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Course: MA History of Film and Visual Media

**You should see her before she puts her face on:
Camp, drag and the Sirkian parody-homage.**

Option Course Essay - Melodrama: Hollywood and World Cinema

Illustrations

Fig.1

MEHBOUBEH, the slave woman,
lifts the artificial elephant
off the love bandit's
chair...and creates a
pasty novelty

featuring
Mehboubeh . . . Jeanne Philips
The Love Bandit Doris



*from the
forthcoming film*

**BUZZARDS
over
BAGDAD**



**A CINEMAROC
NORTH AFRICAN
NICOLODEON
PRESENTATION**

*by
jack smith*



Introductory pages from the "Underground movie flip book" of *Buzzards over*

Baghdad, one of Jack Smith's homages to Maria Montez' Universal fantasies of the early 1940s.

Fig.2



Candy Darling in *Women In Revolt* and Julianne Moore from the poster of *Far From Heaven*.

Fig.3



Marion Eaton listens in on her husband (played by Curt McDowell) in George Kuchar's *A Reason To Live*. Kuchar was responsible for all his own make-up, sometimes billed pseudonymously as 'Mr Dominic'.

Fig.4



Photos of Lana Turner testifying at the murder trial of her daughter Cheryl Crane in 1958. It was widely rumoured at the time that Turner had killed her lover Johnny Stompanato and persuaded Crane to take the blame. Almodóvar references this as well as it's relation to *Imitation of Life* in *High Heels*.

Fig.5



Publicity shot of Divine and Tab Hunter. In earlier roles Divine's make-up owed much to the 'Mr Dominic' look modelled by Marion Eaton in Fig.3.

Fig.6



A 1996 Lypsinka poster, with clear allusions to film aesthetics and (literal) reflexivity.

You should see her before she puts her face on:

Camp, drag and the Sirkian parody-homage

In *Melodrama - Genre Style, Sensibility*, John Mercer and Martin Shingler discuss the affinity of the gay sensibility with the world of the 1950s family melodrama, anticipating new possibilities for what they call the 'standard Film Studies account' of such films, incorporating questions of gay spectatorship and the study of the 'gay auteur'¹. With this in mind it is my intention in this essay to explore the legitimacy and relevance of certain responses to Douglas Sirk's Ross Hunter-produced melodramas of the 1950s, that have been pejoratively labelled as 'camp'. Suggesting ways in which parodic homages to Sirk can be viewed more positively, I will discuss the work of gay directors including George Kuchar, John Waters and Pedro Amodóvar, concentrating on their uses of drag queens and/or exaggerated presentations of constructed femininity as a positive Sirkian strategy.

Like Mercer and Schingler I will refer back to Barbara Klinger's analysis of camp in relation to Sirk, addressing the 'intricate relation between convention and parody' that affects how modern audiences view old films, that they ignore.²

In her 1964 essay 'Notes on Camp,' Susan Sontag sought to define the meanings and uses of camp, as a contested intellectual category with increasing popular currency at this time, applied widely to (pop) art, television, and a range of films, from Jack Smith's *Buzzards Over Baghdad* to Toho Studios' *Rodan* and the George Melly-scripted musical *Smashing Time*.

Sontag distinguishes between pure or naïve camp and the self-conscious use of camp that she calls camping. She argues that true camp is unintentional, that its 'essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails'. Klinger observes that 'film melodrama tends to emphasize the social mores of its time, and that the dramatic situations of the past are "disempowered" in a contemporary context due to the sheer force of social change'⁴. Mercer and Schingler quote Klinger selectively to support their interpretation of camp readings of melodrama, that 'what represents one era's supreme scandal can strike a future generation's funny bone', ignoring her subsequent point that, whilst the hysterics of *Reefer Madness* are now read exclusively as comedy, the Sirk melodrama situations are not totally without contemporary currency⁵. A non-serious consumer of studio era melodramas may be attracted by the outlandish anachronism of the crisis-ridden settings, but, Klinger asserts, they are equally affected by the style through which the plot is delivered; the camp appreciation of melodrama is equally reliant on the reading of the expressive codes of the genre. The typical dramatic crescendoes, reversals and twists of fate can accumulate to the point where they create the kind of 'clash with plausible dramatic logic' relished by the camp viewer, in contrast to the persuasive verisimilitude of modern cinema, introducing a reflexive and distancing dimension to the contemporary spectator's understanding⁶.

Klinger quotes critical disavowals of the camp appropriation of Sirk's 1950s melodramas to emphasize the nagging, lurking shadow of camp on the margins of discussions of his work. Aware of the humorous reception of the

films in other quarters, writers such as Paul Willemen, Andrew Sarris and James Harvey have defended Sirk against camp appropriation to establish and maintain his status as a 'serious, self-reflexive, Brechtian filmmaker' whilst Klinger reaches the eventual conclusion that to some degree the insights and strategies attributed to Sirk by critics and academics are not in themselves inconsistent with a camp reading of the work⁷. On the contrary, Klinger's observations of mass camp's absorption of his films could be seen to support Sirk's privileged position as social critic and subversive commentator, rather than undermining it through frivolity.

Klinger's 'mass camp' observers register Sirk's distancing devices, elaborate symbolic mise-en-scène and dramatic manipulations, but without any pre-knowledge of his concerns and methods. They are likely to take the films at face value, ignoring their nuances and critical potentialities in favour of an incorrect assumption of Sontag's 'pure' unintentional camp, presenting the values and social conventions of the past uncritically. Mass camp audiences may laugh at the constructedness of femininity, romance and gender roles, but only out of a self-congratulatory 'superiority to the past', without any appreciation of Sirk's skills or intentions. It is this attitude that Willemen *et al* are railing against, but they forget that the "inside knowledge" of his motivations, Jon Halliday interviews and subsequent re-evaluations were not widely known outside critical and academic circles, arguably until the increased currency of these ideas following the release of *Far From Heaven* in 2002.

Sirk uses of self-conscious artifice as a criticism of the shallowness of bourgeois values, and cliché to deliberately undercut the romantic idealism of his storylines and characters. The 'trash aesthetic aimed ultimately at generic auto-critique', reaches the modern audience, but they are unable to read its critical edge.⁸ Read as camp and removed from their 1950s contexts, the edge is depoliticised, and made invisible. Sirk comments on 1950s America with the critical eye of the foreigner, but the cultural structures of belief that his veiled criticisms depend on have lost their power.

A depoliticised and superficial mass camp reading of melodrama in general is the approach taken with most genre parody on television. Parody relies on recognition, of a particular film, star or set of genre conventions for their comic effect. The strong stylistic elements of Sirk's cinematic vocabulary leave scope for parodic references to be made, in, say, a television comedy sketch, although signifiers (clichés) of the 1950s or family conflict tend towards more general conventions understood by the widest possible audience, rather than references to a specific film. Television parody is typically based on the minimum number of clichés required to position the sketch or show in a recognised setting.

Klinger notes the humorous response that some classic films elicit from young students, and that this reflects their predisposition to see the campy side of films of the past, informed by genre parody and their 'mass camp' pop culture programming. A prominent source for Hollywood parody in mass culture today is *The Simpsons* (1987 -). Films as diverse as *Citizen Kane*, *The Shining*, *Cape Fear*, *Mary Poppins*, *Rear Window*, and *Planet of the*

Apes, have been referenced on the show, sometimes repeatedly, amounting to a series of introduction to clusters of genre conventions to an audience that will probably be cued to laugh at Rosebud if they ever discover Orson Welles. An explicit reference to a film by Douglas Sirk has yet to appear⁹.

The hugely popular television soap opera *Dallas* (1978 - 1991) apparently took the Texas oil family scenario of *Written on the Wind* as its prototype, foregrounding alcoholism, family strife, sexual problems and serial infidelities, combined with big-business corruption and a return to Manichaeian good/evil oppositions. The series, especially in its later phases, came close to parody and became a favourite of Klinger's 'camp practitioners', but a direct link to Sirk is more difficult to substantiate, since soap operas have their own set of conventions more generally (and generically) linked back to melodrama as a whole. These have been parodied overtly in the television series *Soap* (1977 - 1981) and the film *Soapdish* (1991).

Conventions for citation and parody on film are more complex. Firstly there is the artistically credible category of the homage. Secondly, whether the citation is contextualised as an affectionate, serious or reflexive homage, or as something closer to a parody, a director is likely to assume a more detailed pre-knowledge of their inspiration for the reference to be effective. Thus a film like Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* combines explicit light-hearted visual references to Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* in its opening credits and music that initially suggest a parodic reading, before Haynes' darker and more modern concerns become apparent.

Haynes plays with the audience's pre-knowledge and expectations by closely copying the opening of *All That Heaven Allows*, encouraging a camp interpretation in other elements such as the typography of the credits, and continues this play to a lesser extent throughout his film, in a way that allows the privileged viewer another level upon which to understand and enjoy it. Sharon Willis notes that Haynes presents a view of the 1950s that also refers closely to the concerns of 1980s and 1990s feminist film theory and the works that brought Sirk to renewed prominence, so that the film is 'as much an homage to film theory' as it is to *All That Heaven Allows*, addressing period as one of 'intense contradiction around femininity, particularly in its relation to popular culture, especially television and consumerism'.¹⁰

Where one director's homage to the work of another is assumed to be positive and respectful, in critical circles parody is generally assumed to be negative, exaggerating and drawing attention to generic codes and clichés in the interests of comedy, as in the work Mel Brooks.¹¹

Thus, homages to Sirk such as Haynes' *Far From Heaven* and Fassbinder's *Fear Eats The Soul* (*Angst essen Seele auf*, 1974) have a place in academic studies of Sirk and his legacy, but parodic treatments of 'Sirkian' themes and *mise-en-scène* have received less attention, primarily because they approach their films from a variation on the camp perspective that has been viewed in the past as a negation and debasement of Sirk's Brechtian methods. If we identify Sirk's 'generic auto-critique' as a trigger to the mass camp response in the unschooled audience, linking the more self-aware 'knowing' subcultural camp responses to Sirk's Universal melodramas to

academic readings of the work gives us a way of seeing and reassessing the parody-homage.

Christine Gledhill, Klinger and others have noted the gay following for a range of films including Sirk's 1950s melodramas, predating their recovery as examples of subversive Hollywood cinema by Film Studies academics. Their excessiveness, extreme emotions, mannered performances and direct sentimentality are identified both as a source of humour for the gay subcultural audience and the basis for the family melodramas' canonical status as subversive, progressive texts.¹²

The intersection between three developments in film culture and the gay male audience provide a link between the mass camp, subcultural camp and academic responses. The growth of avant-garde and underground cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of film schools in the US over the same period, and the expansion of academic film criticism and theory in the 1970s and 1980s, have contributed to an environment in which a group of gay film-fan/film-makers have been able to appreciate Sirk artistically, retaining their enjoyment of the films as camp texts. Their interpretation of the Sirkian is a cumulative distillation of various perspectives, with a new potential to play with all of the above reading strategies in their work, combining homage and parody, and addressing different sectors of the audience on their own terms.

We can view films by gay directors such as John Waters' *Polyester* (1981) and George Kuchar's *A Reason To Live* (1973) in this way, including in our grouping the Sirkian drag performer Lypsinka, and a more recent Sirk influenced film comedy, *Die Mommie Die!* (2003). *Far From Heaven* and

Pedro Almodóvar's *High Heels (Tacones Lejanos, 1991)* also fit this analysis. In these films we can detect a common approach to the presentation of femininity and the centrality of a certain elements of performativity that reflects an awareness of Sirk's methods and his own use of stars, notably Lana Turner, but turns them around in most cases by the use of drag queens or highly stylised female leads to emphasise distancing as a parodic element.

Such preoccupations fit Philip Core's definition of camp as an assertion of marginality and difference through theatrical style, and Susan Sontag's aphorism that 'to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role'.¹³ For these filmmakers the layers of excess and artifice associated with drag have a natural home in the movies, that is echoed in Sirk's exaggerated uses of colour and *mis-en-scène*.

Although drag itself has taken considerable steps towards the mainstream since the 1990s, appearing in lightweight mainstream films such as *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*, and more serious portrayals such as in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, in the 1960s and 1970s drag queens were not the fluffy non-threatening emissaries of camp gayness that they have come to signify in recent years. Novels such as Hubert Selby Jr's *Last Exit To Brooklyn* (1965) and John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963) portray queens predominantly as deluded outcasts and drug-addicted prostitutes, the most marginalised and disreputable of all sections of the gay community. This perception had hardly changed by the time of William Friedkin's film *Cruising* in 1980. In her memoir, *Man Enough to be a Woman*, the transgender punk icon Jayne County recalls

that she would often be asked to leave parties to maintain their hosts' illusion of respectability in late 1960s New York:

The straighter guys wanted to be able to just walk out into the street and just be normal, but if we were seen turning up at the party then the neighbours would get the idea. Sometimes the neighbours would call the police and they'd come and arrest people for riotous behaviour or whatever. The police hassled us quite a bit.¹⁴

In 1965 drag still had some shock value. Its associations with perversion, hard drugs and prostitution were not camp. For Andy Warhol to adopt Jack Smith's 'star' Mario Montez (Rene Ricard), and other eccentric gay figures like Taylor Mead, alongside uptown playgirls like 'Baby Jane' Holzer and Edie Sedgwick, to bring these 'creatures' (to use Smith's term) into his films, was to deliberately encompass a harder-edged and more self-consciously provocative subcultural vision of camp than Sontag's non-committal 'good bad taste'. Smith was obsessed with the glamour and hyper-stylisation of a particular period of escapist B-pictures, Warhol with movie stars and their 'real lives', mediated through gossip and fan magazines. Mario Montez, drag queen and off-off-broadway theatre performer gave both men an outlet for these interests, Warhol casting him in a succession of films about screen goddesses Jean Harlow, Hedy Lamarr and Lana Turner.¹⁵ In *Camp*, featuring Smith, Montez and Gerard Malanga, Warhol suggests that the roles people assume define their real lives, so that the dividing line between reality and 'acting' is blurred, voicing his implicit disagreement with Sontag's differentiation between pure camp and 'camping'.

Although Kuchar's work is perhaps the earliest example of a consciously Sirkian approach, emerging from the underground cinema of the 1960s,

beginning with *Hold Me While I'm Naked* in 1966 and extending through his work into the late 1970s, Richard Dyer rightly traces 'the outlandish banality of middle-American conversation and style ... and its loose unhurried structure' to Warhol and Smith.¹⁶ The older directors' influence combined with Kuchar's own take on Hollywood mythology, a common interest that proved a further link between the three men. Kuchar's early 8mm work with his twin brother Mike - an impressive 17 films made between 1954 to 1963 - reflects their own obsession with Hollywood and broad genre parody, revealed in titles like *The Naked and the Nude* (1957), *Born of the Wind* (1961), *A Town Called Tempest* (1962).¹⁷ On his own, George progressed to 16mm and a no-budget approximation of the Sirk visual style in several films, concentrating on over-saturated colour and lighting set-ups such as Sirk's signature 'sunlight through window' effect. Like Fassbinder, Kuchar appreciates Sirk in terms of his ability to create work of great beauty under the industrial conditions of the studio system: "I used to go see his movies and they were movies made by adults who seemed to know what they were doing ... adults working in a beautiful form: the Hollywood motion picture ... making beautiful works".¹⁸ Kuchar saw *Written On The Wind* up to eleven times at first run houses in The Bronx of his childhood and was deeply affected by the Sirk aesthetic.¹⁹

Kuchar was also an aficionado of soundtrack music in the 1950s and would often base his viewing choices on the presence of favourite composers such as Alex North or Bernard Herrmann. This led to the later development of a technique of recycling and re-shaping existing music his collection of film soundtrack LPs to fit his own films, using a wide variety of different

(unidentified) sources in each. He appropriates the sweeping romantic themes and dramatic musical climaxes from a range of films, as utilitarian additions to the cinematic language of his work, but always with an acknowledged ironic touch, a further distancing device, as they are often cut off abruptly or conspicuously muffled or distorted. This is in itself a self-reflexive comment on the film making process and the low-technology aesthetic. In *Forever and Always* (1978) Kuchar uses romantic orchestral scores as a counterpoint to the mundane onscreen action, and in *A Reason To Live* to heighten the drama (Fig.3); Waters uses a similar approach to the music in his early films, where tapes of obviously scratched old rock'n'roll 45s provide the soundtrack. They have a practical use, in covering sequences shot without synchronised sound. The contrast with mainstream cinema is taken as read, and it is clear that Kuchar, unlike Fassbinder, had/has no ambitions of mainstream exposure, although Waters' career has moved closer to the mainstream with each successive film.

Where Kuchar has made relatively few feature length films in his career, his immediate successor John Waters progressed to his first feature in 1969 after only three shorts.²⁰ Waters had been a regular visitor to New York in the mid-1960s to see underground films, and was directly inspired by the Kuchars, who led him to Sirk: "They made me want to make films - I hadn't even seen Douglas Sirk yet ... they were the first people that ever idolised Douglas Sirk, they were so ahead of their time, and their films were that LURID colour."²¹

An avowed admirer of Fassbinder as well as Warhol and the Kuchar brothers, Waters takes the ideas of exaggerated gender presentation and 'good bad taste' from his American progenitors and takes them to a high point in cinema that is unlikely to be surpassed.²²

Using a stable of actors in the Brechtian/early Fassbinder style, Waters' 1970s films, aimed squarely at the counter-cultural 'midnight movie' circuit rather than the mainstream, contain little that could be considered camp, beyond Sontag's observation that 'there exists ... a good taste of bad taste' and that the 'discovery of bad taste can be very liberating'.²³

In Kuchar's work women are often very stylised, with exaggerated anti-naturalistic 1950s style hair and make-up by Kuchar himself and vampish thrift store gowns. Waters and his long serving make-up artist Van Smith took the Kuchar style one step further with their presentation of the drag queen Divine (Glenn Milstead).²⁴ Although Milstead is clearly a man, Divine is essentially genderless in the early films. Their outlandish situations bear scant relation to conventional realism, to the extent that a specific reading of gender is superfluous. In *Female Trouble*, 1975, the melodramatic conventions of the soap opera are grafted onto the crime/prison drama, but it is not until Waters attempts a more mainstream film in 1981 that he chooses to reveal any more direct Sirkian influences or references. *Polyester* is also Waters' first film in which Divine portrays a more conventional woman, Francine Fishpaw, in a traditional family setting, without the excessive make-up, costumes or homicidal tendencies of her predecessors (Fig.5).

Like *Far From Heaven*, the opening credit sequence of *Polyester* begins with a crane shot through the branches of a tree, descending on a suburban neighbourhood, a direct reference to *All That Heaven Allows*. In *Polyester* the shot extends into an exaggeratedly long tracking shot, as the theme song continues beyond the credits, taking us hesitantly into the Fishpaw home, then up the stairs and into an opulent sunlit bedroom where we observe Francine dressing. Waters establishes the centrality of the home on one hand, but makes his intention to play with the conventions of the language of cinema clear on the other, with a cue to Sirk probably lost on many members of his early audiences. When first released, screenings were supplemented by scratch and sniff cards reflecting the narrative device of Francine's keen sense of smell. Waters called the cards Odorama, in honour of William Castle, a B-movie director of the 1950s.²⁵ The deliberate high/low film culture division continues with further Hollywood references, including Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and Russ Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970). Waters signposts his diverse influences to assert their equal cinematic value.

Themes from *Written on the Wind* as well as *All That Heaven Allows* are at the centre of *Polyester* as Francine descends into alcoholism after a series of humiliations by her uncaring, dysfunctional family, and takes a young lover in the form of 1950s star Tab Hunter. Hunter is clearly a stand-in for the equally closeted Rock Hudson, while her newly-wealthy ex-maid Cuddles (played by Edith Massey) fulfils a maternal rather than subservient role. A preoccupation with plans for her coming out party and other upper class social activities allows Cuddles all the tunnel vision of Lora Meredith in *Imitation of Life* as she

ignores or trivialises her friend's alcoholism and other problems. Meanwhile Francine's real mother is plotting with Hunter's character Todd Tomorrow, sent to seduce the drunken Francine. The social disapproval that Cary faces in *All That Heaven Allows* is directed at Francine in *Polyester* as the brunt of anti-porn demonstrators picketing her home because her unfaithful husband runs an 'adult' cinema. As the only defender of suburban middle class morality in the film she is humiliated further by the behaviour of her teenage children, as they play out their roles in tribute to 1970s Freudian film theorists such as Thomas Elsaesser as much as the pop-Freudian allusions of 1950s 'adult' films themselves.²⁶ Lulu is an uninhibited pleasure-seeking disco dancer, unable to stand still for one second and completely beyond her mother's control. Dexter, a sullen and inarticulate drug user, is expelled from school, leaving him more time to devote to his secret life as the Baltimore Foot Stomper. A deranged foot fetishist, Dexter moans and grimaces as the urge to stamp on womens' feet overcomes him, then staggers away laughing nastily. Order is restored in the correct Freudian manner when Dexter is caught, treated and subsequently released after learning to successfully channel his deviant urges into paintings and sculptures of shoes. Denied an abortion by scary pro-life demonstrators, Lulu has a miscarriage and becomes a Christian. Both return to type following the trauma of a violent *deus ex machina* ending that leaves all the villains of the film dead, and Francine sniffing a can of air freshener.

Although it owes much to Sirk, questions of Francine's performance of femininity, parodic or otherwise, are hardly explored at all in the film.

Conversely, the comedic possibilities afforded by her romance with Todd are exploited in scenes that emphasise Todd's performance of the heterosexual masculine. The humour relies on the audience reading him as gay, and the additional revelation that he is actually having an affair with Francine's scheming mother. Todd's character has none of the connotations of nature that Rock Hudson and Denzel Washington share in *All That Heaven Allows* or *Far From Heaven*. He is synthetic, like the eponymous artificial fibre. Nature is not portrayed as a positive force. When Cuddles takes Francine for a picnic in the woods ("Look at the nature - it's beautiful!") their sandwiches are quickly over-run with insects and they return to Cuddles' limousine. Cathy (Julianne Moore) in *Far From Heaven* shares some of Francine's detachment, but the not-quite-there aspect of her acting is more likely a Haynes nod to Warhol superstar Candy Darling. Moore's character appears to be styled after Darling in *Women In Revolt*, suggesting an extra level meaning to her gay husband's drunken exclamation "you should see her before she puts her face on", and her coy admission that "every girl has her secrets" (Fig.2).

Pedro Almodóvar's *High Heels*, provides a more thoughtful treatment of issues of gender performance and imitation. Whilst Almodóvar explicitly identified the film as a 'melodrama in the grand cinematic style' and references *Imitation of Life* extensively, the visual style of the film is more naturalistic than other consciously Sirkian films, but in keeping with the director's customary emphasis on colour and costume.²⁷ The incorporation of aspects of the real-life murder drama of Sirk's star Lana Turner and her daughter Cheryl Crane to *High Heels* adds a second layer of imitation, a third

if we consider the publicity generated by the Stompanato case in 1958, its resonance in the plot of *Imitation* in 1959 (Fig.4). Although not heavily reliant on Sirkian mise-en-scene, Almodóvar does appropriate Sirk's reflections and mirrors motif, primarily in relation to the various guises of Miguel Bosé's character - the drag queen Letal, the judge Dominguez and the undercover cop Hugo. We see him through the distancing device of the mirror in various degrees of costume in different locations throughout the film, most tellingly as the drag queen Letal, around whom a veritable galaxy of questions of femininity, imitation, substitution, performance and surrogacy revolves.

In a typically convoluted plot, a mother, Becky, decides to leave her young daughter in Madrid to pursue a singing career in Mexico in the mid-1970s following the apparently accidental death of her husband. She returns fifteen years later to find that her daughter Rebeca, now a television news reader, has befriended Femme Letal, a drag queen who lip-synchs her old hits in a night club, and married Manuel, her 1970s lover. When their affair is rekindled Manuel is murdered. The film contains three key 'performances' by Letal, Rebeca and Becky - the sincerity, truth or authenticity of which are all questionable to some degree.

By chance, the day of Becky's return coincides with the last performance of Femme Letal (the replacement of the imitation with the genuine article). Rebeca insists on attending, bringing her somewhat reluctant mother and husband with her. At the club she carefully explains that Letal is a 'new wave' drag queen paying homage to Becky, rather than actually wanting to be her. Letal copies her gestures and expressions, miming to a dramatic torch song.

He has the costume hair and makeup to back them up, but all without attempting a convincing impersonation of her. Becky says as much when she first sees Letal's posters all over town, based on a famous photo from her early career. The signifiers that constitute the 'Becky' image are available for anyone to adopt, an idea supported by the line of drag queens in the club that follow Letal's moves from the front row. Again, he is clearly a man, but an imitation Becky is better than no Becky at all for Rebeca. She admits this to her real mother, telling her she how she was consciously drawn to Letal as a substitute. Becky, meanwhile, is captivated and flattered by the performance, ignoring her daughter's olive branch and enjoying her celebrity. Becky is charmed by Letal's stylised tribute, but is blind to her daughter's imitations of her, interpreting them as insults rather than homage, whilst Rebeca, in her resentment, expresses her need to imitate her mother in terms of competing with her, in her pursuit of Manuel.

We later learn that the Letal's whole existence is a front for a murder investigation at the club. The film shifts as a second murder case, Manuel's, is opened. The key performance of this segment is Rebeca's dramatic televised confession to the crime. Whilst the speech is rendered as comedy by her style of delivery (starting cold and formal and unravelling as she keeps talking) and the presence at her side of the sign language interpreter, Isabel, Manuel's mistress, the audience does not sure that she is telling the truth at this point. It seems likely that she is covering up for her mother - a further parallel with the Stompanato murder, for which Turner's daughter Cheryl Crane was convicted.²⁸

Becky's triumphant comeback completes the performance trilogy. She puts on an impressive and emotive show, but once again her sincerity is in question; for a woman who says her 'whole life is performing' the demarcation between the act and reality may be indistinct. Watching her sing we can only be reminded of Letal's rote repetitions of her gestures. The script requires her to be 'overcome with emotion' (but the exaggerated gestures of kissing the stage and leaving a single teardrop seem contrived, and one imagines that this might be the climax of her act every night, like Letal's mechanistic imitations.²⁹

Progressing from Divine, a drag queen paying a real woman (with surprising credibility), to Miguel Bosé, an actor playing a drag queen playing a 1970s pop singer (less convincingly), leads us to a pair of drag queens playing Lana Turner as a drag queen. Lypsinka is a character developed by John Epperson in New York in the early 1980s, based on 1950s and 1960s film actress/singer/dancer archetypes and inspired by films like *Valley of the Dolls*, *Madame X* and *Imitation of Life*.³⁰ Exposed to Sirk on television as a teenager in Mississippi, Lypsinka discovered the critical reappraisals of *Imitation* and the other Universal melodramas in New York in the late 1970s.

A typical solo Lypsinka performance would include frenetic yet uncannily perfect lip-synching to a dense, jarring collage of film dialogue and music, with equally frenetic and dramatically lurid lighting. Sirk is a conscious influence in these performances - "I have always wanted my solo performances to function on various levels, to comment on itself and be self-reflexive, as well as comment on performance in general and drag performance specifically"

(Fig.6).³¹ Epperson has also been associated with group projects under the TWEED Theatre Works banner, and a succession of parodic film adaptations - Fractured Classicks. These include *The Children's Hour*, with Epperson and Charles Busch as the two women, *Harriet Craig* with Lypsinka in the title role, *The Women* with Lypsinka in the Joan Crawford role, as well as *Imitation of Imitation of Life*, starring Lypsinka as Lora Meredith/Lana Turner and Flotilla de Barge as Annie/Juanita Moore. Although the play was only performed in only two short off-off-Broadway engagements in 2000, "the public loved it and still talk about it."³² Written by Stephen Pell with additional material and ideas from Epperson, the play followed the trajectory of Sirk's film, but is comically exaggerated at every turn. As Annie gets older and greyer, Lora's make-up gets thicker and costumes get more elaborate, as Annie gets more depressed over Sara-Jane, DeBarge plays the character as "real" as possible, while Lora becomes increasingly "robotic".³³

Epperson's partner in the *Children's Hour* parody, Charles Busch, describes himself as 'actor, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, drag legend', with a New York stage career dating back to 1976.³⁴ *Die Mommie Die!* his own tribute to Sirk by way of *Valley of the Dolls* and Lana Turner's 1969 B-movie *The Big Cube*, also started life as a stage show.³⁵ Thus Busch and Epperson have some common ground and a shared interest in film and parody, although Busch is more mainstream and conservative, preferring to use his real name and present himself as an actor, in contrast to Lypsinka's fully realised 'Celebrity of the Millenium' drag persona.³⁶

Despite director Mark Rucker's appropriation of the distinctive *All That Heaven Allows* credit sequence (a year after *Far From Heaven*) and various references to *Imitation* in the script, including the seemingly obligatory line "stop acting, Mother!", the film owes more to gay cult staples like *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane*, and the LSD plot of *The Big Cube* than Sirk. Moreover, the humour in *Die Mommy Die!* is broad and lacking any subtlety or affinity with the critical subcultural camp readings of Sirk discussed earlier. Lypsinka is truer to this reading strategy and at the same time more consciously Sirkian, incorporating reflexivity and ironic distancing in her portrayal of the kaleidoscopic drag performer.

Concluding her own discussion of Sirk and camp, Klinger makes the gloomy observation that his films 'have become ancient relics whose relevance to [mass] culture ... has long since past' like other products of studio-era Hollywood, as a result of the disarming sensibility of mass camp'.³⁷ I would take a contrary view. Klinger's point may hold true if we restrict ourselves to the mainstream, yet there have been a range of responses to Sirk originating on the margins of film culture, rooted in subcultural critique and parody, that do not require us to disregard the original work to succeed in amusing us. A camp re-reading of a film such *Imitation of Life*, for example does not necessarily undermine the content or intentions of the original, or indeed rely it for comic effect, as one review of *Imitation of Imitation of Life* indicates:

Watching the play, I had no idea what was referenced ... but the sense that thousands of tiny ironies were being lost on me did nothing to diminish the pleasure of the thousand ironies

that were readily available to anyone sitting in the theatre that night.³⁸

Camp may constitute a triumph of style over content in some contexts, but camp can also be complex and be read by a varied audience on many levels. With or without the glib festival programme blurb, the sold out London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival audience for a new print of the film in 1997 were as moved by Annie's funeral as any audience has ever been. Klinger argues that mass culture and its product mass camp rob Sirk's films of contemporary meaning, but marginal subcultural camp material like the works of Waters, Kuchar and Lypsinka particularly, are largely ignored or invisible to the mass audience. Mass camp undermines 1950s melodrama because it reads the films as ridiculous. Nevertheless, it *thinks* it understands them, in an assumption of superiority. But mass camp cannot poison what it does not see or understand. This limitation is what keeps the marginal marginal, but is also a source of its strength.

Notes

¹ John Mercer, and Martin Schingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*, (London: Wallflower, 2004), p.107

² Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the films of Douglas Sirk*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.133

³ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (London: Vintage, 1994) p.283

⁴ Klinger, 1994, p.142

⁵ Klinger, 1994 p.143 quoted in Mercer and Schingler, 2004, p.106

⁶ Klinger, 1994, p.145

⁷ Klinger, 1994, p.132

⁸ Klinger, 1994, p.156

⁹ For example, one entire episode is based on Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

¹⁰ Sharon Willis, 'The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk', *Camera Obscura* 54, vol. 18, no. 3, Duke University Press, 2003, p.134

¹¹ Brooks' film parodies of the 1970s follow their sources closely - whether a single film cycle, as in *Young Frankenstein*, a genre, as in *Blazing Saddles*, or a director in *High Anxiety* (Hitchcock).

¹² Mercer and Schingler, 2004, p.106

¹³ Sontag, 1994, p.280

¹⁴ Jayne County with Rupert Smith, *Man Enough to be a Woman*, (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1995), p.31

¹⁵ *Harlot*, 1964, *Hedy*, 1966 and *More Milk*, *Yvette*, 1966. See also Fig.1, illustrating one of Smith's films of this period.

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, *Now You See it: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.144

¹⁷ Kuchar brothers filmography, *Pandemonium* no.3, 1989 p.62

¹⁸ Georgw Kuchar Interview by Jack Stevenson, May 1988, *Pandemonium* no.3, 1989, p.85

¹⁹ Kuchar interview, p.63

²⁰ *Mondo Trasho*, 1969, 16mm, 95 min

preceded by *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* 1964, 8mm 17 min

Roman Candles, 1966 8mm 40 min

Eat Your Makeup, 1968 16mm 45 min

²¹ John Waters interview by Jack Stevenson, September 1988, *Pandemonium* no.3, 1989, p.42

²² 'Without a doubt Fassbinder was the most talented director of his day.

Anybody who idolises Douglas Sirk is A-OK in my book.'

John Waters, *Crackpot: the obsessions of John Waters*, (London: Fourth Estate, 1988), p.114

²³ Sontag, 1994. p291

²⁴ Divine starred in all but one of Waters films between 1966 and his death in 1987

²⁵ Known as 'King of the Gimmicks', Castle is best remembered for *The Tingler* (1959). At certain cinemas a selection of seats were wired to administer mild electric shocks at strategic points in the film - Castle called this effect Percepto.

²⁶ Sharon Willis makes the same point about Haynes and *Far From Heaven*, but the difference is that Haynes has literally been schooled in these ideas and has reason to expect they will be recognised by a proportion of his art-house based audience; Waters was a self-taught filmmaker working twenty years earlier, when such ideas had considerably less common currency.

²⁷ Almodóvar 'auto-interview' in *El Pais*, 19 October 1991, paraphrased in, Paul Julian Smith, *Desire Unlimited: the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, (London: Verso, 1994), p.127

²⁸ Crane has consistently denied the rumours that Turner was the true perpetrator of the crime, yet the American gossip tabloid the *National Enquirer* still includes insinuations to this effect periodically, in features such as their 'All-Time Top Ten Hollywood Scandals' of 1995 - see illustration, from author's scrapbook.

²⁹ Script directions quoted in Smith, 1994, p.129

³⁰ "My absolute favourite movie" - undated interview with V Vale
V Vale and Andrea Juno, *Incredibly Strange Music Volume 1*, (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1993) p.152

³¹ personal email correspondence with author, November 2004

³² as prev.

³³ Epperson's terms. in drag circles "realness" denotes a serious attempt at passing. The queens in Jenny Livingstone's documentary *Paris is Burning* discuss realness versus ostentatious artifice at length. Although far removed from Harlem's drag subculture, Lypsinka definitely favours artifice.)

³⁴ Introductory text from www.charlesbusch.com/index.html

³⁵ A cheap drug exploitation film made in Mexico - described by Lypsinka as "Imitation of Life on LSD".

³⁶ www.lypsinka.com/index.html

³⁷ King, 1994, p.156

³⁸ Thomas Beller, 'Not Far From Heaven', review written 2000, posted on internet 2003: <http://www.mrbellersneighborhood.com/story.php?storyid=855>

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Filmography

The listing follows the format Title, year, producer, director - where only one name is given, in most cases this individual is producer-director.

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls, 1970, Russ Meyer

The Big Cube, 1969, Lindsley Parsons, Tito Davison

Blazing Saddles, 1974, Michael Hertzberg, Mel Brooks

Born of the Wind, 1961, George and Mike Kuchar

Buzzards Over Baghdad, 1951-64, Jack Smith

Camp, 1965, Andy Warhol, with Mario Montez, Jack Smith, Gerard Malanga

Cape Fear, 1991, Barbara De Fina, Martin Scorsese

The Children's Hour, 1961, William Wyler

Citizen Kane, 1941, Orson Welles

Cruising, 1980 , Jerry Weintraub, William Friedkin

Dallas, television series 1978 - 1991, Lorimar/ Warner Bros Television

The Devil's Cleavage, 1976, George Kuchar

Die Mommie Die, 2003, Danre De Lorito, Mark Rucker, starring Charles

Busch

Eat Your Make-up, 1968, John Waters

Far From Heaven, 2002, Chistine Vachon and Jody Patton, Todd Haynes

Fear Eats The Soul, 1973, Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Female Trouble, 1975, John Waters

Forever and Always, 1978, George Kuchar

Hag in a Black Leather Jacket, 1964, John Waters

Harlot, 1964, Andy Warhol - Warhol's first sound film with Mario Montez as Jean Harlow

Harriet Craig, 1950, William Dozier, William Sherman

Hedy (AKA Hedy the Shoplifter), 1966, Andy Warhol

High Anxiety, 1977, Mel Brooks

High Heels, 1991, Pedro Almodovar

Hold Me While I'm Naked, 1966, George Kuchar

Madame X, 1965, Ross Hunter, David Lowell Rich

Mary Poppins, 1964, Walt Disney, Robert Stevenson

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, 1997, Clint Eastwood

Mondo Trasho, 1969, John Waters

More Milk, Yvette, 1966, Andy Warhol (with Mario Montez as Lana Turner)

The Naked and the Nude, 1957, George and Mike Kuchar

Paris Is Burning, 1990, Barry Swimar, Jennie Livingston

Pink Flamingos, 1972, John Waters

Planet of the Apes, 1968, Arthur P Jacobs, Franklin J Schaffner

Polyester, 1981, John Waters

Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, 1994, Al Clark and Michael Hamblin, Stephan Elliot

Rear Window, 1954, Alfred Hitchcock

A Reason To Live, 1976, George Kuchar

Rodan, 1956, Ishiro Honda

Roman Candles, 1966, John Waters

The Shining, 1980, Robert Fryer, Stanley Kubrick

The Simpsons, television series 1987 - present, Executive Producers Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, Sam Simon

Smashing Time, 1967, Carlo Ponti and Roy Millichip, Desmond Davis, George Melly (writer)

Soap, television series 1977 - 1981, Producer: Susan Harris. Directors Included: Jay Sandrich, J.J. Lobue

Soapdish, 1991, Allen Greisman and Aaron Spelling, Michael Hoffman

Sunset Blvd, 1950, Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder

The Tingler, 1959, William Castle

A Town Called Tempest, 1962, George and Mike Kuchar

Valley of the Dolls, 1967, David Weisbart, Mark Robson

Whatever Happened To Baby Jane, 1962, Robert Aldrich

Women In Revolt, 1971, Andy Warhol, Paul Morrissey, with Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, Holly Woodlawn

The Women, 1939, Hunt Stromberg, George Cukor

To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar, 1995, G Mac Brown, Beeban Kidron

Young Frankenstein, 1974, Michael Grusgoff, Mel Brooks