Greenbergian tendency to evacuate the social and political from formal discussions of art mediums. Instead, Bryan-Wilson's discussion of medium, form, and practice embraces the interdisciplinary logic of textile mediums as hybrid and expansive and serves as a methodological influence on this thesis. Further, while Bryan-Wilson follows the Butlerian line, the study nods

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<sup>34</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 47.

toward a deeper importance of the formal strategies of self-fashioning to drag practices. A major contribution to art historical studies of queer performance is Amelia Jones' 2020 monograph *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*. Jones makes a compelling case toward a reconsideration of the study of queer performance, questioning the dominance of Butler in discourses around performativity while offering numerous analyses of art and performances that highlight the hybrid and intermediate nature of drag.<sup>35</sup>

#### 1.4 Drag Through Theories of Form, Medium, and Genre

The definition and categorization of artistic mediums has a long history before the work of cultural theorists and art critics began to redefine the notion of medium in the mid 20th century. From Clement Greenberg's polemic on the importance of medium specificity in fine art criticism, to Marshall McLuhan famous framing of "the medium is the message" in his discussion of new media forms, the categorization and distinction between artistic disciplines centered on the formal affordances of each medium.<sup>36</sup> In the decades that followed Greenberg and McLuhan, media studies and art history continued to grapple with and critique these theories - with challenges from social art history, the rise in interest in hybridity through a return to discussion of Bakhtin's ideas around dialogism, and the post-structuralism of art historian Rosalind Krauss' discussion of the expanded fields of mediums. Terms and concepts such as intermediate, remediation, hybridity, interdisciplinarity, and the post-medium condition render the boundaries between the artistic

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<sup>35</sup> Amelia Jones, *In between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 147.

<sup>36</sup> See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian (U. of Chicago, 1986), 23-38; and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1964)

disciplines as collapsible, overlapping and colliding into one another and transforming the rigidity of Greenberg's medium-specificity.<sup>37</sup> Further, drag art and performances remediate the form and content of other mediums including music (lip syncing, impersonation and tributes of popular musicians), dance, film (genres, Hollywood stardom, gestures, costuming, makeup) visual art and fashion (cosmetic masking, dress, sewing and textiles), theatre and staged performance (from Shakespeare to Gender Impersonation, and 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century new media (video, television, the internet, social media)).

Thus, in expanding, or, perhaps returning to these important questions of medium and the affordances of form, I argue that drag is a medium that is constantly in flux, a fluid and highly mobile set of practices that at their core are made up of a series of what literary theorist Caroline Levine would call a "collision" of bounded forms that collide, entangle, and overlap with other mediums to produce hybridized transformations and remediations. In her 2015 book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine calls for a new formalist method in literary studies which can be expanded into a method in art history in particular through the concepts of overlapping and colliding forms.<sup>38</sup> Levine is nearly polemical about some continental philosophy including postmodernism and new historicism, in particular the concept of deconstruction which, Levine rightly points out, continues to be recycled in discourse.<sup>39</sup> Outside of the traditional space / body of drag, almost all drag occurs within collisions and transformations, as drag appears in other mediums or artistic spaces such as cinema and moving image, multi-media performance art, and fine art

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<sup>37</sup>Most important to the discussion of remediation are Bolter and Grusin's discussion of it in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999)

<sup>38</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), Xi.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 9.

exhibitions. Given that drag is a performative medium that encompasses the transformation of bodies, the fact that drag is “mobile” and appears frequently in the aforementioned mediums or settings is an obvious fact. The significance arises from the particular affordances and specificities (in both the Greenbergian and anti-Greenbergian uses of the word<sup>40</sup>) of these mediums and how they might align, converge, and transform when encountering drag. In many ways drag is both an endorsement and disavowal of the primacy of categories of identity gender, sexuality, etc – the literature as developed to date would suggest that it must validate dominant ideologies and histories, structures and boundaries in order to deconstruct and/or transform them. Given this contradictory relationship, how might examples of drag forms such as its gestures and genres transform when taking into account the formal logics and affordances and the medium specificities and possibilities of cinema through their collision? Moreover, how might these collisions reveal productive overlaps in form and medium between drag and the cinematic as equally and inherently mobile and embodied forms, organized frequently around genre forms and their transgressions, and through these collisions enable their collusion as cinematic drag.

### **1.5 Thesis Outline: Drag as a Formal Practice of Queer Worldbuilding**

When considering the effects of formal appropriation and remediation, drag provides a “queering” of not only narratives of gender, ideology and history, but also of particular mediums and artistic forms.

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<sup>40</sup> Here I am referring to Clement Greenberg’s discussion of medium specificity in his infamous 1960 article ‘Modernist Painting.’ Greenberg’s discussion of medium specificity, emphasizing the distinct formal qualities of artistic medium and the necessity of their separation from one another is a curious framework for my discussion of the mobile and fluid capacities of drag. Clement Greenberg. ‘Modernist Painting.’ Forum Lectures (Washington, D. C.: Voice of America), 1960. Arts Yearbook 4, 1961 (unrevised).



In light of this, how might the suggested framework of cinematic drag expand a radical potential for drag that not only carries social and political relevance, but also speaks to the complex and critical capacities of the medium as an artform? Indeed, in returning to artist Sin Wai Kin's articulation of drag and cinema as “performative technologies,” which hints at the importance of forms and mediums to perform the work of “worldbuilding,” is it possible that drag is less about identity performance than it is about tangible tools and material transformations? In other words, understanding the creative and cultural tools of queer artists advances instances of drag as a “radical” artform that stretches beyond the discursive and ephemeral. Applying this methodology to a discussion of drag and cinema as *cinematic drag* roots these artists and films within a material world that acknowledges the lived realities and tangible strategies of queer artists who live simultaneously in a world ordered by both intangible and tangible ideologies, apparatuses, and forms.

Following this introductory chapter, my thesis launches into these questions through analysis of examples of cinematic drag framed through the concepts of gesture, genre, and temporality. Gesture, genre, and temporality appear as important concepts and formal logic for both cinema and drag and as such provide an organizing principle through which to understand what I term and loosely classify *cinematic drag*. In Chapter 2, I traverse into the familiar territory of Livingston's 1990 documentary to explore the vitality of gesture within cinematic and drag forms, and how embodied form as gesture enables a re-exploration of materiality and movement in drag not only as referential of gender and identity constructions but also as overlapping with the ‘moving image’ as key to the formal logic of the cinematic medium. In Chapter 3, I explore the history and theory of genre as it emerges out of film theory and drag cultural conventions. I argue for the importance of historical and theoretical understanding of “genre” and “genre form” in drag and masquerade and for

how the concept is inextricable from cinema. This chapter includes an initial discussion of John Waters' camp cinema and the earlier influences of classical Hollywood genre films on drag content, style, and form. The chapter's primary case study explores representations of drag and masquerade as they are remediated in the cinematic productions of Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar, whose work "queers" the genre of melodrama. Using an expansive and layered approach to form and materiality, the "genre form" of Almodóvarian cinema embodies what I codify in this thesis as *cinematic drag*.

In my final chapter, I explore the expanded nature of cinema and drag in contemporary art practices, thinking through *performative technologies* including drag, storytelling and cinema as taken up by Sin Wai Kin as a practice of worldbuilding of non-binary, femme, queer, trans and gender nonconforming modalities and futures. This chapter explores how Sin's work is in many ways a confluence of the earlier discussions of cinematic drag through embodied gesture and genre form, while also expanding into other mutually inclusive schemas in both cinema and drag: temporality and narrative. This chapter engages with Freeman, Lorenz, and Muñoz's discussion of queerness and temporality alongside theories of narrative including Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' and Laura Marks' notion of haptic visuality, whose theory on cinematic form and embodiment helps to conceptualize drag beyond the visual thereby eliciting the expanded terrains of *cinematic drag*<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Laura U Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000)

## Chapter 2 (GESTURE)

### The Embodied Form of *Cinematic Drag*: Rethinking *Paris is Burning*

“This aesthetic of “in betweenness” underpins as a signifier the gesture’s relation to meaning, sometimes excessive or sometimes ineffable. At its most literal, gesture is mime-like, a recognisable signal proffering a supplement to the verbal, reducing the abstraction of language to bodily, material expressiveness. On the other hand, gesture hovers on the brink of meaning, suggesting but resisting and remaining closer to the ineffable than the fullness of language.”

- Laura Mulvey. "Cinematic Gesture: The Ghost in the Machine."<sup>42</sup>

#### 2.1 Introduction

Known for her groundbreaking work on the cinematic gaze and gendered spectatorship in classical Hollywood films, Laura Mulvey’s more recent writing focuses on the role of gesture in film theory. Based on analysis of the embodied gesturalism of actress Marilyn Monroe, Mulvey argues for the complexity of cinematic gesture and its relationship to ideas of artifice, gender, and filmic materiality. Gestures arise from the movements of bodies, faces, hands, and other elements of the human torso. As products of “energy and motion,” certain gestures are said to form images or pictures that denote an object or mimic particular movement patterns.<sup>43</sup> These gestures are representative of “artifacts or acts” and are called “imagistic.”<sup>44</sup> Imagistic gestures have been reasoned to be ‘motion pictures’ of sorts and are thus relevant to the study of film and film theory.<sup>45</sup> In drag discourse, despite an abundance of source material, it is only recently that significant

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<sup>42</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Cinematic Gesture: The Ghost in the Machine." *Journal for Cultural Research* 19, no. 1 (2015): 6-14. Pp 7.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins, "Introduction: Gesture in Film." *Journal for Cultural Research* 19, no. 1 (2015): 1-5. Pp 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

research has begun to view gesture's importance to a theoretical, formal, and historical understanding of the medium.<sup>46</sup> Given the proposition of this thesis, which aims in part to explore the formal complexity of "in-betweenness" in examples of what I call *cinematic drag*, Mulvey's quotation and the broader gendered cinematic masquerade her article explores could conceivably stand in for analysis of gesture in drag as well of cinema. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to delve into particular theories of film and drag, rendering them mutually inclusive of one another through gesture as a means of visual and formal rethinking of an iconic example of cinematic drag: the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*.

## **2.2 *Paris is Burning*: Parable and Paradox; Butler and hooks**

Massively influential and equally controversial, Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary has become oversaturated, if not cliché, in queer academic discourse. I recall attending an academic conference where one art historian was in the middle of referencing the film, which documented the lives of queer and trans communities of colour in New York's drag and ballroom subculture, remarking: "Now of course I assume we all know what Judith Butler and bell hooks have had to say about this film?" This rhetorical question reveals how academic discourse arising from Butler (and to a lesser extent, hooks) have come to suffocate and mask the formal complexity and hybrid mediality of the film, as well as the cultural practices it documents. Within queer theory and academic discourse on drag, Livingston's film gravitates from the equally untenable positions as a parable for the medium of drag and for gender performativity, and as paradoxical

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<sup>46</sup> Katie Horowitz, *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness* (New York: Routledge, 2020)

cultural object that has massively expanded the cultural reach of the medium just as much as Butlerian theory has limited more artistic and cultural inquiry beyond subversion. The documentation of ballroom culture in Livingston's film has had an unquestionable influence on the content and form of drag art, most notably witnessed with the rise of television juggernaut *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-) and its many international spin-offs. The program makes frequent citation of the ballroom practices documented by the 1990 documentary, from the category runway competitions, the concepts of 'shade' and 'reading', and the embodied practices of voguing. The critiques of *Drag Race*, in particular, its presentation of a sanitized form of drag, seem to extend from Butler's ideas of around performativity and subversion. As Amelia Jones outlines in *In Between Subjects*, Butler's analysis of drag in Livingston's film "simply extended the problematic and avant-gardist tendency to fetishize those perceived as exotic and marginal as 'subverting' the tropes of European modernism."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, For Butler, while drag can reveal gender's costuming and subvert its stability as a natural process, certain practices of drag represented in Livingston's film can be dangerously reductive and risk reasserting hegemonic gendered power structures. Challenges to Butler's discussion of Livingston's film tend to centre on the set up of Venus Extravaganza, who was murdered during filming, as a tragic example of a failure to 'pass' for a white, cisgender woman.<sup>48</sup> As Namaste points out, Butler's inability to engage with the lived reality of Venus as a sex worker reveals a tendency on Butler's part to privilege theory over materiality.

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<sup>47</sup> Jones, *In between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*, 205.

<sup>48</sup> Cisgender denotes a person whose gender identity / expression conforms to their assigned gender at birth.

Concurring with this, I hold that this lapse extends to a failure to analyze the documentary as an artistic object in itself and as a documentation (if however, deeply imperfect) of the complex practices of queer and trans cultural production. In particular, Butlerian discourse roadblocks an understanding of the collisions and layers of cinematic, drag, and queer and trans cultural forms which produce an unstable and uncertain conception of medium. In contrast to Butler, bell hooks' analysis is more comprehensive, considering the political implications of the film, drag, and ballroom while attending to the artistic content and form. hooks' analysis is perhaps most valuable in the late theorist's explication of the racialized role of the camera and of cinematic spectatorship, drawing on both Black feminism and classic film theory to question the role of whiteness in the film and the embodiments depicted within.<sup>49</sup> While there are notable flaws in hooks' analysis, particularly in her misunderstanding of trans subjectivity and her limited conceptualization of drag, hooks offers a model to analysis that engages the formal and material aspects of drag and cinema as overlapping and colliding mediums.<sup>50</sup> This pathway enables a rethinking of *Paris is Burning* with formal analysis by way of the increasingly prominent topic in both drag discourse and film theory: gesture.

### **2.3 Artifice and Gesture: Cinematic Gesture from Agamben to Mulvey**

Laura Mulvey's discussion of gesture saw the wading of a prominent figure of classical film theory into a burgeoning field of analysis. Theories of gesture in cinema tended to divide around conceptions of gesture as either representational and linguistic or by their ineffability.<sup>51</sup> Language

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<sup>49</sup> bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?," In *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2020). 281.

<sup>50</sup> See Stokoe, *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo*, 3, 57-59.

<sup>51</sup> Chare and Watkins, *Introduction: Gesture in Film*, 2.

psychologist David McNeill is known for his research on gesture through the mimicry of hand movements and poses as thought processes.<sup>52</sup> In tracing the “dynamic role of mimicry of gestures in ideation and communication,” McNeill drew an expansive assessment of the agency of collaborative relationships between film auteurs, film actors, and audiences in communicating and remediating cinematic gestures.<sup>53</sup> Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues for a less tidy understanding of gesture that has implications for cinema. Agamben’s work unsettles more didactic or mimetic conceptions of gesture, and instead embraces “crisis at the level of visible utterance’s articulation and interpretation.”<sup>54</sup> Agamben describes gesture as “an inessential communal action” that western societies have lost sight of during modernity.<sup>55</sup> According to film theorists Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins, cinema “remembers” gestures, summarizing Agamben’s discussion of cinematic gesture as “not determined by an image, but timeliness in the transience of communication.”<sup>56</sup> Through Agamben’s thinking, gestures “constitute a temporality of movement that transforms the photographic into the cinematic. Agamben’s insistence that the “element of cinema is gesture and not image” can help to complicate and broaden analysis of gesture in cinematic drag through *Paris is Burning*, pushing past notions of drag as consisting chiefly of aesthetic masquerade rather than also encompassing embodied form through gesture.

Inarguably the most notable of gestures to emerge from Livingstone’s documentary is voguing. Ballroom participant and famed voguer Willie Ninja described voguing as a complex system of dance movements and hand gestures that fuses embodied forms, including the imagery of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 3.

Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, gymnastics and array of bodily gestures that gravitate from perfect lines to awkward postures. As Ninja's descriptions alludes to, voguing gestures incorporate the mimicry and participatory capacities in a likeness to McNeill's research on cinematic gesture through citation and repetition. Vogue, with its remediation of both ancient and contemporary cultural archives, also evokes Agamben's discussion of a temporality of movement that transforms still art into moving image media. With Mulvey's contributions, the embodied form of cinematic gesture achieves an "in-betweenness" of both abstract and didactic understandings.<sup>57</sup> Further, Mulvey's approach to gesture has particular relevance for this particular discussion of *cinematic drag* in her gendered analysis of Monroe, "fusing" inanimate and animate concepts of artifice, image, and mask with cinematic bodies and movement.<sup>58</sup>

Working through Agamben's writing, Mulvey uses the cinematic figure of Monroe as an illustration of the correspondence of artifice and gesture with the broader affordance of cinema of the formal and conceptual relationship between image and movement. Many of the affordances and specificities in drag performance also rely heavily on a similar relationship animate forms, such as the moving body of the performer and inanimate forms, through the creation of masks and particular compositions of fashion remediated from imagery and representational practices steeped in artifice such as photography and painting.<sup>59</sup> Dorian Corey's interview in Livingston's documentary, praised (perhaps, problematically) by hooks as more substantive than others, reveals how the gestures of vogue arose from linguistic and relational aspects of drag and ballroom. As Corey explains, the practices of 'shade' and 'reading' developed by Black queens along the pageant and ballroom

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<sup>57</sup> Mulvey, *Cinematic Gesture*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Again, it is pertinent to clarify that ballroom and drag overlap so much in discussions of Livingston's cinema that conceptualizations of drag become broader and more hybridized.



circuits take the competitive nature of wordplay and creative insults into an embodied practice.<sup>60</sup> With voguing, instead of one-upping the competitor with language or visual appearance, bodily gestures move drag form into a space that is equally abstract and non-verbal as it is discursive, representational, and linguistic. Voguing and other drag gestures confirm the mobility of Mulvey's discussion of cinematic gesture as an aesthetic of "in-betweenness." If Mulvey sees Monroe as embodying the cinematic, then voguing and drag gestures establish more than similitude between drag and cinema, with *Paris is Burning* as a possible demonstration of *cinematic drag*.

## 2.4 Drag and Relational Gestures

Discussion of gesture also extends into recent drag scholarship and research. Katie Horowitz devotes a chapter to gesture in her 2019 monograph *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness*. On the subject of gesture in drag performance and theories of gender performativity, Horowitz states:

This notion that relations give rise to identity I call *interperformance*. ...the reframing of performativity as intra-activity marks a significant shift away from repetition-based understandings of performativity, such as Butler's citationality (1993), Richard Schechner's restored behavior (1985), and Victor Turner's ritual (1982). Performativity here is not about reiteration or pattern or copies of originals that are themselves copies. Nor is it about particular gestures whose repetition over time sediments something like an identity.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Within the film, Corey defines the practices of 'shade' and 'reading' as elements of ballroom and drag culture that deploy wordplay through joyful insults. According to Corey 'reading' is the more direct form of roasting an opponent's visual presentation. In contrast 'shade' takes on a more veiled use of diction, with Corey offering the example "I don't have to tell you that you're ugly, because you know that you are."

<sup>61</sup> Horowitz, *Drag*, 11.

Horowitz's assertion, that relations, instead of the copying and repetition of particular gestures and forms, are what give rise to identity. This might seem to distort the use value of Mulvey's gendered discussion of cinematic gesture for this chapter's exploration of cinematic drag. On the contrary, Horowitz's reframing of gender performativity helps to liberate drag from being simply about identity. Further, this relational and phenomenological approach to drag and its practices of gesture help to elevate discussions of drag and ballroom in Livingston's film. These gestures are not merely citational appropriations from cinema and other cultural archetypes; they are the product of relations in a culture.

Poses that derive from mass-culture, including film, are not 'copied' or 'appropriated' to reveal archetypes; instead, through relational cultures, they acquire new meanings. The importance of relationality to queer cultural production is summed up Amelia Jones, who says "relationality can be the primary mechanism in the formation of coalitional communities."<sup>62</sup> For Horowitz, the genealogies of drag gestures are traced through their semiotics but acquire complexity and are remediated through relational processes.<sup>63</sup> Horowitz's discussion of gesture helps to establish a "phenomenological account of drag as culture." From this approach, we can see how drag is cultural and collective more than it is singularly about personal identity. It is fluid and cultivated through communal processes, in this case the Black, Hispanic, and racialized subculture of queer, gay, gender nonconforming and trans artists and performers who foster a less rigid understanding of drag, queerness, and even medium-specificity. In this fluid and hybrid framework, the proposal to view works such as *Paris is Burning* through the logic of *cinematic drag* becomes possible. *Cinematic drag*, when elaborated through the topic of gesture, shows the

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<sup>62</sup> Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 86.

<sup>63</sup> Horowitz, *Drag*, 11

benefit of viewing drag as part of and among cultural forms that are more often about relations between bodies and forms than they are about identity.

## **2.5 Conclusions: Against Documentary Capture - Drag Embodies the Cinematic**

The major criticisms by hooks, particularly in the role of the camera in objectifying the bodies and stories of racialized ballroom performers and the fetishizing tendencies of the white audiences of Livingston's film, are themselves the products of the affordances and specificities of the cinematic medium and the documentary as form.<sup>64</sup> In Livingston's film the camera, especially when wielded by a white filmmaker with far greater cultural and social mobility than the subjects she documents, confirms its "colonizing" ability as a formal apparatus to capture and document bodies as subject matter.<sup>65</sup> As hooks explains, the documentary form masks the role of Livingston as the curator of the recorded experience such that "it is easy for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay 'natives' and not recognize that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston."<sup>66</sup> However, this idea of the cinematic image, as controlled and curated by the hand filmmaker, is where hooks' critique could be informed by the hybrid logic of *cinematic drag*. I would argue that hooks overemphasizes the documentary form at the expense and agency of the cultural production of the ballroom participants.

*Paris is Burning* is a documentary that does not merely document; it is an example of the collision of drag and the cinematic medium through the formal logic of gesture. Unlike still

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<sup>64</sup> hooks, *Is Paris Burning?*, 286-287

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 281. See hooks' discussion of the colonizing white gaze.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 283.

photography, moving image photographic mediums have a different relationship to representation and movement through the formal condition of gesture. As Mulvey explains, the “in-betweenness” of cinematic gesture reveals the essential relationship between animate and inanimate forms. Mulvey gives active power to Monroe in her analysis, the Hollywood star herself transcending the faulty binary between gendered subjectivity and artifice. Unlike Mulvey, hooks’ overinvestment in the power of the director comes at the expense of the agency of the ballroom figures like Pepper LaBeija, Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia St. Laurent, and Willi Ninja and their hybrid and multifaceted cultural production. In this analysis hooks has the effect of freezing the embodied form of drag and cinematic gesture in the documentary as if it were photographic rather than cinematic, in stasis rather than in motion. Indeed, as an early example of cinematic drag through the collision of formal strategies and medium fluidity, the form of drag and ballroom are not able to be constricted by other mediums. Instead, the primary documentation at hand in *Paris is Burning* is the complexity and mobility of the cultural forms of ballroom and drag artists, their lineages through appropriation and remediation of cinematic gestures and images, and the possibilities of the collision between cinematic and filmic. The film demonstrates how drag embodies culture and at the same time as it cultivates and produces it; it embodies relations between bodies and cultural forms through artifice and gesture. In examples such as Livingston’s film and the ballroom cultures it documented, gesture offers a lens to see the relationship between drag and cinema as one that expands beyond likeness. Through gesture, drag embodies the cinematic at the same time as it transforms it.

## Chapter 3 (GENRE)

### A History of Genre Collisions - Drag in Pedro Almodóvar's Melodramatic Cinema

#### 3.1 Introduction: (Queering) Genre and its Forms

Genre, like gender and identity, is a compulsion of ideology. Genre's boundaries, its classifications and distinctions, work to define and categorize the representational structure of artistic forms from literature, cinema, music, painting, and theatre. Genre, as film theorist Christine Gledhill states, is "first and foremost a boundary phenomenon."<sup>67</sup> The concept of genre originates from the classical era, when Aristotle attempted a typology of literature styles in *Poetics*.<sup>68</sup> During the Renaissance, genre was expanded and reformed into a more rigid system of classification, becoming even more so during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries wherein mechanical and scientific rationalism merged with artistic philosophy to cultivate the discussion of genres as species.<sup>69</sup> As film theorist Edward Buscombe surmises, the Early Modern idea of genre as a rigid system of classification encouraged consistent resistance to it and its prescriptive tendencies from the Romantic period onward.<sup>70</sup> With the rise of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought, genre's rigidity became all the more unsavory, while its fluidity and hybridity became more possible. While in art history, genres have maintained a more marginal position, genre is generally an enduring aspect of many forms of cultural media, or, as Drew Daniels puts it: "at once omnipresent and undertheorized, genre is what nobody really believes

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<sup>67</sup> Christine Gledhill, "Re-Thinking Genre" in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, (New York: Arnold, 2000), 221.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Buscombe., "The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema." in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed Grant, Barry Keith., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 12-13.

<sup>70</sup> 12-14.

in but everyone relies upon.”<sup>71</sup> Daniels sees genre as a kind of filter, using Colie’s idea that genre has a “fix” on the world, and combining it with Jacques Rancière’s notion of a politics of perception, noting that understanding genre “means understanding technologies of inclusion and exclusion as they reinforce or counter such ongoing systems of identification and dis-identification.”<sup>72</sup> As Daniels and many film theorists suggest, these structures and their elaboration through materiality are also rife spaces for artistic and political agency through transgression and transformation. Genre, as with gender and identity, can be ‘queered.’

Auteurs Rainer Warner Fassbinder, Todd Haynes, and Pedro Almodóvar ‘queer’ the genre of melodrama by appropriating the genre’s formal structure and narrative tropes from certain classical Hollywood productions.<sup>73</sup> If drag is to be understood as an analogy, then these filmmakers could be said to remediate genre in the familiar way that drag approaches gender and identity: not as simple imitation or mimesis, but through transformative masquerade. Beyond analogy, Almodóvar’s films in particular feature the trope of drag performance, which can act as a framing device to observe the director’s approach to genre, identity, and narrative, which all suspend and distort dichotomies of ‘real’ and ‘false’, ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’, and ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic.’ In this chapter, I argue that drag in Almodóvarian cinema expresses a particular relationship between film genre, specifically, melodrama and queer strategies of masquerade and drag. I observe the director’s layered approach to genre as primarily a formal expression of boundary transgression and generic excess which in effect commits to the medium of drag’s own embodied materiality and expanded

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<sup>71</sup> Drew Daniel, "Redistributing the Sensible: Genre Theory After Rancière." *Exemplaria* (Binghamton, N.Y.) 31, no. 2 (2019). 130.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>73</sup> See Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

capacities beyond gender subversion and toward the appropriation, remediation, and transformation of genres, mediums, and forms.<sup>74</sup> Informing this approach to genre form, this chapter outlines the colliding genealogies of cinematic and drag genres, a formal and historical process that not only influenced the form and content of drag but also likely informed the queer strategies taken up by Almodóvar. As such, this chapter positions the critical place of drag and cinematic genre in Almodóvarian cinema, and the theoretical and formal overlaps it incorporates, as another instance of *cinematic drag*.

### 3.2 Typologies of Genre: Cinema and Drag

Ideas of drag genre embody the notion of genre as an at once omniscient and undertheorized conceptual frame. The most notable theorization on drag genre, albeit from the lateral concept of style, arises from Muñoz's discussion of the classifying system of styles of drag, in his 1997 case-study "The White to be Angry". Muñoz builds on Julian Fleisher's *Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide* which derives from formal and visual distinctions between 'glamour' and 'clown' drag.<sup>75</sup> From these two poles of drag style, Muñoz creates a kind of spectrum which associates ideas of 'real' with glamour drag, while its opposite, 'clown', is associated with 'parody' due to its over-the-topness and artificiality, with other drag artists falling somewhere in between.<sup>76</sup> On the one hand, this early classification system is far too rigid; it also implicitly excludes non-feminine forms of drag, while ideas of real and false have the tendency of perpetuating less-nuanced

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<sup>74</sup> Levine, *Forms*, 13. While Caroline Levine is bullish on the tendency herself, she summarizes that genre and form are often "synonymous or near-synonymous." While I agree, genre and the classification of genre does rely on formal conventions and the two are certainly entwined in the practice and development genre categorization.

<sup>75</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentification*, 95, 100.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

theorizations of passing in queer and trans culture.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, the drag style spectrum enables the possibility of thinking about drag form and how it organizes itself into distinct proto-genre categories, where ‘glamour’ is codified with mimetic representational strategies, and with ‘clown’ as a system of drag form that stands as the visual antithesis to the mimicry of binary gender presentation, using exaggerated bodily form, makeup and gestures to distinctly mark the object as smeared powdered artifice.<sup>78</sup>

Muñoz’s multi-pronged intervention into this discourse, focusing particularly on dimensions of queerness and race, offers up Davis as one who terrorizes the stability and coherence of the drag genre system. Muñoz’s development of his theory of disidentification derives partly from his assessment of a system of genre predicated on the perception and organization of formal characteristics, which supports Daniels’ claim that genre means understanding technologies of inclusion and exclusion. I argue that while Muñoz’s claim that Davis distorts the genre system is a valid one, it leaves it suspended, which only serves to strengthen its importance and opens it up to further and expanded detailing. Moreover, Davis’ ‘drag terrorism’ instantiates a new genre or sub-genre of drag which is taken up by artists such as Christeene in the decades that follow Muñoz’s work.

The so-called drag genre system initiated by Fleischer and elaborated by Muñoz also relies on examples of drag seen in cinema. Indeed, the relationship between cinema and drag is also historical, and one that can be traced through the concept of genre and generic forms. While more of a loosely defined sub-genre, notable representations of drag as an artform in cinema have had a wide influence on queer culture and drag subculture. The documentation of ballroom culture in Livingston’s film, in which performers would use fashion, cosmetics, walking and moving to

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<sup>77</sup> For instance, Butler’s conflation between drag and trans identity in the case of Venus.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 100-101.



embody cultural archetypes—from businessmen to butch queens, to glamorous female icons—demonstrates the joyful enactment of classification and boundaries through remediated form as proto-genres. These Ballroom categories have had an unquestionable mediating influence on the content and form of drag art, ensuring the longevity of certain drag categories and underscoring the importance of drag genre as constituted through boundaried forms.<sup>79</sup> In narrative cinema, mainstream examples of the representation of drag include *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (dir. Beebon Kidron, 1995) *Victor/Victoria* (dir. Blake Edwards, 1982), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephan Elliott, 1994), and *The Birdcage* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1996). In their article “Drag Performance on Screen,” drag scholar Harris Kornstein provides an overview of moving image representations of drag and cross-dressing, arguing that even films such as *Yentl* (Barbara Streisand, 1983) and *White Chicks* (Keenan Ivory Wayans, 2004), which are about heterosexual cisgender characters cross-dressing as a plot device, are - despite being controversial - nonetheless “taken up by LGBTQ audiences as camp, allegorical, icon-driven, or otherwise queer-adjacent cinematic texts.”<sup>80</sup> Kornstein clarifies that while these representations of drag in Hollywood have had a palpable influence, their political work was often muted by criticism from those who felt these works “signified a selling out, sanitizing, or appropriation of queer culture” that did little to stop the violence against queer communities.<sup>81</sup>

The focus on drag only as subject matter in cinema restricts the broader cultural and formal influence of the cinematic, including its contributions to understandings of genre. While Kornstein

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<sup>79</sup> This influence extended out of cultural prominence of Livingston’s film, perhaps most notably witnessed with the rise of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-) and its many international spin-offs.

<sup>80</sup> Harris Kornstein, “Drag Performance on Screen,” in *International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media and Communication*, ed. Karen Ross et. al. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 2.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

seems mostly concerned with detailing the spread and reception of drag through screen technologies, moving from cinema to new media, and crucially detailing more underground examples such as John Waters and Vaginal Davis, the choice to not consider drag within an expanded idea of genre and form leads to a missed opportunity that evacuates the presence cinema as a medium has within drag culture. For example, 'Glamour', a category or genre of drag that initially emerged from a lineage of gender impersonation in Vaudeville-style theatre, is equally, if not more, indebted to Classical Hollywood Cinema. Beyond drag as content in cinema, the cinematic archive affords drag artists endless arrays of form and content to be appropriated and remediated, taking the makeup, hair, styling, costumes, and gestures of iconic Hollywood figures and scenes and remobilizing them into the codification of drag's own genre forms. Genre cinema itself has a mediating effect on drag genre and forms. Positioned as an alternative to *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-), the series *Dragula* (2016-), hosted by drag duo the Boulet Brothers, organizes itself around three categories: 'Glamour', 'Filth', and 'Horror'. The genre of horror cinema, itself a space of transgression and queer subversive possibility, has helped to cultivate a subgenre of monstrous drag, wherein gender and identity are merely the baseline of the reproduction of horror film content and forms onto the body of drag artists. 'Filth' as a generic form of drag emerges from the transgressive cinema of John Waters and his notorious collaborator Divine - exploitation cinema, or the subcultural categories of 'trash' and 'filth'. Waters and Divine's *Female Trouble* (1974) even inspired the naming of Butler's seminal and first monograph *Gender Trouble* (1990), afforded almost-near biblical status in the study of gender and performance. Indeed, in the drag spectrum, Divine would seemingly fall in the 'clown' category, but as with Muñoz's example of Davis troubling the generic system, Divine and Water's cinematic approach has to be understood within the lens of queer strategies of camp. As the ensuing

discussion will outline, camp and drag have notably coalesced in the work of Davis, Waters and Divine, as well as informing the approach to genre and drag in Almodóvarian cinema.<sup>82</sup>

### 3.3 Queer Camp: Genre Transgression and Subversion in Cinema and Drag

Neither a form nor a genre, camp is a queer strategy that overlaps and entwines with a discussion of drag genre and the role of drag in the queering of film genre. Made famous by cultural critic Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” Sontag described camp as a sensibility that sees everything in quotation marks and imbued with an aesthetic penchant for artifice and exaggeration.<sup>83</sup> Filmmaker and anthropologist Mattijs Van De Port similarly positions camp through “relentless attempts to undo the naturalization of cultural forms and practices” and joins Sontag in centralizing drag as exemplary of these strategies.<sup>84</sup> John Waters’ films, specifically the 1970s ‘trash trilogy’ of *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977), are synonymous with a camp sensibility.<sup>85</sup> These films also highlight Waters’ appropriative and transgressive approach to

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<sup>82</sup> Marvin D’Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon, *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, (West Sussex: Wiley & Black Well, 2013), 3-4. The editors of the Anthology Publication *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, Marvin D’Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon describe the term Almodóvarian as means of incapsulating the ways in which the director’s influence transcends the textual domains of cinema. D’Lugo and Vernon are working from Foucault’s deconstructed conceptualization of authorship, clarifying that Almodóvarian refers both to more traditional ideas of film auteurism as observable through the form and style of a particular director’s style and the Foucauldian notion of Almodóvar as launching his own discursive cinematic practice that would come to be emulated. In alignment with D’Lugo and Vernon, my use of the adjective Almodóvarian throughout this chapter and onwards is rooted in ideas of the film auteurism. Moreover, I particularly like the discursive and expansive possibilities for the adjective in describing the genre form of drag in Almodóvar’s films and how it corresponds to his queering of genre and gender.

<sup>83</sup> Mattijs Van de Port, “Genuinely Made up: Camp, Baroque, and Other Denaturalizing Aesthetics in the Cultural Production of the Real,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 18 no. 4 (2012), 880.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 157-159.

cinematic genre - taking up the generic forms of exploitation cinema, cult cinema, and Hollywood melodramas. Considering the genre of melodrama, film and cultural theorist Matthew Tinkcom argues that Waters “offers a split affectivity” wherein his films engage a playful camp viewing of the genre’s depiction of femininity as “performative excess of costume, speech, and gesture” alongside a tendency to take seriously the demonization of femininity in Water’s contemporary America.<sup>86</sup> Tinkcom’s description of this dual approach sees camp’s ironic retooling of cultural objects and film heroines as performative excess mixed with Water’s tendency to antagonize with abject imagery and forms. The embodiment of this style could arguably be the star of Waters’ earliest films and his long-time collaborator, Divine. The presence of Divine, her excessive visuality and aberrant approach to physicality, is inseparable from the aesthetic strategies of Waters’ films. This collaboration, steeped in the queer camp use of aesthetics and with a subversive critique of feminine suffering, becomes dually embodied in the *mise-en-scène* of Waters’ film and the figure of Divine. As Tinkcom notes, this ‘trash’ and ‘camp’ embodiment shows Waters’ attempt to insert a transgressive drag artist into the role of the melodramatic heroine - turning the audience’s sympathetic gaze onto a figure of abjection.<sup>87</sup> The collaboration between Waters and Divine is thus an example of a queering of genre through the use of drag as a methodology.

If Waters’ early films use of camp and abjection offers a transgressive assault on cinematic norms through a remediation of generic forms, then Divine’s role transcends the relegation of drag as mere subject matter to becoming an active entity in the cinematic form. The effect of this transcendence from subject to informing the medium’s form also enters drag as formal strategy into the cinematic discourse about its genres. Another consequence of Divine’s singular status and her

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 158.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 159.

collaboration with Waters and his transgressive filmic style is its influence on drag's own ontology and the formal qualities of generic classification. As Tinkcom notes, part of the impetus of Divine's artistic style was to mock the figure of the drag queen, or at least, instances of drag folded into a "more conciliatory femininity."<sup>88</sup> Just as Waters aimed his camera at the figure of the melodramatic heroine, Divine's embodiment appropriates the cinematic archive and provides an example of its mediating effect on particular forms of drag.

Divine was a controversial drag embodiment for other drag performers because her antagonism of certain styles of drag, particularly the more 'conciliatory' form of glamour drag, which ignored the class distinctions embedded in such transformations. Divine's self-conscious approach demonstrates the role of cinema in the construction of drag's generic forms and the dominant sensibilities of the medium of drag.<sup>89</sup> As the first truly autonomous model of a transformative queer masquerade impacting the generic form of cinema and drag, Divine proves the possibilities and significance of taking into account the productive collision of drag and cinematic mediums. Delving deeper into the materiality of genre form and the queering of melodrama, Almodovarian cinema takes up overlapping queer strategies deployed Waters and Divine with greater and more sustained complexity.

### **3.4 Layers of Masquerade: Almodóvarian Collisions of Drag and Cinema**

Strategies of queer masquerade and drag are prominent in the cinema of Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar, who has a complex relationship to 'authentic' notions of subjectivity, narrative, genre, and autobiography. Themes of queerness run deep throughout Almodóvar's catalogue, which

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

includes depictions of homosexual and queer sexualities, gender transgression and transgender identity, and a love of queer aesthetics of camp and parody. Almodóvar's early films were closely associated with the *La Movida Madrileña*, a counter cultural movement centered in Madrid that encompassed an eruption of cultural and political expression following the end of a long period of violent repression under the Francoist regime in Spain.<sup>90</sup> While culturally distinct, the rough aesthetic and irreverent narratives of early Almodóvar's films resemble the queer deconstructionism of Waters and Divine in both aesthetics and content. However, while Almodóvar and Waters were both invested in the Hollywood melodrama as a site of appropriation and remediation via queer strategies of camp, a divergence would emerge between the two as Almodóvar's style and politics began to transition in the 1990s. This formal and thematic transformation—moving from punk aesthetics to a more sumptuous *mise-en-scène* reminiscent of the aesthetics of high fashion—was, understandably, most discernible on the layered and “excessively” shiny surface of Almodóvar's films.”<sup>91</sup> Almodóvar's films often centre around themes and characters marked by their femininity and queerness, surrounded by objects that stand in as echoes of the Spanish past (the Civil War and Franco's reign). These referents of the Spanish cultural imaginary and its traumatic past “permeate and shape Almodóvar's strategies to “queer” the melodrama.”<sup>92</sup> Adrián Pérez Melgosa identifies Almodóvar's “foregrounding of style and surface” through an emphasis on clothing and fashion, hairstyle and makeup, decoration, and colour as distinctly suggestive of theories of gendered masquerade and identity.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Adrián Pérez Melgosa, “The Ethics of Oblivion: Personal, National, and Cultural Memories in the Films of Pedro Almodóvar,” In *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, eds M. D'Lugo and K.M. Vernon (West Sussex: Wiley & Black Well, 2013), 182.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

Given the queering of melodrama through surface and embodiment, the trope of drag performance found in Almodóvarian cinema demands greater attention. As I will argue, within these layers of surface, drag in Almodóvar's films extends beyond content to becoming fully embedded in the aesthetic and thematic operations. According to J.D Gutiérrez-Albilla, drag in Almodóvar's work can be positioned as a framing device to observe the director's approach to the dichotomies of 'real' and 'false', 'natural' and 'artificial' and 'authentic' and 'inauthentic.'<sup>94</sup> In discussions of Almodóvar's work, scholars often remark that instead of seeking to resolve these dichotomies, the director willingly holds them in suspension and relishes in the transgressions of their boundaries.<sup>95</sup> My analysis of the films *High Heels* (1991), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Bad Education* (2004) will explore the use of drag and other forms of queer masking/unmasking in Almodóvarian cinema. Moreover, in outlining the layered contours of drag as a method for distorting the authenticity of identity, narrative, and the authorial self through the queering of gendered embodiment and formal excess of cinematic melodramas, genre can emerge as yet another frame through which to explore *cinematic drag*.

Drag is a recurring element in Almodóvarian cinema, which acts as a method of queer masquerade that assists in a disruption of any coherent and ordered experience of identity and narrative. Despite not dealing with Butler's work, Mathijs Van De Port's discussion of drag in his article "Genuinely made up: camp, baroque, and other denaturalizing aesthetics in the cultural production of the real" pushes past Butler's dichotomy by establishing how drag's unmasking of the real does so in a way that actually stands as preoccupation and "unshakable desire for that which

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<sup>94</sup> J.D Gutiérrez-Albilla, "Scratching the Past on the Surface of the Skin," In *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, eds M. D'Lugo and K.M. Vernon (West Sussex: Wiley & Black Well, 2013), 334.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

is real.”<sup>96</sup> Van De Port argues that within camp and drag this antagonism for the real as also encompassing a contradictory yearning for it “mobilizes the body to produce [...] fleeting moments of jouissance.”<sup>97</sup> Van De Port, who briefly references Almodóvarian cinema, provides a distorted framework of camp that can be extended to Almodóvar’s use of drag and other formal instances of the masking/unmasking of gendered and cinematic artifice

*High Heels* (1991) is a maternal melodrama centered on the difficult relationship between daughter Rebecca, a young news anchor, and her neglectful celebrity singer mother Becky del Páramo. From this tension, the mother and daughter become involved with a female impersonator Letal who is also covertly an undercover police officer Hugo, later revealed to also be in disguise as a judge who emerges to investigate both Rebecca and Becky for the murder of Rebecca’s husband. Becky and Rebecca first encounter Letal in a gay bar, drawn by the notoriety of Letal’s drag act which is a faithful impersonation and tribute to Becky. Letal appears on stage dressed in a style denoting Becky’s “pop-era” and lip syncs for the crowd in a blonde wig. While attempting to aggressively seduce Rebecca, Letal is unmasked backstage as he removes his wig, the first of his many unmaskings, as the narrative gradually establishes that Letal the drag queen is one of three identities taken up by the character in the film. Leaning heavily on camp as a queer method, any sense of a “real” motivation or identity becomes hard to grasp, as Rebecca, Letal, and the other characters mediate their identities through false images and farcical tropes. In this early film, Almodóvar’s use of drag performance functions mostly as a trope that reflects the layers of drag represented within the film, which distorts the authenticity of the identities of the characters and their motives.

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<sup>96</sup> Van de Port, “Genuinely Made up,” 880.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



In 2004, a more mature Almodóvar deploys drag performance once again as a kind of analogical method in *Bad Education*. The film centers around the tension between Enrique, a filmmaker, and what appears to be his long lost friend and childhood crush Ignacio (played by Gael Garcia Bernal). “Ignacio” brings Enrique a script, inspired by the pairs’ experience at traditional Catholic boarding school and Ignacio’s sexual abuse by the Father Manolo. But the Ignacio who writes this script is revealed to in fact be Ignacio’s brother, Juan. Juan had killed the true Ignacio, who was a drug addict and had transitioned after she left the boarding school, going by the name Zahara. A layered meta-fiction, the film weaves between Enrique’s ‘true’ memories and the fictional memories represented through the script written by Juan/ “Ignacio.” Juan and “Ignacio” incorporate drag into the script, a fictional Ignacio performs as Zahara, and Juan frequents a drag nightclub to do research for the script. As with *High Heels*, the narrative of *Bad Education* organizes itself around the unmasking of farces and false identities, exposing the utility of drag for Almodóvar in appropriating and unmasking the workings of narrative and genre conventions.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, in both of these examples, the role of the drag performance as the embodiment of the incoherence of identity and authenticity extend beyond the melodramatic genre, including blending the logic of narrative and identity duplicity of film noir and its famous gendered genre archetype, the femme fatale.<sup>99</sup>

Moving beyond representations of drag as a narrative device and formal tool, there are observable similarities in Almodóvar’s own masking of his identity as an auteur. The 1995 film *The*

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<sup>98</sup> However, a distinction emerges in the later film’s multivalent narrative approach to temporality and narrative - there are the ‘real’ contemporary narratives of the present day seen mostly through the character Enrique, combined with experiences of the past through ‘historical’ and ‘authentic’ memories of the characters alongside the ‘false’ narratives and ‘false’ events in the visualization of the character Juan’s script.

<sup>99</sup> Víctor Fuentes. “Bad Education: Fictional Autobiography and Meta-Film Noir.” In *All about Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, ed by Epps, Bradley S., Despina Kakoudaki (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 444.

*Flower of My Secret* centers on the character Leocadia, who is a popular romance writer publishing under the false name of “Amanda Gris”. Much of the narrative operates around this now familiar trope of masquerading identities, but as Juan Carlos Ibáñez’s has pointed out, there is an added autobiographical parallelism in the depiction of Leocadia, who navigates between a desire for an authentic authorial voice and the safety of anonymously producing apolitical fluff.<sup>100</sup> Ibáñez also positions the film as a bridging work in Almodóvar’s collection, marking a gradual turn away from pure parody and irony toward a more mature and subjective approach to politics and Spanish history.<sup>101</sup> From this we might establish a viewpoint that *The Flower of My Secret* marked a time where Almodóvar relied on masquerade as a means of masking his own relationship to the politics of his films. The cloaking of identities, narratives, and temporalities, coupled with a reliance on feminine embodied form in queer melodramatic cinema, advances a notion that Leocadia is Almodóvar in drag. In her article on the Swedish avant-garde band The Knife, author Kajsa Widegren argues that the relationship between queer masking and authorship has a precedent that can be traced through Michel Foucault’s famous discussion of author-function.<sup>102</sup> To Widegren, Foucault’s discussion of the author-name functions as a formal device that acts as a boundary between texts while also serving to define and distinguish them; this bears a formal resemblance to the material use of the mask.<sup>103</sup> Like the author function, the queer use of masking is a function that is not really used to conceal “an authentic face, or to alter it, but to accentuate, and visualize the

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<sup>100</sup> Juan Carlos Ibáñez, “Memory, Politics, and the Post-Transition in Almodóvar’s Cinema,” In *In A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, eds M. D’Lugo and K.M. Vernon (West Sussex: Wiley & Blackwell, 2013), 159.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Kajsa Widegren, “The Politics of the Mask: The Knife as Queer-Feminists,” *In Made in Sweden*, ed. Alf Björnberg and Thomas Bossius, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 201.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

discourses and boundaries of being intelligible.”<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, clearly intending the film to be his most autobiographical work, the dichotomy between masking/unmasking and auteur/autobiography is distorted and disfigured as Almodóvar turns away from certain tendencies, such as embodied feminine form as self-masquerade. On the other hand, the film still contains the hallmarks of Almodóvarian masquerade in disrupting and reveling in the subsequent reinstatement of the boundaries between and within authenticity and artifice. After all, like cinema, drag and strategies of queer masquerade may suspend and hold up forms, narratives, subjectivities, and authenticity but will never themselves be fixed and static.

### **3.5 All About Almodóvarian Drag: Genre Form through Masquerade, Excess, and Appropriation**

“That’s not a woman, it’s a Christmas Tree.” - College student in *Stella Dallas* (1937)

“I can’t stand the drag queens. They’re sleazebags. They confuse transvestism with a circus. Worse, with mime!” - Agrado in *All About My Mother* (1999)

In characterizing classical Hollywood melodrama, film historian Thomas Elsaesser describes how the genre gives “critical importance to the *mise-en-scène* over intellectual content or story-value” through material elements including sound, composition, light, color, and the symbolic aspects of “overdetermined” objects and decor.<sup>105</sup> Building on Elsaesser, Laura Mulvey portrays the genre’s ability in “giving abstract emotion spectacular form,” which speaks to ways that melodramatic

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,” In *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Grant, Barry Keith, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 443, 449.

cinema's use of spectacle and excess is filtered through formal devices in a kind of masquerade.<sup>106</sup> A key scene in *Bad Education* is the drag performance by the script version of Ignacio, performing as a drag queen Zahara, also played by García Bernal. In a blonde wig and nude-illusion sequin dress, the 'fictional' Zahara, who makes a living as a drag queen, lip syncs seductively into the camera.<sup>107</sup>

Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla has analyzed Zahara's drag performance in the film by focusing on the nude-illusion dress as a "parodic signifier" of femininity that extends into an analogy of how memory becomes embodied in the materiality of flesh and clothing, and by extension the surface of the film. Moreover, this elaboration on embodied surface calls up the Elsaesser and other film theorists' discussion of the overdetermined surface as essential to the logic of melodramatic form. Melodrama reveals the importance of the cinematic surface and its layers of form for the constitution and expression of genre, and as with gender and identity, is a vessel and a site in which Almodóvarian drag can appropriate, remediate, and transform it. Thus, Zahara's drag performance is not only a rhetorical device to suspend any futile attempt at resolution of authentic and inauthentic identity and narrative coherence but also is representative of a queering of genre and its form.

The appropriation, parody, and simultaneous reverence for the genre of melodrama is a distinctive feature of Almodóvarian cinema that parallels and overlaps with the formal operations of drag and other uses of queer masquerade. The respective forms found in drag and melodramatic cinema are both materialized within the surface operations of their mediums and point to a

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<sup>106</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama." In *Visual and Other Pleasures. Language, Discourse, Society*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 41.

<sup>107</sup> In this scene there is a triple masquerade in that it presents a drag performance, that this scene is not canon, but a representation of an autobiographical script written by "Ignacio", as well, that this memory is indeed a deception on the part of Juan. These three levels of masquerade combine layered temporality with the aesthetics of queer masking/unmasking. The suspension of the dichotomies of narrative and temporal truth coalesces within the use of drag, which as I will outline in the ensuing chapter is another element through which to view *cinematic drag*.

commonality between drag embodiment and melodrama's excessive female embodiment and the use of mise-en-scène. Formal excess as masquerade in melodrama has a distinctly gendered legacy, as historians such as Linda Williams have shown in analyzing the 1937 film *Stella Dallas*.<sup>108</sup> Williams zeroed in on the excessive use of form in Barbara Stanwyck's *Stella*, where unlike the colour films of Douglas Sirk, the black and white production instead had to use material devices such as fashion and clothing, hair and makeup, and other bodily signifiers to elicit what Williams calls "a travesty, an overdone masquerade of what it means to be a woman" in the eyes of the upper class characters of the film.<sup>109</sup> Williams' gendered discussion of embodied masquerade resembles the excoriation of drag queens by the character Agrado in Almodóvar's 1999 film *All About My Mother*. This 1999 film is yet another queer remediation of the maternal melodrama. The film follows Manuela, who returns to Barcelona following the tragic death of her young son. In Barcelona Manuela initially searches for her son's father, instead encountering her long-lost friend Agrado, a transgender sex worker. Together they form an unconventional family bond as they care for a pregnant nun Rosa (played by a young Penelope Cruz), who had met Agrado while working at a shelter for sex workers. Agrado, who call herself a transexual, and is an aspiring actress, dismisses what she calls the cheap parody of trans and female identities by drag queens<sup>110</sup>. Associating drag's gendered formal excessiveness with a "circus," the perceived failure of drag by Agrado resembles the travesty of

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<sup>108</sup> Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama." *JCMS : Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 1000, no. 1, (2018),14.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>110</sup> To some Agrado's association of trans identity with transvestism (cross-dressing) and their own use of transexual instead of trans\* might seem to be anachronistic or "problematic" but it is important to consider the film within its context and the fact that more progressive discourses on gender identity were over a decade away from materializing in popular culture and even some academic discussions. For context, see Vivian Namaste's *The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (2000) and Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1997).

Stella's inability to perform a correct level of feminine embodiment which elicits the observation in the film that "That's not a woman – it's a Christmas Tree." Stella's bodily form becomes like all of the surface elements and objects in melodrama: overdetermined formal masquerades of affect and identity which parallel the use of drag and other forms of masking in Almodóvar's films.

There is an additional aspect of Agrado's polemic against drag that also parallels the formal strategies of Almodóvar's "queering" of melodrama: mimicry and the closely related operations of appropriation and plagiarism. While Agrado understandably fixates on how drag gets gender and identity 'wrong,' the character might also miss the point that drag does not exist to point out what is real and what is artifice but rather as Van De Port outlines it functions to celebrate subjectivity at the same as it seeks in vain to denaturalize it.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, instead of merely copying gendered forms, drag can also critically appropriate them in a vein that recalls Lorenz discussion of how a "combination of fiction and documentary, of lies and claims, of reenactments and inventive experiments, and of conspicuously different bodily characteristics and artistic parts produces queer bodies that do not match up any dichotomies between 'true' or 'false' and 'normal.'<sup>112</sup> In his approach to melodramatic cinema, Almodóvar mirrors drag in the appropriation of forms to build and reconstitute material surfaces which disrupts the authenticity of dichotomies and subjectivities.

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<sup>111</sup> To give Agrado more credit, her rant concludes with "A woman is her hair, her nails, her lips for sucking or bitching - I mean, have you ever seen a bald woman?" which could be read itself as misogynistic and fetishistic essentialism of womanhood but there is a clear parody in Agrado's emphasis on material signifiers and sexualized tropes. Agrado takes delight in these forms and in her own surgical alterations in her iconic last-minute substitution for an absent performer in the theatre company she joins. Her critique of drag thus seems to home in on a view that performing the constructs of femininity is a real and serious act while at the same time a joyful art and that drag artists simply fail to strike this "impossible" balance of authenticity and artifice.

<sup>112</sup> Lorenz, *Queer Art*, 21-22.

Almodóvar revels in the citation of iconic melodramatic films, with the heavy-handed homage to *All About Eve* that becomes refigured and queered in *All About My Mother* as but one of many examples. In his 2016 book *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility*, theorist Jonathan Goldberg argues for a new awareness on the aesthetics of queerness within studies of the genre of melodrama, observing a lineage of citation of Douglas Sirk's films in the work of queer filmmakers Rainer Warner Fassbinder and Todd Haynes.<sup>113</sup> The meat of Goldberg's argument arises from melodrama's "impossible situation," a condition first described by Sirk in which the "impossible tasks of overcoming differences that remain inseparable" is contingent on the themes and forms of the genre.<sup>114</sup> The "impossible" elements that are simultaneously resolved and retained in suspension bear a resemblance to Almodóvar's drag-like appropriation and queering of plagiarized forms and themes from his predecessors' (and his own) works. While Goldberg strangely omits him from the discussion, Almodóvar's approach to melodrama absolutely expands the queering of the genre. Notably, Almodóvarian strategies of queering/drag extend beyond melodrama, with his parodic reverence for Franco-era symbolism seen in his exaggerated use of colors and overdetermined objects of traditional Spanish culture.<sup>115</sup> This subversive remediation of gender and femininity in Almodóvar's film might also be self-reflexive on the part of the director, reflecting an awareness but refusal of critiques of perceived misogyny in his films and in the construct of 'woman' in broader melodramatic film discourse.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, if Almodóvar is never one to shy away from masked self-

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<sup>113</sup> Goldberg, *Melodrama*, 23.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 24

<sup>115</sup> Enric Bou, "On Almodóvar's World: The Endless Film," *Hispanic Issues on Line*, vol. 8, (2011), 43-45.

<sup>116</sup> Noelia Saenz, "Domesticating Violence in the Films of Pedro Almodóvar In *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, eds M. D'Lugo and K.M. Vernon (West Sussex: Wiley & Black Well, 2013), 246.

reflexivity and autobiography, then perhaps Agrado's rant against drag is merely a clever nod to the director's own citation and distortion of the melodramatic genre.

### 3.6 Conclusions

While in chapter 2, the frame of gesture enabled an important excursion into the colliding and overlapping role of embodied form and movement in *cinematic drag*, this chapter has returned to and underscored the role of the inanimate surfaces of drag and cinema through the genre form. Throughout both drag and cinema, the classification of genre and its taxonomies seem from inception to demand a transgression of the authenticity of their boundaries. With binaries of clown and glamour, the role of figures such as Vaginal Creme Davis is partly to use camp and other queer strategies to transgress and disidentify from the formal conventions of genre. With a figure such as Divine and the early films of John Waters, camp and drag through embodied form provided a critical intervention in attempting to disrupt the logics of both drag and cinematic genres from glamour to melodrama. Where Almodóvarian cinema outstrips that of Waters' *cinematic drag* is through the layered approach to the authenticity and coherence of genre and its forms. For Almodóvar, *cinematic drag* transforms melodramatic form by providing a multivalent surface through which genre, like gender and identity, can be queered.



## Chapter 4. (WORLDBUILDING)

### Queer Narrative, Temporality, and the Confluence of Drag and Cinematic forms in Sin Wai Kin's *Performative Technologies*

#### 4.1 Sin Wai Kin's Performative Technologies

Drag and cinema's temporal capacities coalesce in the work of contemporary artist Sin Wai Kin (Fka Victoria Sin). Also an experimental filmmaker, a number of Sin's works are a synthesis of cinematic and critical drag strategies. Their films and multimedia performances draw upon the shared capacities of cinema and drag for narrative, in particular as a storytelling technology that reveals the temporal register of both mediums. Indeed, as Sin explains, their worldmaking practice draws upon the 'performative technologies' of cinema and drag. Worldbuilding, a narrative and storytelling process often associated with the genres of science and fantasy, is defined by Merriam-Webster as referring "not simply to an author's imagination of the world, but also denoting the creation of an entirely new world." I argue that Sin's own use of worldbuilding to describe drag and cinema encompasses this literal definition of the term but is also inextricable from the "worldmaking" legacy of queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, as well as Muñoz's utopic possibility of queer futurity.<sup>117</sup> In this chapter I will analyze particular works by Sin that show a

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<sup>117</sup> Fiona Buckland, *Impossible dance: Club culture and queer world-making* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 4-5, 20. In the book *Impossible Dance*, performance theorist and author Fiona Buckland's extends out of the more singular notions of queer community and queer identity to explore the dancefloor and the nightclub as spaces of "worldmaking." Buckland's idea of worldmaking comes out of the work of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who distinguish the concept of lifeworlds from community, explaining lifeworlds as environments created by "participants that contain many voices, many practices," often including more people than can be mapped or identified as one would with the notion of community. Through this definition of lifeworlds, Buckland's sees queer worldmaking as occurring through the "production in the movement of a space of creative, expressive, and transformative possibilities, which remained fluid." See also Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, (Winter 1998)

critical awareness of the history and capacity of cinema and drag in the shaping of images and embodied forms, from gender to memory, and how the artist's intervention relies on the temporal register of both mediums in their work of queer worldbuilding. Sin's engagement with drag and cinema is underwritten by their use of science fiction narratives and theories that prominently champion worldbuilding practices, such as those in Ursula K Le Guin's article "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." In speaking about their practice Sin says "for me, drag is embodied speculative fiction"—a statement that succinctly exemplifies their approach to worldbuilding as a synthesis of the storytelling methodologies and queer strategies of futurity.<sup>118</sup> With this worldbuilding practice, steeped in the temporal logic of queer futurity and the speculative possibilities of narrative, Sin advances the capacities for the medium of drag and cinema by drawing the two mediums together into a practice that embodies and transforms histories, memories, and futures. Through the hybrid forms of *cinematic drag* par excellence, Sin's transcends the temporal limits described by queer theorists such as Elizabeth Freeman while folding in notions of queer utopias and transtemporal drag in the work of Muñoz and Lorenz.

Canadian-born, UK-based, and internationally exhibited, Sin Wai Kin experiments with drag began during their MFA, with a high-femme drag embodiment previously named Victoria Sin. Sin's early work included cinematic productions, including their experimental short film series *Narrative Reflections on Looking* (2016-2017). Some of the early press and notoriety garnered upon Sin's career concerned their identity and status in the drag world: an AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary artist whose drag persona as a hyperfeminine drag performer countered the predominant idea

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(547-56); Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The then and there of Queer Futurity* 1st ed (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> Erin Reznick, "Drag is a mirror: Interview with Victoria Sin." Canadian Art (2019). <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/drag-is-a-mirror/>

that feminine drag (often referred to as drag queens) is only practiced by cisgender gay men.<sup>119</sup>

Lurking below these relatively unnuanced notions of identity are some of the narratives that Stokoe and others have attempted to dismantle, in particular that the artistry of drag is about cross dressing and crossing gendered categories.<sup>120</sup> Much of this novelty actually arises from the erasure of non-binary and trans folks and cisgender women from the category of the drag queen and their exclusion from gay and queer spaces. Transphobic and racialized ideologies often perpetuate these gatekeeping misogynistic narratives, which Sin has experienced in their life. Captivated with drag while a teenager, Sin would often sneak into drag shows in Toronto's gay neighborhood Church & Wellesley. As an Asian-Canadian, Sin noted instances of misogynistic and racist treatment in gay nightclubs, spaces that were often dominated by cisgender white men.<sup>121</sup>

Tellingly, this reception of Sin's work has tended to place it within the familiar scope of resistance.<sup>122</sup> Coupled with their nonbinary subjectivity, discourse on Sin's career frontlines their work as resistant, critical, and subversive to the medium itself. A quick summary of the above leads to an even quicker reading of how Sin's deconstructs the medium of drag, but a closer look at their practice through an attendance to questions of medium and formal operations undermine the narrative that drag should chiefly be viewed as an ephemeral practice that destabilizes the form of gender. Instead, this case-study will explore how Sin's works, which reveal the possibilities of cinematic drag, embody a generative approach to drag, queerness, and gender through the logic of

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<sup>119</sup> "An Interview with Victoria Sin," Shades of Noir (2016). <http://shadesofnoir.org.uk/an-interview-with-victoria-sin/>. Early career interview with the artist detailing their femme identity and the oppression of queers who are not who are not white cisgender gay-males within the drag and queer community.

<sup>120</sup> For why many theorists and drag performers see cross-dressing as an out-of date term, see Stokoe's *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo*.

<sup>121</sup> "An Interview, 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Reznick., "Drag is a mirror"

temporality and narrative in cinema and drag.<sup>123</sup> As such, narrative and temporality, along with the predecessors of gesture and genre, offers another framework to approach artists and filmmakers who deploy or engage with drag and cinema and help to define the possibility of the hybrid and fluid space that also contributes to my definition of *cinematic drag*.

#### 4.2 Sin Wai Kin's Cinematic Drag: History, Memory and Temporality

“For years, I was obsessed by the idea of embodying a perfect image of Western femininity through drag, and so that’s what NARRATIVE REFLECTIONS ON LOOKING evokes.

This ideal is influenced by classic Hollywood figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich, and Veronica Lake, as well as more contemporary figures, who are in themselves iterations of that iconography, like Jessica Rabbit and Amanda Lepore... I’m participating in an iterative genealogy of images that are performed, naturalised, and then performed again in new and even more extreme ways.”

-Sin Wai Kin<sup>124</sup>

Sin’s work is generative, rooted in personal and universal questions of identity that are mediated by the history and formal affordances of film and drag. Reflecting back on earlier chapters, Sin’s meditation on femininity and cinematic embodiment recalls Mulvey’s discussion of the cinematic gesture - building performance practice from a genealogy of embodied forms, gestures, and poses. The citation and transformation of these gendered archetypes through formal excess also bring to the fore some of the ideas in chapter three on the queering of embodied genre forms in Almodóvarian

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<sup>123</sup> Artist Talk | Body Work: Performance and Practice. Art Basel, Hong Kong, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpvZNqEZMY>

<sup>124</sup> O.H. Fletcher, “Interview with Sin Wai Kin,” The White Review (September 2021).

<https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-sin-wai-kin/>

cinema. From this, we might consider Sin's work as the confluence of these early examples of *cinematic drag* through the respective schemas of gesture and genre. However, Sin's work more thoroughly addresses another aspect central in both cinema and drag, certainly observable in particular in Almodóvar's films - narrative and temporality. These aspects of Sin's work derive from the artist's understanding of the narrative possibilities and formal contingencies of cinema and drag.

In earlier work, Sin's hyperfeminine embodiment uses the temporal registers of cinema and drag to explore memory and history. Most notable is *Narrative Reflections on Looking* (2016-2017), a series of films starring Sin's *Victoria Sin* embodiment, with a long blonde wig, styled in a Classical Hollywood glamour dress, and makeup that overlaps in references to Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich. Narrated by Sin, the work takes the viewer through various scenes that play with Hollywood constructions of femininity and the gaze. Through content and embodied form, Sin's citation, in their earlier work, of instances of feminine embodiment through a historical genealogy calls up Elizabeth Freeman and Renate Lorenz's discussions of drag and cinema. As Lorenz outlines, drag form makes it "possible to go back into the history of a production of knowledge about bodies and their emotions, affects, and desires take up expectations, evidence, stereotypes, and violent histories," which Sin simultaneously indulges and subverts without, as Lorenz notes of drag and temporality, "facilitating their repetition."<sup>125</sup> Lorenz's further elaboration into drag temporality appears through their notion of transtemporal drag, which they use to describe the work of Jack Smith through a synthesis of Brechtian and feminist performance theory.<sup>126</sup> For Lorenz, the transtemporal in drag is built from temporal and political entwinement "which represent an

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<sup>125</sup> Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, 22.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

intervention in existing concepts of time and establish temporalities that counter, interrupt, or shift an advanced economic or scientific development or a heteronormative course of life.”<sup>127</sup>

Vital to Lorenz’s theorization of transtemporal drag is the work of Freeman, summarizing the crux of Freeman’s argument, related to temporal drag, that “chronopolitics are *embodied* politics.”<sup>128</sup> Using drag to play with time and history, Freeman theorizes ‘temporal drag’ as a collective and fantastical use of transformation that is “exteriorized as a mode of bodily adornment” as a means of “connecting queer performativity to disavowed political histories.”<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Freeman ponders drag as a medium that is an excess of the “signifier of ‘history’ rather than signifiers of ‘woman’ or ‘man.’”<sup>130</sup> In one particularly cinematic image from *Narrative Reflections*, (Figure 1) Sin looks into the camera lying on red bedsheets. The resplendent colours and shining materiality are evocative of Almodóvarian surfaces—yet another queering of the visual language and semiotics of Hollywood glamour and melodrama. The camera, positioned from an impossible angle as a bird's eye shot, affirms the cinematographic impulse.

These material dimensions, their appeal to senses beyond the visual, call to mind Laura Marks’ notion of haptic visuality. In her 1999 book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, explored embodiment in intercultural cinema in order to expand the sensorial orientation traditionally assigned to the cinematic—namely that cinema is more than audiovisual experience, because it also involves “synesthesia, as well as haptic visuality” which “enables the viewer to experience cinema as multisensory.”<sup>131</sup> For Marks, haptic visuality suggests

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>129</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 65.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>131</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 22-23.

“the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes.”<sup>132</sup> Marks holds that haptic visuality is frequent in feminist film and video work, because feminist work often engages with embodiment and representations of the senses.<sup>133</sup> In challenging the primacy of vision and opticality in cinema, Marks’ analysis opens another pathway for understanding cinematic form that unveils the multivalence of sense and materiality in cinematic embodiment as in Sin’s work in video and film.

In other works, Sin takes up similar strategies that invoke historical bodies and cinematic conventions, such as *Tell me everything you saw, and what you think it means* (2018 ) (Figure 2) which arose from Sin’s multi-media performance *A View From Elsewhere* (2018).<sup>134</sup> When it was on view at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver for the summer 2021 exhibition *Interior Infinite*, the video at first glance appeared to be a still image of the artist reclined on silver sheets, gazing into the camera and enacting the iconic gesture of the reclining female, made famous in European early modern painting. However, as Sin’s voiceover goes on, subtle shifts in the image reveal it is as indeed an edited film, as Sin’s body and their environment shift and change. Within the installation the video plays on a digital screen, framed by red curtains that denote the theatrical and cinematic mediums that inform Sin’s work. Their long blond wig, makeup, and the noticeable exposure of their breastplate mobilize against a mere repetition of the figure of the reclining female; instead, the reconstruction is a queering of the past and of historical memory. Their monologue narrates the ways in which feminine bodies are “contrived” for the male gaze, highlighting the temporal pulses of drag form and the cinematic apparatus.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, xi.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. xiii.

<sup>134</sup> *Interior Infinite: Exhibition Guide*, Curated by Justin Ramsey, Polygon Gallery (2021). 17.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. Exhibition text.

When there is further distance from a linear medium, the temporal framework of Sin's *cinematic drag* becomes all the more tangible. *Illocutionary Utterances* (2018), a mixed-media installation that also came out of *A View From Elsewhere*, features Sin's narration overlaid on a video consisting of an extreme close-up of their mouth as they lip-sync to a muted song.<sup>136</sup> Sin's narration in this instance is far more personal, this time not only speaking about the gendering of bodies in media and history, but also about Sin's personal experience being assigned female at birth.<sup>137</sup> Here Sin invokes a personal intervention that has broader, more universal distinction in the practices of gender assignment. Sin creates disjuncture between these broader practices and their own identity as non-binary, done formally through the uncanny displacement between the muted lip sync which does not match the words of Sin's monologue.<sup>138</sup> As with *Tell me everything you saw*, the work is framed in the exhibition space with red curtains, a tangible materialization of the image and formal system inherent in *cinematic drag* practices and the sensorial dimensions of haptic visuality described by Marks.

Using performance and film, Sin inhabits temporal processes to unpack their own personal memory alongside broader historical practices of gender assignment. At this intersection of personal experience and history, and through the use of performative technologies, Sin enacts what Allison Lansberg calls "prosthetic memory."<sup>139</sup> In the 2004 book *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Lansberg explores cinema and other narrative technologies, defining prosthetic memory as a new form of memory that "emerges at the interface

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<sup>136</sup> The exhibition text identifies the song as "Marcia Baila" by Rita Mitsuoko.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. Description from Exhibition Guide.

<sup>139</sup> I am indebted to Gutiérrez-Albilla's article "Scratching the Past on the Surface of the Skin", where the Almodóvarian expert observed invoked Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory to explore the role of temporality, memory, and drag embodiment in *Bad Education* (2004).



between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum.”<sup>140</sup> Lansberg asserts that prosthetic memory has the ability to shape and reconfigure subjectivity and politics on a personal level.<sup>141</sup> Sin goes further into prosthetic memory, transcending the separation between receiver and the historical memory that “sutures” them “into a larger history” by producing their own narrative reconstruction of their own and a broader past.<sup>142</sup> The cinematic and drag affordances of temporal and narrative forms help to define Sin’s description of *performative technologies* through prosthetic and embodied forms and mediums. These narrative and temporal impulses, so vital to Sin’s practice, while are often centered on the historical and personal past, also take up a futurist dimension that materializes their use of drag as worldbuilding practice.

#### **4.3 Conclusions: Sin Wai Kin’s ‘Carrier Bag’ Mediums - Futurity, Narrative, and the worldbuilding possibilities of *Cinematic Drag***

Narrative is a central aspect of drag performance. Sin is acutely aware of narrative in drag performance and the importance of storytelling to queer subjectivity. Perhaps not surprisingly, they were strongly informed by the work of science fiction novelist and theorist Ursula K Le Guin, who often wrote novels from the perspective of characters from underrepresented communities. Following Le Guin’s passing in 2018, Sin wrote an article valorizing the cultural significance of the author. Published in *Auto Italia*, Sin discusses Le Guin’s short article “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”.<sup>143</sup> Le Guin’s approach to narrative aims to radically shift the way stories are told, and in

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<sup>140</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). 2.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Sin Wai Kin, “Victoria Sin on Ursula K. Le Guin,” *AutoItalia*. (07.02.2018)

science fiction tradition this means a new understanding of human history and our evolution as a species. Le Guin argues against the tyranny of conventional wisdom, that the first transformative tool developed by early humans was the knife. Instead of the knife, which is used by the hero or the warrior in fiction and through history for “sticking, bashing, and killing,” Le Guin pushes the predominance of the carrier bag, a tool developed to carry gathered food and necessities.

Supplementing the endless tales of violent struggles fought by opposing forces, the carrier bag theory of fiction argues for alternative approaches to narrative that embody its namesake as “a device which gathers many seeds, many stories, many individual parts which may not sit easily alongside one another, many perspectives perhaps, and holds them together for consideration.”<sup>144</sup> To Sin, these carrier bag stories are pertinent to queer politics, as they can be used “as a representational strategy to refigure and reposition constructed notions of identity and society that hundreds of years of historical and scientific narratives have served to construct.”<sup>145</sup> Sin’s reception of Le Guin’s work provides a possible insight into the notion of drag as performative technology – one that ties together temporal and narrative possibilities.

Sin’s championing of carrier bag theory is also an assertion of the utopic and temporal possibility of queerness that Muñoz proposed in 2009 with *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Queer futurity is predicated on Muñoz’s rejection of Lee Edelman’s book *No Future*, a canonical queer polemic against queer notions of the future because the future is the domain of the child.<sup>146</sup> Muñoz describes Edelman’s take on the future as inherently “anti-relational” and as a politics of negativity—arguing instead for the productive possibility of a collective

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<http://autoitaliasoutheast.org/news/victoria-sin-on-ursula-le-guin/>

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

queerness that sees queerness as not yet here and instead as a horizon that stands to be “primarily about future and hope.”<sup>147</sup> Key to Muñoz’s theorization of queer futurity is the work of Frankfurt School and Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch, in particular his writings on utopia in the 1950s in *The Principle of Hope*.<sup>148</sup> As a counterpoint to the negative and oppositional politics of Edelman, Muñoz sees value in Bloch’s understanding of the necessity to think towards a utopic future, despite the very possibility of disappointment because the affect and feeling of futurity “are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging transformation.”<sup>149</sup> Instead, Muñoz claims that queerness, which was defined as unrealized, is an “ideal” that needed to become associated with notions of utopia and futurity in order to consider queerness “as a temporal arrangement in which the past is the field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.”<sup>150</sup>

For Sin, these influences—a transformative approach to narrative and queer temporality—are materialized in their practice of *cinematic drag*. This narrative operation modeled after Le Guin is a proposition for queer storytelling, part of a technology of storytelling brought to life through the mediums of drag and cinema. The use of drag and cinema to call up, through gesture, embodiment, and temporality, the past through history and memory also invokes the importance the past as a tool for challenging the present and, through the process, envisioning and cultivating a future that is queer, hopeful and utopic.<sup>151</sup> Worldbuilding is an example of queer resistance that goes beyond the destabilization of gender, racial, and sexual power structures, instead providing a blueprint for a transformative future as enacting in the present. Therefore, it is the work of this study to analyze

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 1,16.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 1.

how Sin's "blueprint" or use of *performative* technologies function across the forms and mediums of drag.

Another process of time that can be revealed through cinema, and drag, is the process of change. In their first 4 years of renown, Sin only performed as 'Victoria Sin', the hyperfeminine embodiment that fused cinematic and drag references. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sin began to explore new work that delved deeper into their non-binary identity, questions of masculine embodiment, and the status of drag kings in queer theory and drag history.<sup>152</sup> In yet another example, Sin's work shows how self-reflexive and medium-informed it is, using drag not only to think about gender as a construct but also to interrogate the categories of 'drag queen' and 'drag king.' These categories are rendered paradoxical by Sin, who acknowledges the limitations and exclusions of them as boundary constructs while activating them as 'carrier bags' for narrative and transformation. Again, Sin's multi-media practice shows a penchant for the possibilities of the cinematic medium. In their 2021 film *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts*, perhaps Sin's most dynamic work to date in terms of form, visual references, and cultural context, Sin explores the layers of racialized and gendered identity through a dreamlike and theatrical interpretation of a text by ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu's writings as "its starting point, in which the ancient Taoist imagines the experience of the senses as a dream."<sup>153</sup> The work has been described as weaving "traditional Chinese dramaturgy with contemporary drag, music and poetry, in order to queer genres and categories while cultivating a space for imagining different worlds and new ways of being."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Fletcher, *Interview with Sin Wai Kin*.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Fletcher, *Interview with Sin Wai Kin*. I must rely on these descriptions and available short clips and stills for my analysis because I have been unable to see the film due to travel restrictions disallowing visits to its exhibition in Hong Kong and London.

Sin's discussion of drag kings and masculinity also evokes and thereby necessitates discussion of scholarship by Jack Halberstam and other theorizations on the absence of performance (and form) in representations of drag kings. In deciding to explore masculinity, Sin states: "from a cultural perspective, so often masculinity is equated with an absence of performance, and thus seen as a site of authenticity and authority."<sup>155</sup> Sin's statement likely references Halberstam's theorizing on drag kings in *Female Masculinity*. Discussing an apparent lack of formal attributes in comparison to the excessive use of artifice of performativity within feminine drag, Halberstam attributes this to "the fact that dominant male masculinities tend to present themselves in the register of the real, eschewing the performative and the artificial."<sup>156</sup> Halberstam holds that drag kings must work harder to expose the veiling of dominant masculinity by exposing its sexist "tricks and gadgets."<sup>157</sup> In the more than 20 years since *Female Masculinity* was published, massive cultural shifts in understandings of gender and practices of drag have led to works such as *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts*. With the rise of trans and non-binary activism, theory, and art, Halberstam's distinction between the form and artifice of drag kings and drag queens seems both muted and made more relevant than ever. Artists like Sin, whose non-binary identity informs a dynamic approach to drag and gender construction, enables a temporal journey through cinematic and drag embodiments and forms. While cultural associations of drag kings and masculinity as inherently less performative, and

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 266.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. The distinctions between drag kings and drag queens is carried on by Katie Horowitz in *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness* in 2019: "On the contrary, for kings and queens alike, drag is a constellation of gestures that evokes legibly gendered states of embodiment only to dismiss them as absurd (in the case of kings) or exaggerate them to abstraction (in the case of queens). So central to drag performance is gesture that one might invoke Zeig's assertion as an alternate definition thereof: to do drag is to control the production of one's gestures." (Horowitz, 63)

therefore more 'authentic', still hold true, Sin's layered storytelling practice in *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts* represents how *cinematic drag* can propose a futurity in conceptions of gender, drag, and a queered and liberated artificiality in drag king performance.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

“The version of queer theory identified loosely with scholars such as Butler has thus become embedded in popular culture and academic theory via a late-capitalist neo-liberal gloss that troubles its most basic underlying political premise: that queer performance (or performativity) is necessarily or at least generally “subversive” to capitalist, instrumentalized versions of selfhood.”<sup>158</sup>

- Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 13.

*Cinematic drag* offers a container through which to reimagine art historical and queer theory conceptions of drag. In refusing the primacy and omnipresence of Butler’s theory of performativity— or as Amelia Jones suggests above, refusing the deleterious paradigm that feeds the capitalist abstraction of queer performance discourse—I have attempted to pursue an alternate methodology that drag’s most compelling and abundant elements are the layers and collisions of form and the multivalence of its medium (un)specificity. As a byproduct of this approach, the collisions and frequent collusions between cinema and drag can be revealed through formal, historical, and theoretical analysis. In enjoining these two mediums, prominent film theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Christine Gledhill, Thomas Elsaesser, and Laura Marks provide untraversed pathways to contemplate drag beyond the performative. With gesture, the importance of embodied form and movement in cinema as the balance of still image and bodily motion helps to draw out the same in examples of drag such as those documented in Livingston’s documentary. With genre, the overlapping forms that typify the cultivation and transgression of both cinematic and drag genre taxonomies reveals the complex strategies of Almodóvar’s queering of melodrama. With Sin’s worldbuilding practice, film theory synthesizes with queer and feminist approaches to consider the

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<sup>158</sup> Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 13.

multivalence of drag as a worldbuilding medium, capable of narrative deconstruction and reconstruction while simultaneously using the temporal registers of drag and cinema to remediate histories, memories, and futures.

If Amelia Jones is correct—that gender performativity has reached peak reification under late capitalism—then how might my proposed approach to studying drag still arrive at questions of politics without deprivileging medium and form? Each concept central to building a hybrid and fluid conceptualization of *cinematic drag* is found layered by questions of feminist and queer politics. In advancing gesture as a lens through which to understand drag form, the embodied cultural and political forms of gendered cinematic representation collides with the relational practices of trans and queer communities of colour who built and transformed the formal lexicon of drag culture through gestures such as voguing. With genre, the binary between the fixed and unfixed nature of classificatory systems of genre is abolished by Almodóvarian drag. Genre as a means of understanding *cinematic drag* exposes the limitations of seeing drag as only capable of queering identity and gender, instead proving how drag is already always invested in the dizzying balance between construction and transformation of all systems of classification, thereby liberating the medium from the trappings of false and fixed binary systems.

Finally, with Sin's worldbuilding, the political erupts from the layered form of drag through the artists blending of *performative technologies*. With Sin, we once again return to the performative problem this project attempted to displace. However, unlike the neutered and generalized understanding Butlerian queer theory that codifies discourse at present, Sin's work is unimpeachably invested in the affordances of drag and cinematic mediums and the layers and collisions of their form. Moreover, by approaching the temporal and narrative elements that underpin Sin's practice of worldbuilding, questions of politics are no longer tied to the limits of drag as subversive or non-



subversive. Instead, in arranging analysis of drag around the layers of form and the complex collisions and transformations between mediums, drag's political capabilities only become more widespread. Drag is no longer bound to one single medium, nor is it beholden to the logics of gender performance and the false dichotomies between artistic form and cultural politics.

## Figures

Figure 1. This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Sin Wai Kin. *Preface/Looking Without Touching*, 2017. Single-channel video 1' 02". <https://blindspotgallery.com/artist/victoria-sin/>

Figure 2. This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Sin Wai Kin, *Tell me everything you saw, and what you think it means*, 2018, HD single channel video. . <https://blindspotgallery.com/artist/victoria-sin/>

Figure 3. This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Sin Wai Kin, *Illocutionary Utterances*, 2018, Installation View, "Age of You" (Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, 2019). . <https://blindspotgallery.com/artist/victoria-sin/>

Figure 4. This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Sin Wai Kin, *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts*, 2021, Single-channel video. 23' 03". . <https://blindspotgallery.com/artist/victoria-sin/>

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