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Redressing Grievances. Cross-Dressing Pleasure With the Law

Elisabeth Bronfen

> The notion of the subject-in-process assumes that we recognize. on the one hand, the unity of the subject who submits to a law - the law of communication, among others; yet who, on the other hand, does not entirely submit, cannot entirely submit, does not want to submit entirely. The subject-in-process is always in a state of contesting the law, either with the force of violence, of aggressivity, of the death drive, or with the other side of this force: pleasure and jouissance. (Julia Kristeva: *Interviews,* p. 26).

The Riddle of Dress

The double proposal scene, with which Billy Wilder puts closure on the scenario of mistaken identities played through in *Some Like it Hot,* continues to fascinate not only critics writing on postwar American film comedy but, perhaps more crucially, those engaged in the debate on the potentially subversive resignification cross-dressing might entail.[1] As the plot unfolds, the two musicians Jerry/Daphne (Jack Lemmon) and Joe/Josephine (Tony Curtis), who have unintentionally become the witnesses of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, find that the only way they can leave Chicago and thus escape detection is to don women's clothes and join an all-women-band, which is leaving that night on a train to Florida. Once safely installed in their new environment, they discover to their horror, that the gangsters they are fleeing from have chosen for their clan meeting precisely the hotel where their band is performing. In contrast to their first successful flight, a second escape, however, now proves to be more complicated, because in the course of their stay at this Florida beach resort, they both have gotten involved in vexed romances. The saxophonist Joe, donning the guise of a wealthy oil-producer traveling incognito, has fallen in love with the singer of the band, Sugar (Marilyn Monroe). Jerry,

[1] Ed Sikov. In: *Laughing Hysterically. American Screen Comedy of the 1950s,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, highlights Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* as one of Hollywood's best examples for the inability of human beings to construct themselves to the limit dictated by American social regulations.

in turn, is being courted by a real millionaire, Osgood (Joe E. Brown), who seemingly takes him to be a woman.[2] After initially hesitating, Daphne finally decides to accept the older man's offer of marriage, but only in order to get himself and his friend onto the millionaire's yacht, safely out of the reach of the irate gangsters. Thus the duped Oscar, waiting for his beloved at the pier in his motorboat, is surprised to find that Daphne, eagerly rushing toward him, is not only not alone, but in fact accompanied by two other women, Josephine and Sugar, who, as Daphne explains, are meant to serve as bridesmaid and flower girl.

Once the four lovers are safely at sea, both of the cross-dressed men decide to confess their real identity. Joe explains to Sugar that she shouldn't really want him because he is a liar and a phony, 'one of those no-goodniks you keep running away from.' He begs her not to give in to what can only turn into a romantic catastrophe, but Sugar, acknowledging the inevitability of her fate, simply agrees. 'I know, everytime,' she explains blissfully, no longer listening to the warning he gives. Or perhaps she already enjoys in advance the disaster that is about to occur, for as Joe reminds her of the scenes of disappointment she had confided to him while he was dressed as a girl, she both succumbs to her romantic delusion, even while she is also only too aware of the consequences. 'That's right, pour it on, talk me out of it,' she says, as she leans forward and kisses him. She quite self-consciously falls back on an already established pattern of romantic object choices because, though sure to cause pain, it also affords the safety of the familiar.

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[2] As Michael Shapiro argues in *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage. Boy Heroines and Female Pages,* Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1996, part of the fascination for cross-dressing on the Renaissance Stage was that these figures were neither perceived as grotesque hybrids nor as static icons of androgyny, but rather functioned as "a figure of unfused, discretely layered gender identities - play-boy, female character, male persona. Any one of them could be highlighted at a given moment because all of them were simultaneously present at some level in the spectators' minds", (p. 4). Along these lines one could speculate whether the poignancy of Billy Wilder's comedy might not reside in the fact that the question of whether Osgood actually knows about Daphne's real sex, indeed whether Jerry really knows about his sexual inclinations, remains open. The scenario of fused gender identities conforms with the fetishist's fantasy scenario, where to know one thing and to believe in another need not be mutually exclusive. It is as though Osgood were all along saying, 'I *know you are a man, but, in order to keep up the pretense you seem to desire, I will* believe you are a woman', rather than the more conventional reading of mistaken identities , 'I will believe you to be a woman, so as to cover up my clandestine and forbidden homoerotic desire'.

However, Wilder's enactment of the fact that she so willfully subjects herself to a repetition compulsion whose injurious outcome is only too clear to her, need not only be read as a sign of feminine masochism. Rather one could also understand it as the director's ironic comment on the very genre his film reiterates. For what Wilder renders visible is the way in which the happy end of any comedy of mistaken identities necessarily implies a willing blindness on the part of the players, not least of all because the role we play in the fantasylife of the other is always a form of disguise. Though equally supportive of the blind madness of love, Daphne's disclosure of her male sex serves to dismantle a different aspect of the allegedly happy couple-building which the comedy genre requires. After having offered several reasons why the marriage between herself and Osgood can not take place - because she isn't a natural blond, smokes all the time, has been living with a saxophone player and can have no children - Jerry finally admits, "I am a man." Without looking at his beloved, and instead staring blissfully out towards the sea, Osgood, undaunted by this confession, responds with the line that has haunted all discussion of cross-dressing ever since - "Nobody's perfect". This second couple-formation is, arguably, one at all costs. There must be a marriage, even if the proposed bond no longer supports the hegemonic ideology of heterosexuality.[3]

Both the manner in which Billy Wilder's plot of mistaken identities addresses the comic pleasure which the disturbance of clear gender categories performed in cross-dressing affords, as well as the way gender differences are necessarily always recuperated into normative marriage patterns offer a fruitful point of departure for the argument I will seek to unfold.[4] For the gender trouble which *Some Like It Hot* enacts could be

[3] Beyond the colloquial meaning of this terminating phrase, meant to emphasize that everybody lacks something, Osgood's statement can be read to mean 'no body is perfect' in the sense that the sentience of the body alone is not enough to signify; it requires symbolic mediation. Equally the statement points to the fact that perfection may have to do with having not one body, but several symbolically mediated bodies. Most crucially, however, someone by the name of Mr. Nobody is, indeed, perfect, in the sense that perfection is coterminous with having no manifest identity, and thus no troubling marks: nobody is perfect when the physical and symbolic body in question is in fact an empty human vehicle. The notion of cross-dressing at stake in my argument oscillates between these three positions.

[4] As Marjorie Garber argues in her study *Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety,* New York, Routledge, 1992, cross-dressing offers "a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male', whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural," and in so doing introduces crisis into a thinking in categories, putting in question the "possibility of harmonious

read as a significant reversal of the Hegelian insight that the subject prefers to avoid the antagonism in the home which the non-commensurability between masculine and feminine desire entails, even if this calls for a flight into those simple homoerotic oppositions which can be staged on the battlefield or in the public work place.[5] Significant about Wilder's reinscription of this gender trouble scenario is, then, the way in which his two protagonists, by appropriating feminine attire, not only find themselves actually fleeing from the simple opposition of masculine violence, namely a scene of mob warfare. Rather, in so doing, they are ultimately forced to confront what proves to be an irresolvable antagonism, namely the law of love. On the one hand, Billy Wilder thus employs the figure of cross-dressing not only in order to emphasize the construction of all gender performance. Rather, the impasse his two cross-dressed heroes find themselves in also articulates how the fate of love, given its enmeshment with culturally prescribed gender definitions, can only be experienced as a forced choice. While Sugar's desire can only express itself in response to the codes of American post-war femininity which, though injurious, also comprise the only mode of self-fashioning available

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and stable binary symmetry" as well as "identities, previously conceived as stable, unchallenged, grounded, and 'known'," pp. 11-13 passim. See also Lesley Ferris collection of essays, *Crossing the Stage. Controversies on cross-dressing*, London/New York, Routledge, 1993.

[5] In her groundbreaking study *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London/New York, Routledge, 1990, Judith Butler gestures towards the tension between, on the one hand, the unsolvable antagonism irrevocably inscribed in any performance of gender difference and, on the other, the way in which simple oppositions offer a mitigation of this friction, precisely by having recourse either to an overruling homogeneous definition of gender or by subsuming one sex into the other. As Jan Freitag notes in "Impossible geographies," men go to wars, to flee from the antagonism Hegel designates as the 'abstract negativity' upon which all community is based. Freitag's reformulation of Hegel highlights the fact that, in the sense that war comes to stand for a simple opposition, it articulates the impossible plenitude of society, and it does so by articulating the antagonism, which runs through the sedimented aspects of our objective everyday existence, in the form of gender trouble. See also Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the tension between antagonism and fantasy work in *Plague of Fantasy*, London, Verso, 1997. Here he argues that narration emerges "in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession." If we follow him in concluding that "the very form of narrative bears witness to some repressed antagonism" (p. 11), then an analysis of scenarios of cross-dressing involves exploring how the repressed antagonism resurfaces in this play with fixed gender identities: Does it subversively resignify the antagonistic friction between the sexes, or does it elide this troubling friction of the sexes by appropriating the cross-dresser into a homoerotic or androgynous model?

to her, Daphne finds that he, too, can no longer disengage his desire from the feminine identity he has usurped. Though Jack Lemmon's appropriation of a culturally codified dress of femininity may appear to us to be more ironic than Marilyn Monroe's, the love scenario they ultimately find themselves trapped in discloses how falling in love - far from signifying the return to some presymbolic affective sentience - in fact comes to be coterminous with falling into cultural laws.

On the other hand, Wilder's playful celebration of gender trouble ends with the protagonists preferring the antagonism of love, which is to say the incommensurability between how each lover fantasizes the other, along with the fact that any articulation of love can only be made within the dress of symbolic constraint. They prefer the friction of sexuality over a simple opposition - be this the scene of seduction Sugar declines, when she retreats from the hotel with its bevy of gullible millionaires; be it the scene of violence staged under the auspices of clan loyalty; be it the scene of pleasurable homoerotic male camaraderie, which defines Gerald and Joe's friendship and whose murky designation of gender roles on some latent level calls forth the idea of cross-dressing in the first place.[6] Neither the delusion on the part of Sugar, who knows it is her fate to be disappointed in love and thus enjoys precisely the inevitability of her love choice, nor Jerry's equally helpless giving in to Oscar's courtship, because the latter refuses to relinquish his forbidden love object, appear to be tragic modes of self-curtailment. For Wilder incorporates an ironic protective device into the forced choice around which his double romance plots revolves. His players seem to know about their romantic misrecognitions and thus do not succumb to a sentimental belief that this state of love is true, essential, or natural. Instead, the pleasurable fantasy with which Wilder dismisses us at the end of the film is that, precisely because all four players recognize the fictionality of the romance they are about to embark upon, the love contract might actually work. It is, after all, declared halfway between the mainland, where mob violence rages, and the yacht (i.e. ship), which, as Michel Foucault suggests, is one of our culturally privileged

[6] I take the notion of sexual friction from Stephen Jay Greenblatt's discussion of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1988, pp. 66-93, notably his speculation that even if the gender of the Shakespearean boy heroines was an open secret to the Renaissance audience, the narrative tension of these texts requires the friction between the sexes.

heterotopic sites of unlimited imagination[7]; which is to say it is, significantly, a proposal made in the liminal zone between an enjoyment of pure violence and the violence of pure enjoyment.

Discussing the cross-dressing performed by Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*, Judith Butler has argued that "there are forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself (...) where the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected within the narrative trajectory of the film." According to her, the homophobia and homosexual panic thus negotiated are perhaps less subversive than one would like to assume. Instead "such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and that this displaced production and resolution of homosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task".[8] One could, of course, argue that to a degree, subversion might well lie in the eyes of the beholder, given that it is dependent upon whether the spectator is willing simply to accept the intended reading a film offers, or whether they prefer to negotiate their reading in accordance with their own narrative desire. Nevertheless crucial about Butler's reticence to declare every performance of drag to be subversive is the manner in which she insists on a fundamental contradiction, written into the gesture of culturally produced and thus sanctioned transvestitism. For cross-dressing emerges as such a vexed issue precisely because it explores the murky interface between the resilience of individual pleasure and the constraints of public law, pitting imaginary fantasies of self-fashioning against the recognition that we are always already positioned within the parameters of behaviour dictated to us by the symbolic codes of our culture.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in her discussion of the ambivalence governing drag performance, Butler should have recourse to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation. For the primal scene of subjectivity presented by Althusser involves acknowledging the way in which cultural

[7] See Michel Foucault: "Of Other Spaces". In: *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986), pp. 22-27, where he discusses heterotopias as counter-sides, effectively enacted utopias, places outside of all places, even though it is possible to indicate their location in reality. These are above all sites where crises are worked through, cultural memory is stored, exchanged and imaginatively reworked.

[8] Judith Butler: *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York/London, Routledge, 1993, p. 126.

empowerment necessarily requires a form of subjection to the ideology governing it. Let us recall that Althusser not only suggested we conceive of ideology as representing the imaginary relationship a subject entertains toward his or her real conditions of being. Ideology, he adds, is an illusion that does not correspond to reality, even while it works as an allusion to this reality. In his famous example for how interpellation involves a move from individuality (imaginary register) to subjectivity (symbolic register) Althusser also offers a primal scene for the dialectic between transgressive enjoyment and a desire for the law: A person, walking along the street, turns around 180 degrees once he or she has been hailed by a policeman. By accepting this call, the individual defines itself in relation to the law and thus assures itself a position within the symbolic community constructed under the aegis of this law. The individual perceives itself as a subject of ideology precisely because s/he feels him/herself directly interpellated by one of its representatives, when upon hearing the call 'hey, you' s/he responds by turning around so as to say, 'yes, it is me you are calling'. In the reflection of the interpellative law the subject recognizes itself and assumes a fixed position within the symbolic world precisely because to answer this call means to take on the position which the figure of authority prescribes to it, which is to say acknowledging this as an imaginary, not a real relation. Having assumed this ideologically prescribed location the subject can confirm its identity by adding onto its response the second part of the sentence, 'It is true, I am here.'[9]

According to Butler, this call "is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject" by virtue of an interpellation that implies a legal reprimand and thus the presupposition of guilt.[10] This leads her to ask whether there might not be ways of acknowledging the law's constrictive constitution of the subject, even while they disarticulate punishment from recognition. In her discussion, cross-dressing transforms into such a strategy, because it allows one not only to refuse a punitive law that wounds and curtails one, but rather also empowers one to rupture this law by virtue of an ironic reappropriation. Indeed, at best, it enables one to reformulate one's symbolic identity by resignifying given terms, rather than fully ceding to their curtailment or fully rejecting these cultural dictates. Crucially, then,

[9] Louis Althusser: "Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)". In: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York, Monthly Review Press 1971.
[10] Judith Butler: *Bodies*, p. 121.

accepting interpellation and at the same time renegotiating its terms, allows the subject to question the legitimacy of the symbolic command, even while it does not foreclose its constitutive power. For as Butler correctly insists, while the law can be renegotiated it can not be relinquished, because "the 'I' draws what is called its 'agency' in part through being implicated in the very relations of power that it seeks to oppose."[11] The troubling contradiction at stake in subject formation is, then, the fact that while, on the one hand, interpellation is violating and injurious, because it implies exclusions, curtailments, and reductions, on the other hand, it is precisely symbolic castration which also enables the subject to repeatedly reformulate itself. From this aporetic impasse Butler concludes, "Occupied by such terms and yet occupying them oneself risks a complicity, a repetition, a relapse into injury, but it is also the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chose."[12]

Equally seminal to a discussion of cross-dressing as a strategy of self-representation that crosses pleasure with the law in a resilient, if vexed manner, is, however, the fact that the success of interpellation is coterminous with its failure. This is the point Mladen Dolar has so astutely addressed with his suggestion that while Althusserian interpellation implies a clean cut, it actually produces a residue, marking that part of the individual which "cannot successfully pass into the subject" and thus comes to haunt the constituted subjectivity. "The subject," he argues "is precisely the failure to become the subject" and emerges not in the realm where interpellation fully succeeds, but rather on the fault-line where it succeeds and fails at the same time - where the punitive law and that psychic material which escapes its exclusory constraints come to merge.[13] The alien kernel that determines the individual as a symbolic subject enmeshes the externally imposed legal codes with the remainder that stays on as a representational trace recalling the psychic material that must be relinquished for the law to take hold and fix the subject into an unequivocal position. For Dolar, then, the choice the subject makes in accepting its position within a symbolic field is a forced choice; "One is presented with a choice which is decided in advance, and by choosing, one meets with a loss. To put it roughly, the subject, in its insertion in the

[11] Judith Butler: *Bodies*, p. 123.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 124.
[13] Mladen Dolar: "Beyond Interpellation". In: *Qui Parle* 6.2 (Spring/Summer 1993) pp. 76-78.

social, is subject of a choice, but a forced one, and one that is curtailed."[14] The subject always pays a price for the entry into the symbolic.

Cross-dressing, thus the wager I will be exploring in what follows, may well be one of our most resilient cultural strategies of the uncanny, where in one and the same gesture the subject responds to the representative of the law by acknowledging 'This is me' even while it also insists, 'This is not all of me, because there is something haunting me which radically puts into question the position I am asked to assume before the law, and which reminds me that I am more than this position.' Assuming a different dress becomes coterminous with rendering visible this alien kernel, this point of extimacy, as Lacan calls it, where the most intimate touches the outermost, where subjectivity is constituted around an intimate external kernel.[15] To speak of cross-dressing as the performance of extimacy means highlighting precisely the manner in which an external, and to a degree injurious law, having been internalized by virtue of interpellation (with a repetition of this symbolic call ensuring the survival of this constitutive intimate foreign kernel), is materially reenacted at the body by virtue of a gesture that clearly says of itself, 'I am assuming clothes, and with these a symbolic dress not legally ascribed to me.'

I want to call this an uncanny reformulation of the self not only because it blurs the boundary between masculinity and femininity, nor merely because it compels us to recognize the degree to which the other gender always inhabits one. Rather, cross-dressing can also be read as a performance of extimacy in the sense that it stages the murky fault-line between cultural subjection and empowerment, between an appropriation and subversion of symbolic law, a rejection and an affirmation of predetermined modes of symbolic dress. The message the cross-dresser broadcasts could be seen to address the fact that we are always implicated in the power formations that constitute us, that we can redress these but never entirely rid ourselves of these cultural garments. As Judith Butler astutely notes, while there is no necessary bond between drag and subversion, the gesture of cross-dressing can be seen to embody more than a specific practice of gay culture, given that it performs the ambivalence at the heart of all symbolic interpellation, which implicates us in the regimes

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

[15] See Jacques-Alain Miller's discussion of Lacan's reformulation of the uncanny, "Extimité", trans. Françoise Massardier- Kennedy, *Prose Studies* 11 (Dec. 1988); pp. 121-130.

of power that both constitute and constrain us as cultured subjects. If, then, we speak of social roles as modes of appropriative dressing, given that the subject comes to fashion itself in response to a symbolic interpellation which it can not choose, it may be fruitful to explore both the sites at which gender trouble serves to police a rigid boundary between normal and abnormal, sanctioned and punished modes of conceiving oneself in relation to the law as well as those cultural moments where this border, though patrolled, is left open. Indeed, we might do well to ask ourselves why western culture has so persistently enjoyed the uncanny chatoyancy between fixed gender positions that is called forth by cross-dressing, even while it uses the performance of gender indeterminacy to reinstall homogenous dictates - be they heterosexist, masculinist or feminist. Is the displayed cross-dressing only a defense against homophobic anxiety or does it also offer a rupturing of any clearly defined desire, which seeks, once and for all, to draw the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual enjoyment? Does cross-dressing mark one of those sites where desire is able to liberate itself from definitions that incarcerate it within fixed categories? Does it allow us a multiple, perhaps even a contradictory identification with the performers? Does our pleasure reside in the undecidability of the interpellation?

Precisely, then, because cross-dressing emerges as one of our most resilient, most resourceful but also most troubled cultural articulations of the way in which the subject is governed by a radical incommensurability between the pleasure of heterogeneous self-fashioning and the acceptance of an injurious law, I want to offer a cross-mapping of three historically different sets of texts, each, however, revolving around the vexing enmeshment of subversion and appropriation, which Billy Wilder's strange proposal scene at the end of *Some Like It Hot* articulates: I will begin by discussing the structuring of desire which unfolds in Shakespearean comedies revolving around cross-dressed girls. My interest in these early modern texts does not so much reside in the fact that these love narratives install the heterosexual marriage plot which continues to inform our cultural image repertoire to this day. At stake in my discussion is, instead, the way in which the Shakespearean texts point to the moments of failure written into an interpellation, calling for fixed gender identities, so that they culturally inscribe the birth of the uncanny as an index for the ineffaceable remainder that tarries beyond interpellation.[16] In my next

[16] Though Lisa Jardine's argument in *Reading Shakespeare historically*, London/New York, Routledge, 1996; that one should never forget the difference between reading

section I will turn to one of our most resilient icons of gender trouble, Marlene Dietrich and her repeated performances of cross-dressing, since they illustrate not only our pleasure at the enactment of fantasy scenarios revolving around the chatoyancy of gender, but also an ethics of accepting one's symbolic interpellation. My conclusion will then place the successful heterotopias that emerged in the context of postmodern urban drag culture alongside the horrific nightmare scenarios of mutating bodies science fiction has devised so as to address the toxic side effects of unlimited self-fashioning. At stake in my tracking these different articulations of how being masculine and being feminine is a highly unstable affair, is a discussion of the cost of symbolic identification. Not only does the fact that we dress ourselves in a particular social role imply the loss of other modes of identification. Assuming a given role also entails the appropriation of a norm we have not chosen but rather one whose choice was forced upon us. In the act of renegotiating this forced choice, what comes to the fore is the manner in which one is always more than any one cultural designation, occupying the assigned position yet also exceeding it. By proposing this multiple cross-mapping, I am not, of course, interested in trying to provide solid evidence for any explicitly intended intertextual set of relations at work in these highly diverse cultural artifacts. Rather, following Stanley Cavell, my interest is in discovering, "given the thought of this relation, what the consequences of it might be." As he notes, speaking of his own cross-mapping of Shakespearean comedies and American film comedies of the 30s, "it is a matter not so much of assigning significance to certain events of the drama as it is of isolating and relating the events for which significance needs to be assigned."[17] How does each individual text work through the concerns that motivate a performance of cross-dressing? What modes of figuration are deployed? But also, what solution to the antagonism of gender trouble does the text ultimately propose?

Shakespeare historically and reading him anachronistically is a crucial one, my own concern will be for the latter, given that at stake in my argument is what Julia Kristeva calls the transposition of one text into another, which is to say how later figurations of cross-dressing feed off but also resignify the Shakespearean model.

[17] See Stanley Carell: *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 144.

Affirming the Law of the Father

Wondering why, "if boys in women's dress are so threatening, did the English maintain a transvestite theater?" in contrast to all other European cultures, Stephen Orgel speculates that the cross between seductive fascination and terrifying anxiety played through by virtue of cross-dressing on the Shakespearean stage may well have at its core a cultural fear of women. Staging women in male attire renders them unnoticeable, even while it has recourse to a rhetorical ambivalence that can cut both ways. On the one hand the manifestation of a large cultural anxiety for disarming and controlling women, it can alternatively serve as a "performative construction that both reveals the malleability of the masculine and empowers the feminine, enabling the potential masculinity of women to be realized and acknowledged, if safely contained within the theatre's walls."[18] This has led many critics to read cross-dressing as a subversive reinscription of the existing order, even if they do not necessarily agree as to whether this should ultimately be understood as a cementing of gender difference, its critical disruption or a sublation of femininity into masculinity; indeed whether the subversive potentiality was limited to the action on stage or whether it was located precisely in the female audience watching the cross-dressed boy-actors.[19]

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, who has become the literary prototype for much subsequent female cross-dressing in drama as well as in opera,[20] lands on

[18] Stephen Orgel: *Impersonations. The Performance of Gendering Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 106. See also Orgel: "Nobody's Perfect. Or Why did the English Stage Take Boys for Women". In: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88:1 (Winter 1989), pp. 7-29, tracing the manner in which Shakespearean comedies were performed since the mid-eighteenth century, notes that each historical moment uses the cross-dressed woman to articulate the construction of femininity that is to be culturally privileged, pp. 199-204.

[19] Indeed, Marjorie Garber: *Vested Interests*, notes, two trends can be perceived in recent Renaissance scholarship on cross-dressing, the one "valorizing the female-to-male cross-dresser as a figure for emergent womanhood, either in economic or in psychological and social terms, the other privileging the historical facts of the playhouse, and the special role of the boy-actor or boy-actress as a sign of specifically homosexual energies in the theater, energies of male desire," p. 85. For a discussion of how cross-dressing allows for homoeroticism to be safely explored, see Valerie Traub: *Desire and Anxiety. Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, London/New York, Routledge, 1992.

[20] See Margaret Reynold's discussion of cross-dressing in early opera, "Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions". In: *En Travesti. Women, Gender Subversion,*

the shores of Illyria after having been shipwrecked and forcibly separated from her twin brother Sebastian. Though she accepts the law of fate that has so dramatically disrupted her journey to Elysium, she nevertheless has a choice in how to turn this accident in her favor and the guise she chooses to do so is that of a woman, hiding her femininity by performing the part of a eunuch. "I prithee (and I'll pay thee bounteously)," she explains to her servant, "Conceal me what I am, and be my aid/ For such disguise as haply shall become/ The form of my intent" (I.ii). At the same time, Viola, like many of her cross-dressed sisters, comes, in the course of the play, to support, albeit implicitly, the articulation of a desire, which is precisely not aimed at heterosexual couple-building. Though the happy end of the Shakespearean comedy ultimately requires a recuperation of the distinction between the girl performing femininity and the girl performing the gendered hybridity of a eunuch, it nevertheless resonates with the loss of the far less regulated expression of sexual desire that had sustained our spectatorial enjoyment of this comedy of mistaken gendered identities. As in any other case of interpellation, something remains after the cut which transforms the individual into a subject, and this trace hovers, like a forlorn melancholic note, amidst the wedding bells that mark the successful recuperation of order at the end of all comic misrecognitions. While the women players once more come to hide the scar of this violent cut, which severs them from their creative masculine refigurations, by reassuming their skirts, the fact that something must be relinquished for the heterosexual solution to hold is given material embodiment in those figures who must visibly be excluded from the wedding ceremonies: In *Twelfth Night* Malvolio, bent on revenge, because the woman he loves has chosen to wed the twin of the cross-dressed heroine, along with Antonio, the man who, owing to his unmeasureable love for Sebastian, was willing to enter into the territory of his enemy, the Count Orsino, and risk imprisonment, only to find himself disacknowledged, albeit by the twin sister whom he mistakenly takes for her brother. He uses his speech of self-defense to explicitly accuse Sebastian of ingratitude, and yet, obliquely, he also articulates his own romantic disappointment; "His life I gave him, and did thereto add/ My love, without retention or restraint,/ All his in dedication" (V.i). Although it is this accusation which brings about the discovery of the actual identities of the twin couple, and Antonio is, therefore, saved from execution, he has no further lines in the denouement of the play. He can but watch silently, as his beloved Sebastian enters,

Opera, ed. by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 132-151.

admitting to his clandestine marriage to Olivia, only to remain equally mute when Count Orsino proposes marriage to the cross-dressed page, the other figure he mistook for his beloved.

However, even if Viola's cross-dressing ultimately brings about a double marriage that serves to sacrifice homoerotic desire, the uncanniness of her performance queers precisely the law of heterosexual coupling which she will ultimately be forced to choose for herself. Indeed, she appears to be not only a living imitation of her brother. She actually explicitly defies the law of death, when, because she fears that he may have drowned, she decides to preserve his image at her body. One could say, by transforming herself into him, she takes on his symbolic mandate in his absence, and, as she explains, "I my brother know/ Yet living in my glass" (III.iv), she addresses the specularity which, according to Althusser, haunts the manner in which we fashion ourselves in response to an ideological interpellation. Her transformation of herself into a boy gives voice to her imaginary refiguration of her real condition, the orphan, lost on a foreign island, utterly vulnerable. In the guise of such a multiply uncanny foreign body - a woman appearing to be a man, a sister appearing to be her brother - she allows two homoerotic scenarios to unfold. The woman whom she courts in the name of her master, Count Orsino, falls in love with her. For the audience, who are in on the secret of her real gender, to identify with the fantasies of Countess Olivia, means enjoying the oblique representation of a clandestine love scenario between women. At the same time Viola falls in love with her master, and in so far as we are also asked to identify with the fantasies of the count, what is equally represented in this triangulation of desire, is the pleasure of masculine homoerotic love. The resilient fascination inhabiting this performance of cross-dressing, one could then argue, is that it calls forth an ambivalent, indeed utterly contradictory set of imaginary resignifications of the heroine's symbolic position. Cross-dressing allows Viola to usurp the position of her brother (indeed, she designates her new cloths as "my masculine usurp'd attire" (V.i) and thus to rewrite her own position within her family genealogy. At the same time it calls forth two transgressive love scenarios that not only contradict each other, but that will both have to be sacrificed, along with her usurpation of the role of heir to her father's estate, so that the daughter's social position can once more be fixed as that of wife, confirming the bond between a paternal figure of authority and a chosen son-in-law. At the body of Viola, performing a mimicry of her brother, desire for a culturally forbidden love and the paternal law that

dictates the gendered roles its children are to assume, are as much at cross-purposes as they are mutually implicated.

That the final solution of the heterosexual couple formation prescribed by the hegemonic cultural code is, however, highly precarious, is played through in turn at the body of precisely the figure who also serves as the *deus ex machina* of the plot - namely the brother, returned from the murky oblivion of a supposed death by drowning. Viola, who at this point believes herself to be an orphan, explains "I am all the daughters of my father's house,/ And all the brothers too" (II.iv). This hybrid symbolic body needs once more to be divided, in order for the culturally privileged bond between father and son to be reinstalled, and yet only the rebirth of another uncanny figure - the twin couple, which Count Orsino calls "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons!" (V.i) - can assure that a heterosexual marriage will be renegotiated in the end as well. At the same time, this solution is coterminous with the violent exclusion of precisely the queerness, which we, the audience, have enjoyed as the plot of mistaken identities took its many turns of misrecognition. Sebastian explains to Olivia, of whom (much along the lines of my reading of Billy Wilder's Osgood) we can't be sure whether she really was duped by Viola's disguise, or whether she may not actually have known she was marrying a woman, merely dressed as a page; "So comes it, lady, you have been mistook./ But nature to her bias drew in that./ You would have been contracted to a maid;/ Nor are thou therein, by my life, deceiv'd:/ You are betroth'd both to a maid and man" (V.i). In other words, even as the marriage solution offered by Shakespeare's play supports the claims of heterosexist law, it opens up the space for a different negotiation.[21] We can either follow the bias of nature and renounce a homoerotic fantasy scenario. Or we can read this strange twin brother, who so miraculously appears in the fifth act, as a phantom, over whose doubly encoded spectral body the chatoyant desire haunting the other lovers in the play can come to be arrested. For Olivia, as Sebastian insists, he will remain a cross-dresser,

[21] Tracing the manner in which the subversive or transgressive potential of cross-dressing is recuperated and contained by the narrative solution offered by Shakespeare's plays, Jean E. Howard suggests that, while the unruly cross-dressed woman gives voice to an instability in the dominant gender system, it is ironically Olivia, who poses as the real threat to the proposed hierarchy. For its story of containment of gender and class insurgency seems to "applaud a crossdressed woman who does not aspire to the positions of power assigned men, and to discipline a non-crossdressed woman who does". "Crossdressing, the Theater and Gender Struggle". In: *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4, (Winter 1988), p. 431.

a hybrid enmeshment of maid and man, and, in so doing, he not only gives voice to the homoerotic desire of his future wife but, perhaps more importantly, to the fact that even after the marriage contract has been performed, and with it the hegemonic interpellation of heterosexual law symbolically cemented, the question of femininity and masculinity remains an unstable affair.

In a similar tone, the manner in which the count proposes marriage to Viola indicates that the recuperation of her feminine dress tames a highly fickle desire. For isn't it strange how willingly Orsino relinquishes his beloved Olivia to the man who uncannily resembles his page Cesario, as though he had known all along that his desire was aimed not at the woman for whom he so melancholically pines? Indeed, his object may well always have been the hybrid eunuch serving him, whom he is now able to desire with impunity, because he is about to don a feminine skirt. His homoerotic declaration of love - "Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times/ Thou never should'st love woman like to me," - is transformed into a culturally sanctioned order; "Give me thy hand/ And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds" (V.i). Significantly, we never see this femininity redressed. At least according to the stage directions given by Shakespeare's text, Cesario never reemerges as Viola. As in Billy Wilder's postwar comedy, the playful ambivalence of cross-dressing is preserved to the end. Or put another way, the ideology of gender which the Shakespearean text unfolds proves to be first and foremost an imaginary relation, constructed over and against the real conditions of sexual identity.

Not all Shakespearean comedies, however, employ feminine cross-dressing so as to undercut the harsh exclusions dictated by paternal law. It is, therefore, fruitful to revisit a second, earlier Shakespearean comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, because the usurped masculinity performed by Portia addresses in a far more direct, but also far more tragic manner, how vexed the relation between appropriation of a foreign dress and subjection to the laws of this alterity can actually be. On the one hand this Shakespearean daughter, like Viola an orphan, explicitly denounces paternal interpellation as an act of narcissistic wounding as well as a curtailment of her agency. For her future as a lover and as a wife revolves around the fact that she must submit herself to a courtship ritual dictated to her by her dead father's will, which declares that she must marry the man who chooses the casket that contains her portrait. To her servant Nerissa, she describes this pact between her dead father and her future husband as

one in which she has no choice; "O me the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father: is it not hard Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?" (I.ii) On the other hand, Portia ironically usurps masculine attire to support precisely this paternal law, which is to say a mode of symbolic interpellation in which the only choice you have is a forced one, namely that of wounding subjection. This other appropriation of the paternal law involves not her marriage plot, but rather the strife between the merchant Antonio and the Jewish moneylender Shylock, who has lent three thousand ducats to the Christian so that he might help his friend Bassanio, whom he loves with a selfless passion equal to that of Antonio in *Twelfth Night*, court the rich and beautiful heiress of Belmont, Portia. Shylock, who carries a grudge against Antonio because the latter is willing to lend money without profit and in so doing undermines his business, uses the opportunity which the accident that befell three of the ships of his opponent affords to take revenge. Before the court of Venice he places his claim to one pound of flesh from the body of his debtor in exchange for the money the latter can not return.

Portia, who cannot speak for herself in the realm of her private apartment in Belmont, and must instead watch silently as a man, known to be a spendthrift and a fortune hunter, succeeds in claiming her as his wife,[22] resurfaces in male attire at another site, the public courtroom in Venice. Wearing the robes of an advocate, and thus representing a symbolic mandate that was never legally bestowed upon her, she comes to redress her grievance against the harshness of her father's last will and is able to reintroduce agency into her marriage plot by defending her future

[22] Heinrich Heine notes in his text about Shakespeare's comedy in the context of the battle for emancipation on the part of German Jewry at the begining of the 19th century, notes in *Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen*, München, Winkler Verlag, 1972, pp. 652-666, that Bassanio is, indeed, nothing than a fortune hunter, obsessed with money. As the young man admits to Antonio in the first act, he has much disabled his estate "by something showing a more swelling port than my fair means would grant continuance," so as to convince the older man to lend him more money, even though he has not yet paid back the earlier sum. Indeed his love interests can not be severed from his monetary ones. In the same speech he admits "to you, Antonio I owe the most in money and in love" (I.i), much as his description of Portia lists wealth before beauty: "In Belmont is a lady richly left, and she is fair, and (fairer than that word), of wondrous virtues". Given that we are led from the start to see in Bassanio the proper suitor for Portia, Shakespeare thus obliquely gives voice to the cruelty of a law that privileges money over love, even while it dresses the pecuniary concerns in the theme of romantic comedy.

husband's benefactor. Indeed, she proves to be more adept at the law than both Antonio and Bassanio. If, in this public site, she can renegotiate the wounding subjection inflicted upon her by paternal law, she does so significantly, however, by performing a splitting of this wounding law into two agencies - on the one hand, the representative of a just, albeit harsh law of the dead father, the fully legitimized Venetian citizen she has come to defend, and, on the other hand, the law of an equally harsh paternal lineage, brought forward by a Jew, whose claim to the law is highly fragile and can thus, once it is declared to be obscene - in a rhetorical sleight of hand that turns the abused citizen into a criminal - be refused by the system of symbolic codes judging the case. [23]

So perturbing about the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is, however, the fact that it contains a twofold scenario of feminine cross-dressing with both narratives revolving around the question whether a daughter will accept or resignify an injurious paternal interpellation, and that the plot does so by crossing the question of which position one will assume in relation to one's sexuality with the question of how one chooses to position oneself in relation to the class and race designations of one's family. For one must not overlook the fact that Portia is not the only one to

[23] See Slavoj Žižek's discussion of how a rottenness subtending symbolic law is modulated by virtue of the splitting of the law into two representative figures, the first, pointing to the necessary inconsistency of the symbolic register, a fallible figure of paternal authority, who guarantees a certain stability to any given system of law and the other, the figure of the obscene paternal function, father who really enjoys the in a transgressive and destructive manner. *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1991. By pitting these two agencies against each other this rottenness of the law can be signified and then, in a second step, fixed onto a body that can once again be excluded or, as is the case in *The Merchant of Venice*, radically assimilated. The antagonistic difference around which the trial scene revolves consists in the fact that while the woman Portia can redress her complaint by assuming the role of the representative of the very law, that wounds her, and in so doing ventriloquizes the voice of this injurious law so as to transform herself from the passive object of a father's will into the active agent of his law. Shylock finds that his claim can not be negotiated before the court of Venice, because the language of the courtroom is that of the accused Venetian and not that of the Jewish claimant. The daughter's legal self-assertion requires a second victim. The Jew takes on her position of the disempowered and injured party, having been transformed from a man whose agency allows him to make a claim to the passive object of a legal invective, which accuses him of intended murder and expropriates him not only of his status as a member of the community, but also of his possessions and his religion. Over the body of the Jew the accuser turns into the accused.

appropriate the masculine robe. Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, equally usurps a masculine attire to resist the claim her father makes to her loyalty as a Jew's daughter. Dressed as a page she meets her Christian lover Lorenzo at midnight in front of her father's house and with him steals not only Shylock's jewels and money but also the ring her dead mother Leah had once given him. In contrast to Portia who, though decrying the harshness of her paternal legacy, nevertheless subjects herself to this mandate, Jessica uses her cross-dressing to flee not only from her home but also from her racial heritage. In her case the usurpation of masculine attire functions as a provisional mode of self-refashioning, as a liminal identity she must assume before she can cross over into a second, more permanent mode of cross-dressing - namely the assimilated Jew, married to a Christian, jettisoned forever from her father's home as well as from her paternal, cultural and racial inheritance. As she exchanges her woman's weeds for the cloak of a page, Jessica also sheds her Jewish heritage so as to fully appropriate a foreign, Christian identity. She explains to Launcelot that she is fully aware of the sin which her betrayal of her paternal interpellation entails: "Alack, what heinous sin is it in me/ To be ashamed to be my father's child!/ But though I am a daughter to his blood/ I am not to his manners: O Lorenzo/ If thou keep promise I shall end this strife,/ Become a Christian and thy loving wife" (II.iii). And appropriately, the night is so dark during her act of transgression that, though immediately recognizing the voice of her beloved, Jessica asks Lorenzo to give her proof of his identity, because, unable to see him, she is not entirely sure whether he is indeed the man she is expecting. "Who are you? - tell me for more certainty," she calls out, "Albeit I'll swear that I do know your tongue" (II.vi). Indeed she is grateful to the darkness of the night because it dresses the shame she feels at the exchange she is about to undertake with its own dark cloak. It is as though she required a twofold disguise - the masculine attire and the nocturnal absence of light - to cover up her dual crime, dispossessing her father of a daughter but also stealing his money and his jewels. In response to Lorenzo, who asks her to be his torchbearer, she replies "What, must I hold a candle to my shames?/ - They in themselves (goodsooth) are too too light./ Why, 'tis an office of discovery (love),/ And I should be obscur'd." (II.vi).[24]

[24] As Lisa Jardine: *Reading Shakespeare,* notes, in the Renaissance female cross-dressing was readily conceived as a sign for prostitution, with the freely circulating woman considered to be 'loose' or unconstrained in the sense of being 'out of place'. But this 'looseness' also "eases the process of crossing the threshold into the male domain" (p. 67), or, as I am arguing for Jessica, crossing the boundary from one paternal

And yet, although she will always be haunted by the paternal law whose interpellation she may consciously reject, her nocturnal cross-dressing allows her to reformulate her imaginary relationship to the crime she has committed against her father by refusing his symbolic mandate. Later, in her new home in Belmont, Jessica is able to refigure her shame into a narrative that mitigates her guilt. During a nocturnal lover's quarrel both Lorenzo and his bride interpolate their transgression into a sequence of literary night, in which love led to catastrophe. "In such a night as this," Lorenzo begins, "Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,/ And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents/ Where Cressid lay that night" (V.1). Jessica, in turn, evokes the night in which Thisbe did not keep her appointment with her Pyramus because she was frightened away by a lion, while Lorenzo recalls the image of Dido at the shores of Carthage, waiting in anguish for her lover to return. After Jessica responds with an evocation of how, in such a night, "Medea gathered the enchanted herbs/ that did renew old Aeson," Lorenzo finally includes their own nocturnal transgression, as though it were nothing other than a literary reference, dehistoricized and idealized: "In such a night/ did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,/ And with an unthrift love did run from Venice,/ As far as Belmont" (V.i). As they challenge each other about who has experienced the greater injuries in the course of this forbidden love and who has been the more cruel lover, they not only in retrospect enjoy these acts of subjugation but, more crucially turn their crimes and delusions into a mythic scene, another mode of redressing grievances.

Portia, one could argue, follows a similar rhetoric of replaying her own psychic wounding in another register, though in her case the transposition does not involve turning herself into a heroine of ancient literary texts. She uses her cross-dressing so that she can resignify her own impotence in relation to the law of her father at the body of the Jew Shylock.[25] Astutely

domain into another. The correlation between cross-dressed woman, prostitute, and a female body having not fixed place will return in my discussion of Marlene Dietrich's first song in *Morocco*.

[25] In the context of my discussion one could note that it is astonishing how, in focusing his discussion on the motive of the three caskets, Sigmund Freud should have, perhaps willfully, overlooked that in so far as Shakespeare's play revolved around the issue of forced choices, the question of accepting one's fate ultimately involved Portia and Shylock far more significantly than Bassanio. In Freud's discussion, the casket Bassanio chooses, comes to represent the imaginative transformation of destiny into chance: "Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually. No greater triumph of wish-fulfillment is

Portia notes to her servant, "Hanging and wiving goes by destiny," so as to point not only to the manner in which she has no choice in whom she will marry, nor simply to articulate that this forced marriage marks the execution of her own agency. Declared wife under the auspices of her dead father's will, she is hung from the start. Portia also gives voice to the fact that her marriage requires the sacrifice of someone else besides her and what makes Shakespeare's plot so resiliently disturbing is that her partner in crime, the accomplice onto whom she will ultimately project her guilt, should be the Jew Shylock. At stake, then, in the courtroom scene, is the manner in which any performance of agency comes so inevitably to be enmeshed with precisely the symbolic law which necessarily curtails the subject, making claims in its name. Indeed the interpellation by the law, which we can never refuse but only renegotiate, not only serves to make us recognize that we have no choice but to accept the curtailment of the self it dictates. Rather, it also allows a fantasy scenario to be brought into circulation, in the course of which some one else will bear the burden of this forced choice, or at least share the costs of interpellation.

Together with her servant Nerissa, Portia dons a habit, in which both their future husbands will think they "are accomplished in what we lack" (III.iv), namely the masculine part, and with it the symbolic power this endows its bearer. Owing to her usurped attire, seemingly in possession of the masculine member, and thus by implication a member of the symbolic community where the antagonism of gender is transformed into a simple opposition between two different ethnic representations of the law, Portia

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conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion"; "The Theme of the Three Caskets," *Standard Edition XII*, London, Hogarth Press, 1958, p. 299. Freud's oversight is significant, because while one could argue for Portia that a wishful reversal has taken place, in so far as she refashions herself from disempowered daughter to an attorney at law, the same claim can not be made for Shylock, forced to choose the psychic death Portia's law dictates. Furthermore, by only reading the question of choice in relation to Bassanio's romantic refiguration, Freud highlights only the manner in which romantic love deflects death, by giving it the shape of a desirable beautiful woman. He thus relegates the issue of forced choices to the imaginary register, and to the question of masculine recognition of death as a mode of disavowal; see Elisabeth Bronfen: *Over Her Dead Body. Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, New York, Routledge, 1993. Shakespeare's text actually offers two further instances, where the Freudian formula holds as well, yet where the symbolic cut which the law imposes on the subject can not fully be recuperated into a happy imaginary tale of gendered love. Both Portia and Shylock know that their choice is a necessity, that any wishful reversal remains a fiction and that this forced choice has nothing to do with their sexuality, only with the position they are to assume within a symbolic realm.

functions as the agent of a sanctioned difference. As she transforms the accuser Shylock into the accused, she comes to perform for all those present in the courtroom the cruel consequences that are entailed, when the Jewish law of revenge is pitted against the Christian law of mercy. As Shylock explains in his self-defense "If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? - why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (III.i). This logic, one could argue, is nothing other than a radical appropriation, on the part of Shylock, of the Christian double standard, whereby the cruel injury the Venetian law habitually imposes on its Jews is redressed as an insistance that he, too, may profit from the same cultural codes. Yet Portia holds against this logic - which seems to uncover precisely what is rotten in Venetian law - the law of mercy. In other words, in one and the same gesture, she renders visible the core antagonism around with the symbolic codes of Venice revolve, even while she presents an argument that will keep this dangerous rottenness at bay by preserving the simple difference between Christian and Jew. Shylock, she maintains, may insist on his right, indeed must receive his bond. He is fully justified in what he terms his craving for the law, but only if he is able to remain within the limits of the very condition he himself dictated to his debtor. He is ordered to take a pound of flesh from Antonio without shedding a drop of blood. In her usurped masculine attire, Portia thus transforms into an old biblical figure, into "a second Daniel!" as Gratiano notes, "I thank thee Jew for teaching me that word" (IV.i), both giving body to the cruel harshness of the law he seeks to have affirmed in the courtroom and turning this very law against him. In this precise sense one can speak of Portia's cross-dressing as being uncanny, because she has not only appropriated her father's but also her opponent's legal code, using the latter against Shylock, so as to defend herself against the subjection imposed upon her by the former. The horrific logic she exposes with her performance is that Shylock is now in her position. Like Portia in relation to her marriage plot, Shylock has no choice. He is forced to relinquish half his possessions to the state of Venice, as he must also subject himself to a forced assimilation. Particularly perturbing about this solution is not only the fact that it so cruelly highlights the cost of symbolic agency. Rather, in so far as it signifies a reversal of the position Portia's father dictates to her in his will, it also reveals that there is no escape from the law that wounds, even if there are sites where this law can temporarily be refigured. Dressed as a man of the law, in the Venetian courtroom, but only in this attire and

only in this setting, Portia can regain the agency she has lost once and for all in her estate Belmont. The satisfaction which her wishful reversal entails resonates with the knowledge of its temporal and spatial delimitation.[26]

The multiple wedding celebrated in Belmont is marred not only by the fact that throughout the play we are never shown any convincing love scenes between Portia and Bassanio. Indeed the latter is only too ready to give the ring, which Portia had asked him to preserve as a token of his loyalty, to the figure he takes for Antonio's attorney. Moreover, this marriage solution is uncanny because, along the lines discussed by Mladen Dolar, it offers an over determined visualisation of the trace that remains after hegemonic interpellation has been successfully reinstalled. The Jew Shylock is as much excluded from the apparent bliss of Belmont as is the melancholic lover Antonio, who like his namesake in *Twelfth Night*, can do nothing except warn his friend Bassanio, for whom he was willing to give his life, not to be reckless with the gifts of his future wife. But if Portia, by resuming her woman's weeds, seemingly relinquishes all resistance to her father's law, Jessica sits under the light of the moon and remembers the night of her paternal betrayal. Both embody the cost that successful interpellation entails, whether in the case of Portia the unchallenged acceptance of her position or in the case of Jessica her radical exchange of one position of subjection for another. While Portia, hoping that in future her husband will be less careless with the tokens of loyalty she gives to him, is only too justified in harboring doubts at the sagacity of the father's law that so fatefully binds her to a fickle man, Jessica remembers the crime which led her to break this paternal bond. And yet what we are called upon to acknowledge is not just the violent psychic injuries upon which this happy end is grounded. Recollecting both daughter's transgressions we recognize that for a brief interim, cross-dressing allowed an empowering crisis in interpellation to surface. A trace of this possibility is carried beyond the end of the plot along with our silent

[26] Jean Howard: *Crossdressing*, notes how in the figure of Portia, Shakespeare has created "a fictional structure in which the ideology of male dominance breaks down. The woman," she argues, "is the only source of secure wealth, the only person in the courtroom capable of successfully playing the man's part and ousting the alien intruder", p. 434.

awe at the harshness, with which the play of gender difference comes once more to be contained.[27]

Celebrating Gender Hybridity

In his autobiography, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, Josef von Sternberg describes the cultural practice of cross-dressing prevalent in Berlin in the 1920s:

> This ocean was seething when I was called to explore it. I lived in a quiet hotel on the river Spree, a rest house in the midst of a maelstrom, and to leave it was like shooting the rapids. At night, when I went out to dine, it was not unusual for something that sat next to me, dressed as a woman, to powder its nose with a large puff that a moment ago had seemed to be a breast. To differentiate between the sexes was, to make an understatement, confusing. Not only did men masquerade as females, wearing false eyelashes, beauty spots, rouge and veil, but the woods were full of females who looked and functioned like men. A third species, defying definition, circulated, ready to lend itself to whatever the occasion offered. To raise an eyebrow at all this branded one as a tourist.[28]

The manner in which von Sternberg, in turn, came to introduce the heroine of *Morocco* (1930), Amy Jolly, to the audience sitting in a Moroccan night club - and concomitantly, on the extradiegetic level of the film, his star Marlene Dietrich to the American audience in her first Hollywood film - begs to be read in relation to the culture of cross-dressing sanctioned by the bohemian world of Berlin. This, not least of all, because it refers to a world she decisively left behind as she moved across the Atlantic Ocean. However, as the exploration of a third species, performed on the stages of Berlin night-life between the two world wars, is re-encoded in the language of Hollywood and its production code, it is perhaps not incidental that the birth of Marlene Dietrich as an international star was not only played through in a scene where she dons male attire to win the admiration of her new audience, but that this transformation

[27] In her article "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies" Catherine Belsey notes, the cross-dressed woman neither creates some "third, unified, androgynous identify which eliminates all distinctions," nor does it repudiate sexuality itself. Instead it gives body to a "plurality of places, of possible beings", (p. 189), which can be defined for each person by rendering visible the extimacy of the law of gender; in: *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. by John Drakakis, London/New York, Routledge, 1985, pp. 166-190.

[28] Josef von Sternberg: *Fun in a Chinese Laundry,* London, Columbus Book, 1965.

should itself be staged in a third, liminal site, North Africa as site for a battle fought amongst Europeans.[29] Much has, of course, been written about the manner in which Marlene Dietrich appeared from the start to be nothing other than a creation of Josef von Sternberg, as Dyer notes "a pure vehicle for the latter's fantasies and formalist concerns".[30] Yet one must not forget that von Sternberg is himself responsible for the idea that the icon of female seduction he had artificially constructed was, in fact, fundamentally cross-dressed, a refiguration of his masculine self at a feminine body. Casting himself in the role of Svengali Joe, he enjoyed proclaiming: "In my films Marlene is not herself. Remember that, Marlene is not Marlene. I am Marlene, she knows that better than anyone".[31] At the same time von Sternberg was also the first to admit that, although he was the creator of the star Dietrich, he had not imposed a foreign personality upon her. He had merely known how to dramatically emphasize those attributes which he required for the persona he wanted her to embody, while his makeover of her appearance involved suppressing all the other aspects of his favorite actress, which neither fit his fantasy of feminine seduction nor his formal concerns.[32]

What many critics have, thus, focused on in relation to the scene in which Dietrich, in her role as a former hooker, presents herself for the first time on the stage of a Moroccan cabaret, and thus in the field of vision of the two men who will vie for her romantic attention, is the way her cross-dressing not only ironically comments on the content of her first song - the

[29] Initially we see her embarking on a boat leaving France for North Africa, a delicate lace veil attached to her hat covering her face. In the second, and only other song scene of the film, she is dressed as the arch-seductress, Eve, selling apples to her clients. After performing these three dresses of feminine seduction she will finally cast off her high-heeled shoes and follow her lover barefoot into the desert, as though to signal a move beyond all imaginary self-fashionings.

[30] Richard Dyer: *Stars*, London, BFI Publishing, 1979, offers a useful overview of the debate, focusing on the manner in which Dietrich was seen either as "an empty vehicle for Sternberg's erotic formalism" or as "resisting the construction of her as a goddess for male dreams", p. 179. Seeking to arbitrate the various positions he concludes that "the films can be seen as the traces of the complexities of their relationship rather than just the combination of two voices", p. 180.

[31] Quoted in Tom Flinn's article "Joe, where are You? (Marlene Dietrich)". In: *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 6 (Fall 1972), p. 9.

[32] See Steven Bach's biography: *Marlene Dietrich. A Life and Legend*, New York, Harper Collins, 1993, for a discussion of the strange mixture between appropriation and dispossession that was written into the relation between von Sternberg and his star Marlene Dietrich.

inevitable failure of romantic love - but also raises the question of a vexed spectatorship.[33] The scene, after all, begins with the owner of the night-club asking his audience to welcome the newcomer with their "usual discriminating kindness". However, von Sternberg frames Amy's appearance on this stage with two shot sequences that embellish the highly ambivalent expectations of her audience. On the one hand we hear a cynical comment made by the artist and millionaire La Bessière (Adolphe Menjou), who notes, as he smiles sadistically at his friends, the admiral and his wife, that the usual welcome to newcomers is, if he recalls this properly, rather unpleasant. On the other hand we see Tom Brown (Gary Cooper), a soldier in the foreign legion, initially sitting calmly in the midst of a raucous crowd, smugly smoking his cigarette and then nonchalantly offering a chair to the gypsy woman, who has just joined him, and who gesticulates dramatically as a way of excusing her lateness. He, too, gazes at the stage in an apparently sadistic manner, seemingly assured of the power of his spectatorial position. Indeed, there seems to be an invisible boundary drawn between both of these men (who are clearly positioned by von Sternberg as our point of identification), and the woman, whose appearance they are so eagerly anticipating. Both men pose as empowered and invulnerable spectators, while their female companions function as pure supplements to their gaze. They are the passive accomplices in this visual game, whose source and point of control is allegedly marked as being masculine. Thus, even though these two men are presented as the spectators we are meant to identify with, we realize almost immediately that von Sternberg has implicitly assigned to us the role of these feminine accomplices.[34] Like the women, we are meant to watch the men, watching a star, who at least on the diegetic level of the film is implicitly performing for their gaze. The voyeuristic setting, constructed by von Sternberg as a frame for Marlene Dietrich/Amy Jolly's entrance on the stage, is grounded on the expectation that the female performer will subject herself to the

[33] Writing about a different film, though from the same period, namely George Cukor's *Adam's Rib*, Mary Ann Doane suggests that it might be fruitful to speak about female spectators as spectatorial transvestites, when faced with cinematic performances of women cross-dressing as men; *Femmes Fatales. Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York/London, Routledge, 1991.

[34] See Gaylyn Studlar: *In the Realm of Pleasure. Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, who privileges the position of the masochist in her discussion of the manner in which von Sternberg stages Dietrich. Dietrich's performance, she argues, refigures the position of the maternal body, which is conceived as highly empowered, both dangerous as well as pleasurable, depending on the degree of proximity which the child entertains toward it.

sadistic desire of her masculine spectators. This expected circulation of gazes casts her as an object that can be enjoyed at a distance, without any direct contact taking place between her and her audience.[35]

However, with the actual appearance of Amy Jolly on stage, about to sing "Quand l'amour meurt," von Sternberg ironically undercuts the very relay of gazes he had initially established to frame her performance. In other words, he dismantles the tacit presuppositions underlying the notion of an empowered masculine gaze at precisely the same moment that he produces it by virtue of his *mise-en-scène*. Marlene Dietrich, dressed in a tuxedo and wearing a top hat, casually saunters onto the stage and throws a cool, inquisitory gaze at the tempestuous audience that greets her with impatient shouting. At this point one could still interpret her walk as cautious, fearful, as though she were trying to convince her audience that she were dependent on their benevolent attitude toward her, indeed willing to do anything to please them. Von Sternberg cuts to a close-up of the two men, gazing at her, who in the following song sequence will implicitly be the two members of the audience Amy privileges. For several seconds Tom critically judges the woman who has just appeared before him, viewing her exclusively in relation to his desire, and, having decided that she does, in fact, please him, he cedes to her seductive play. He begins to clap demonstratively, however, upon noticing that the rest of the crowd continues to shout obscenities, he becomes violent. So as to assure himself an untainted enjoyment of the scene which is about to commence, he threatens those soldiers sitting closest to him with his fist, even while he silences his companion, by placing his hands around her throat, strangling her into obedience as he pushes her back onto her chair. Only then does he himself return to his own seat.

[35] The critical engagement with this scene was, of course, inaugurated by Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she was the first to focus on the interplay of sadism and masochism at work in the von Sternberg - Dietrich couple, arguing that, in so far as the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, this pleasure splits between an active/male and a passive/female position. Within this economy women are "simultaneously looked at and displayed" so that they can be said to "connote to-be-looked-at-ness," while the man controls the film fantasy, emerges as the representative of power, i.e. "as the bearer of the look of the spectator"; reprinted in: *The Sexual Subject. A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, New York/London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 22-33. In the course of the last two decades Mulvey has not only herself reformulated her position on spectatorship, see for example *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996.

Upon closer inspection it becomes clear, however, that from the start Marlene Dietrich's cool sauntering is inscribed by a calculated resistance against the subjection expected of her. In what calls out to be read as a sign of utter self-assurance and poise, Amy Jolly enters the stage holding a cigarette in her right hand, while her left hand partially sticks out from the pocket of her trousers.[36] With a clear aim in mind she heads for the chair placed in the center of the stage, slightly pulls up the leg of her left trousers with her right hand, only to sit on the arm of the chair. Leaning her left hand further along the back of the chair, she secures her position and as she continues to calmly smoke her cigarette, she casts her gaze in an aloof manner over the excited crowd. Nothing disturbs this gaze; no impatience, no insecurity, no doubt can be discerned here. Rather, she appears like a mother, mildly smiling down at her disobedient children and clearly enjoying the fact that her favorite son valiantly defends her. As though she had all the time in the world, she waits until the excitement of the foreplay has come to an end. Only then does she calmly rise from her seat and walks toward the railing that demarcates the fault line between audience and stage. Comfortably leaning against it, she finally begins to sing. Once more von Sternberg interpolates close-ups of the two men, whose sadistic comments and body language von Sternberg used to frame her song - the soldier and the millionaire, i.e. embodiments of the two options Amy Jolly will have to choose from in the course of the film's romance plot. Both have leaned back in their seats, fully immersed in their respective enjoyment. Yet the doubling of the masculine gaze serves to make us recognize not only how much each one of their fantasy scenarios, revolving as it does about the woman about to sing, is a limited one. It also raises the suspicion that in this game of pleasurable gazes there always is something that exceeds the position of the allegedly privileged, dominating masculine gaze. Indeed, the fact that von Sternberg offers us two men, absorbed in their individual pleasure, undermines the very self-assurance which this relay of gazes exchanged between audience and singer is meant to support. For what von Sternberg renders only too visible is that the woman, who by virtue of her seductive appearance is meant to support one

[36] Precisely the *mise-en-scène* of a sequence like this supports Molly Haskell's claim that Dietrich "comes closest to being a goddess, but she refuses to be one, refuses to take on the generalized aspects of love and suffering with which a mass audience could identify, and refuses to pretend for the sake of a man's ego that love will not die or that she will love only him... Although she is a creature of myth - and not, in any sociological sense, a 'real woman' - she is also demystifying"; *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, New York, Penguin, 1974, p. 109.

privileged spectator's power, in fact satisfies this desire for many men. In so doing she discloses the fact that any one relation between a publicly staged body and its spectator is an imaginary one.

At the same time, von Sternberg enacts a murky scenario, given that the desire of these supposedly privileged spectators is in fact visibly undermined by the desire of the woman, playing to their gaze. Amy Jolly not only offers a performance of how perfectly she can subject herself to the masculine gaze, how skillfully she can enact what this privileged spectator desires. She also demonstrates that she is fully in control of this performance and that nothing can deter her from the *mise-en-scène* she has conceived for herself. Her cross-dressing signals a hybrid appearance. While on the manifest level she appears to passively take on the submissive role expected of a night-club star, on a latent level - but one that is still part of von Sternberg's *mise-en-scène* - she is masterfully in control of a twofold act of cross-dressing - a seductive woman dressed as a man (Amy Jolly) and a German actress made up as a new international star (Marlene Dietrich). Amy calmly disengages herself from the touch of one of the men, sitting behind the railing, and moving slightly further along this wooden barrier that divides her from her audience, she finally comes to rest. She will not allow herself to be chosen by a random spectator. Instead, self-consciously policing this boundary, she is the one who chooses, who will be privileged enough to play an active part in her performance. Von Sternberg shows her smiling directly first at La Bessière, who, by virtue of the framing, now appears to be entirely isolated from his friends, self-absorbed in his solitary enjoyment. Then we are shown how she smiles at Tom Brown, who proudly begins to look around himself, signaling that his pleasure depends on his knowing that others have recognized him to be the man Amy has chosen to single out from the crowd. A play with her top hat, which runs through the entire scene, further cements the tacit understanding between these two figures, in the midst of a sexually overdetermined public display, where Amy oscillates between being the object and the agent of a relay of gazes that empowers as much as it subjects the players explicitly involved.

The manner in which Marlene Dietrich's body comes to function as the site at which a chatoyant play with predetermined gender designations is enacted - so as to visualize the fluid distinction between the empowered position of the spectator and the disempowered one of the gazed-at feminine body - finds a brilliant acme with the resolution of the song. First,

accepting the offer of the man sitting behind her, to partake of a glass of champagne with him, Amy Jolly breaks open the boundary between stage and audience. She deftly heaves herself over the railing and, after having offered a toast to the entire audience, empties the entire glass in one gulp, while her onlookers applaud her. Then, imitating the gesture of the men watching her, she in turn gazes several moments at their female companion. After having turned her upper body in precisely the same manner as Tom had while she was singing her song, she signals to her audience that the action about to take place is intended for their pleasure - she approaches the woman and takes the flower the latter is wearing behind her ear. Now the figure who had initially been introduced as an accomplice of the masculine gaze has turned into the explicit object of the entire audience's gaze and as such imitates the position Amy had occupied throughout the performance of her song. Having been singled out by Amy, she is isolated from all the other people in the crowd, the object of everyone's gaze, including that of the singer, who in contrast to the clandestine visual gestures she shared with her two privileged male spectators has openly interpellated her. At the same time, the woman continues to be assigned the position of spectator as well, though now no longer the silent accomplice of a male gaze but rather representing the mode of gazing that had initially been ascribed to La Bessière and Tom Brown. Amy, now self-consciously appropriating for herself the masculine position of the active agent, once more approaches the woman, and, having briefly smelled at he flower, she leans forward to kiss her on the mouth. While the audience laughs benevolently, Amy moves back several steps and, once more imitating Tom's body gestures, lightly touches her top hat with her right index finger, as though she were thanking the woman for the kiss, much as he had clandestinely thanked her for the song earlier on.

Only then does Amy fully turn around, take off her hat and bow before the entire audience, as though in the manner proposed by Althusser, her 180° turn signals her acknowledgment of the expectations the audience had imposed upon her as the frame for her initiation as a performer. This is, furthermore, also Dietrich's assertion that she will embody the role of the international Hollywood star von Sternberg has cast her in. On both levels of the spectacle, this turn marks the moment where the performer is clearly no longer presented as an individual, caught in imaginary processes, but rather a subject, empowered in her agency, because accepting the position that is being ascribed to her as this is defined by the parameters of the setting she has chosen to appear in. It is only after this

turn that Amy finally returns to the stage, however, rather than exiting she walks directly towards Tom, who is sitting at a table in the first row, directly facing the center of the stage. Still fully certain that he is her privileged spectator, which is to say the chosen object of her gaze, Tom gets up and once more claps demonstratively, even while he now directly faces her. At this point he is as conscious as she that together they form the object of the gaze of the entire audience. Amy Jolly, however, undermines the self-assurance that this public display of her seductive body is meant to afford by now drawing Tom into her performance and forcing him into the feminine position. Briefly she once more smells the flower, only to throw it at Tom, rather than offering him a kiss. If she had imitated his body language, clearly encoded as being masculine, so as to seduce the female accomplice of the masculine gaze, with the male spectators joyfully applauding this furtive performance of lesbian desire, what Amy now illustrates is that, in the course of a performance where gender identities are rendered fluid, the male spectator can suddenly find himself to be cross-dressed as well. Tom is not only the recipient of the flower that was originally harbored behind the ear of his clandestine lover, passively watching the spectacle. Rather he, too, is forced to submit himself helplessly to Amy Jolly's gift, though unlike the woman he is not rewarded with a direct erotic embrace. The fact that Tom now finds himself in the position of the helpless object of the gaze is confirmed by the fact that the audience, which continues to be encoded as a masculine body, applauds this spectacle as well. But one could add, Tom also has undertaken a 180° turn. He, too, is no longer merely in the position of a narcissistic individual, absorbed in a pleasurable visual spectacle. Though it will take the entire narrative of the film for him to accept her offer of unconditional love, this gift marks the fact that in one and the same gesture Amy acknowledges her place in relation to the desire of her audience and interpellates him as a fellow subject, with whom she can, in a scene von Sternberg stages as a moment of rebirth for both, cast off the entire *mise-en-scène* of imaginary scenes and spectacles, so as to resignify herself beyond all cross-dressing, and thus beyond all social dresses, in the empty space of the African desert.[37]

In the course of this scene so clearly marked by von Sternberg as a double inaugural fantasy scenario - Amy Jolly, introduced into a romantic scene of male rivalry, Marlene Dietrich introduced into the competitive

[37] I want to thank Bodil Marie Thomsen for this interpretation of the final scene of *Morocco*.

world of Hollywood celebrities - we have a chatoyant exchange between masculinity and passive femininity, where the boundary between the active viewer and the passive performer collapses. Dietrich's cross-dressing serves to underline the gender hybridity in both of the key figures of the scene - Amy Jolly's self-empowered agency and Tom Browns acceptance of vulnerability. The third player, La Bessière, is removed in the course of the scene, only to be replaced by a disembodied law that emerges as the invisible source of interpellation at the end of the sequence, superseding the relay of gazes played through on the level of imaginary relations of pleasurable narcissism - for the turnings played through in the course of the scene force both Amy and Tom to accept their position in a scenario that exceeds the cabaret scene. As Amy Jolly once more turns to the entire audience and, lifting the top hat slightly, bows before them, she signals her acceptance of their interpellation - 'yes, I am she, whom you have addressed,' 'yes, I accept the position you have designated for me.' The self-assurance of the stride, with which she finally leaves the stage, cements this symbolic contract. Two moments, however, disturb the recuperation of order. The men have unwittingly become her collective accomplices and as such find themselves cast into the position initially assigned to the women. At the same time, von Sternberg does not end the sequence without once more offering us a close-up of Tom. Initially confused, then angered, he finally accepts the gift and imitates her smelling the flower. He, too, enjoys the chatoyancy of the roles.

The rhetorical cross-dressing at work in this sequence on the formal level is such that, as viewers of this relay of gazes, we can not be sure whose power is being displayed. Is the woman really only the passive object of the diverse men who gaze at her or must one not also speak about these spectators as the objects of the cross-dressed woman? Is the cross-dressing which Marlene Dietrich and Josef von Sternberg so dexterously play through only an extinction of femininity or also a gesture that renders masculinity uncanny, fraught with ambivalences? For even though Amy Jolly, dressed as a man, is intended to function as a cipher for masculine empowerment - precisely because she is expected to reflect for her privileged masculine spectators the imaginary relation they entertain toward their real social conditions - she also turns into a cipher for the disturbing, uncanny kernel inherent to any gender designation. In the course of this crossover from one gender position to the other, it not only becomes more and more difficult to determine who seduces whom, but also for whom Amy serves as a cipher - for the director Josef von

Sternberg, for the star Marlene Dietrich, or for a particular type of femininity one could call icon of seduction? Equally undetermined is the question which gendered desire is being satisfied by this scene.[38]

Marlene Dietrich, who throughout her life enjoyed being photographed while wearing men's clothes, argued that this preference of dress was exclusively a question of comfort. Already in 1933 she explained to a reporter:

> I simply followed up the logical consequences of the big pajama-fashion and I have to confess, that I have never felt more comfortable and better dressed. The public is always outraged about something new. First I showed my legs, and they were outraged, now I hide my legs, and they are equally outraged. I want to emphasize that I genuinely prefer men's clothes and that I don't wear them to provoke a sensation. I simply find that I appear more appealing in men's clothes. Furthermore, these clothes give one perfect freedom and comfort, which I can't say is true for women's clothes and skirts. Women's clothes require so much time, it is so fatiguing to buy them. You need hats, shoes, handbags, scarves, coats and many details that all have to fit together. That requires much thought and precise choice and for that I have neither time nor interest.[39]

Yet there are also other images of Dietrich wearing men's clothes, namely the photographs and newsreels, showing her in the uniform of the US Army, supporting the allied troops in their fight against Nazi-Germany. This was cross-dressing with real political consequences, for which the German public never forgave her. When in the early 60s Dietrich decided to tour Germany, she was greeted by an angry mob that was not willing to forget that she had deserted her homeland to fight with the enemy. In

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[38] Andrea Weiss: "'A Queer Feeling when I Look at You.' Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s". In: *Stardom. Industry of Desire*, ed. by Christine Gledhill New York/London, Routledge, 1991, has argued that von Sternberg consciously plays with the possibility of a lesbian gaze, given that he allowed Paramount to use the publicity slogan - "Dietrich - the woman all women want to see". The song sequence thus not only opens up a privileging of heterosexuality, as this was the intended reading of Hollywood comedies, where Dietrich's kiss comes to stand metonymically for her power of seduction. Therefore, the sequence also allows a queer reading, resisting this intended reading, and this not only because for a brief moment Marlene Dietrich seems to step out of her role as femme fatale, so as to stage a different form of sexual desire, namely lesbian sexuality. Rather, the chatoyant shift between seductress and seduced woman gives voice to a fluidity of positions that seduces all spectators, regardless of their proclivities.

[39] Quoted in Renate Seydel: *Marlene Dietrich. Eine Chronik ihres Lebens in Bildern und Dokumenten*, München, Nymphenburger Verlag, 1984, p. 165.

contrast to von Sternberg's *mise-en-scène* in a Moroccan cabaret, this crowd could not be appeased by a self-ironic play with gender roles, and until the end of her life, her position within the postwar ideology that governed the manner in which the German people came to fashion their imaginary relation to the consequences of World War II was fraught with a murky expression of rejection.[40]

But for those on the other side, for the Allies, Dietrich will be remembered as a more palatable modern-day Portia, not fighting against Shylock, but rather on the side of his descendants for the rights of the Jewish people in a war against a totalitarian system, whose revenge threatened a radical Final Solution to all Jewish claims on a right to existence. And like Shakespeare's heroine, Dietrich felt she was merely acting as a representative of a law she had inherited from her father - the Prussian officer's code of honor. She was joining the ranks of men not in order to introduce gender trouble, but to be part of a simple opposition, where the Allies and the Nazis fought on clearly delineated moral grounds. Indeed, so as to respond to the question why she had changed her allegiance once the US had declared war on the Axis powers, she came to construct a narrative that uncannily resonates with the one given by Shakespeare's heroine. It was a decision forced upon her, not one she had much freedom in, because for her it was the only decent thing she could do. Many years after the end of the war she explained to a journalist, "even today I receive letters from Germany, in which I am asked: 'Given that you were a German and, as you repeatedly state, continue to be so today - why did you join the American army that fought against Germany?' I felt responsible for the war caused by Hitler. I wanted to help to bring this war to an end as quickly as possible. That was my only wish. When Japan attacked America I gave up everything I owned, I sold all my jewels and waited for my orders. I didn't have to wait very long. There weren't many

[40] Gertrud Koch: "Exorcised: Marlene Dietrich and German Nationalism". In: *Women and Film. A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd, London, Scarlet Press, 1993, pp. 10-15. After the war the Germans continued to view Marlene Dietrich as a traitor to her own country. Gertrud Koch discusses how it was treated with great surprise that she asked to be laid to rest in Berlin, next to her mother. The grand funeral ceremony had, however, to be called off, because the authorities were not sure how the Berlin audience would welcome the return of the international star. For a discussion of cross-dressing and the military, see Elizabeth Young: "Confederate Counterfeit: The Case of the Cross-Dressed Civil War Soldier". In: *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg, Durham NC, Duke Univ. Press, 1996, pp. 181-217.

'celebrities' who were willing to take upon themselves the discomforts of sharing the war with the soldiers. America had taken me in when I gave up Hitler and Germany. You can't simply take - you also have to give. That is already written in the Bible."[41] Significantly, Marlene Dietrich considered the fact that she was awarded a medal of honor by the French government for her role as a simple allied soldier to be one of her most significant symbolic recognitions.

Uncanny Mimicry of a Less Wholesome Kind

In tandem with the critical attention paid to the cross-dressing enacted on the Shakespearean stage and its refiguration through the centuries, critics and artists alike have focused on drag culture as a postmodern moment of subversion.[42] Admitting that drag queens have been her obsession since the early 1970s, when she first wanted to use her photography to pay homage to the courage of her friends to recreate themselves according to their fantasies, Nan Goldin sees transvestites as a third sex, liberated from the constraints any homogeneous sexual definition entails. By using their bodies not only to materialize fantasies of what they want to look like but also to publicly declare that one can appropriate cultural formations of the feminine without relinquishing masculinity, they succeed in performing an astonishingly iridescent palette of genderings. "Some of my friends shift genders daily - from boy to girl and back again," Goldin explains. "Some are transsexual before or after surgery, and among them some live entirely as women while others openly identify themselves as transsexuals. Others dress up only for stage performances and live as gay boys by day. And still others make no attempt at all to fit in anywhere, but live in a gender-free zone, flaunting their third sex status." In Goldin's photographs, the transvestites seem to be saying: 'Given that any existence within culture implies abiding by certain gender formations, then to consciously choose masquerades of the self can turn subjection before the law into a moment of agency.' For Goldin, transvestites are the heroes in her saga about

[41] Quoted in: Renate Seydel: *Marlene Dietrich*, p. 223.

[42] See the exhibition catalogue *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose. Gender Performance in Photography*, edited by Jennifer Blessing for the Guggenheim Museum, New York (January 17-April 27, 1997). See also Majorie Garber: *Vested Interests*, for a general discussion of contemporary expressions of drag.

human relationships; "They are the real winners of the battle of the sexes because they have stepped out of the ring."[43]

However, leaving the battlefield of gender trouble behind can at best perform a utopic gesture, even while it continues to be riddled with uncanny ambivalence. Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, filmed primarily at the Imperial Elks Lodge, which documents her fascination for the drag balls in Harlem in the late 1980s, where African-American or Latino gay men competed in contests, organized under predetermined categories, serves as another example for the vexed pleasures of drag. Seeking primarily to make visible the self-empowering creativity with which theses contestants came to appropriate the image repertoire of the white world of fashion and celebrity, Livingston focuses on the competitions themselves, where we are shown an almost parodistic imitation of the clichés that characterize appearances in the white world of prosperity and fame, even while she interrupts these sequences with statements made by the contestants. Part of the resilience of this documentary material resides in the way in which 'appearance' is resignified so as to become coterminous with realness. Although the mimicry is astonishingly perfect, the poignancy of the appropriation of the 'executive look' or the "college student look" resides in a self-conscious staging of the fact that appearance is precisely not to be understood as entertaining a transparent relation to existence. This is an utter foregrounding of appearances, of the imaginary relation over any social reality, a performance of ideology as pure fantasy, empty, but utterly poignant. The notion of "realness", one of a complex array of concepts coined in the context of these balls, in fact describes the ability "to be able to blend, to look as much as possible like your counterpart, to mimic the real woman/ real man." At stake for most of these performers is not so much any one particular imitation. Rather foregrounded is the agency involved in choosing one's dress and enacting the fact that it is nothing but an appropriated appearance. The dictum performed by the walkers in the heterotopia of these drag balls seems to proclaim: 'I can be what I am not but what I want to be because I look it'.

Commenting on her own unease with this documentary material, Judith Butler notes that "there is both a sense of defeat and a sense of insurrection to be had from the drag pageantry in *Paris Is Burning*, the drag we see, the drag which is after all framed for us, filmed for us, is one which both

[43] Nan Goldin: *The Other Side*, Zürich, Scalo Verlag, 1993, pp. 8 and 11 passim.

appropriates and subverts racist, misogynist, and homophobic norms of oppression."[44]. Indeed, Livingston's film offers a vibrant example for how a critical appropriation of our cultural dictates, involving normative definitions of gender, class and race, might fruitfully perform a crisis in the very interpellation it also responds to. At the same time she also uncovers the blindspots inherent to any imitation of hegemonic values on the part of drag culture. Much as the attraction of the cross-dressed Shakespearean heroine revolved around the manner in which this mode of dress could be instrumentalized to contain the radical alterity of femininity within Renaissance culture, so too, as Peggy Phelan argues, much of the appeal this film has for a white, straight audience resides in "its ability to absorb and tame the so-called otherness of this part of black and Latino gay male culture."[45]

As Livingston herself explains, when she came to revisit Harlem two years later, this particular moment in drag culture had already eroded itself. Two aspects of this change are particularly striking. Venus Xtravaganza, perhaps the most successful mimic in *Paris is Burning*, appears to have literally experienced the dangers of identifying with the idealized images of a culture foreign to him. Having wanted nothing more than to become the perfect white spoilt suburban housewife, s/he is found murdered in a hotel room, killed by one of her clients, who, thus Livingston's suggestion, had been angered at the fact that she wasn't what she appeared to be. But as Peggy Phelan conjectures, it is equally possible that Venus was murdered because her passing was successful: "On the other side of the mirror which women are for men, women witness their own endless shattering. Never securely positioned within the embrace of heterosexuality or male homosexuality, the woman winds up under the bed, four days dead".[46]

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[44] Judith Butler: *Bodies*, p. 128. In a similar mode, Peggy Phelan notes in her article "Crisscrossing Cultures"; "walking in a ball is at once a celebration of one's grandest ambitions to charm, seduce, and attract, and an admission that what one most admires is perennially hostile and impervious to such admiration", in Lesley Ferris (ed.): *Crossing the Stage*, p. 162.

[45] Emphasizing the manner in which these walkers are unavoidably complicitous with the cultural ideology they try to denounce, Phelan cites bell hooks scathing dismissal of the film, "What could be more reassuring to the white public than a documentary affirming that the victims of racism are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasies of the ruling class white culture?", "Crisscrossing Cultures", p. 167.

[46] Phelan: "Crisscrossing Cultures", p. 168.

At the same time success proved to be the other side of corrosion. In the course of two years the "voguing" celebrated at the dragballs had become a fashion trend. The parodistic expressions of the marginalized had turned into an accepted mode of presentation at mainstream fashion shows, with some of the performers from these drag pageants, suddenly transformed into the celebrities they were previously merely imitating. With subversion recuperated and diffused, Livingston's film ultimately closes with an acknowledgment of cultural constraint. Not only can we not choose the cultural norm interpellating us. We can also not calculate the consequences which our appropriation and reformulation of this norm might take. Ironically, the toxic side-effects of thriving on a crisis in interpellation may be the utter success of this enterprise, opening up, however, to two modes of destruction: "successful" cross-dressing can lead to the real killing off of the performing body, because the appearances are taken for being real, or to the complete dissolution of the performance, because the appearance is declared to be the real thing.

Perhaps the most poignant lesson to learn, then, is that cross-dressing never fails as dramatically as when it fully succeeds. Indeed, Stephen Orgel astutely notes that the whole point of cross-dressing "is precisely for the audience to see through the impersonation." In contrast to the pleasure which a playful game with interpellation affords, "to be seriously deceived by cross-gendered disguising," he adds, "is for us deeply disturbing, the stuff of classic horror movies like *Psycho*."[47] So as to explore the implications of this claim I want to turn to Guillermo del Toro's science fiction thriller *Mimic* (1997). Genetic biologist Dr. Susan Tyler (Mira Sorvino) and her husband Dr. Peter Mann (Jeremy Northam), in charge of controlling infectious diseases in New York City, discover that an epidemic, threatening to kill an entire generation of children, is being transmitted by the common cockroach. So as to contain it before it can spread beyond Manhattan, they design a new species, christened the Judas-breed, which secretes a poison fatal to the roaches. In an eerie scene of parturition, Susan, dressed in an armor-like white gown that completely shields her from her environment, sets free the killer-bugs and the epidemic is successfully overcome. Yet three years later she finds herself confronted with a creature which, along the lines discussed by von Sternberg and Nan Goldin, embodies a third species that defies clear definition. These nocturnal hybrid creatures that look like big men dressed in black become the symptoms for a far more dangerous xenophobic

[47] Stephen Orgel: *Impersonations*, p. 19.

anxiety than the urban transvestite, precisely because they render visible the toxic side effect of successful appropriation. Far from dying, as they were designed to, they evolved to mimic their predators, namely the human species. Thinking about what the completion of this evolution will look like produces a nightmare. As Susan Tyler explains to the men who have gone out with her to destroy this brood, "They will imitate us, infiltrate us and breed a legion before anyone can notice." One of the men, who has been listening to her conspiracy theory with incredulity, asks: "If that thing has been around, how come nobody has seen it?" Susan responds by giving voice to the horror that all too successful cross-dressing entails, precisely because it effaces all traces of incongruity between the posing subject and the attire it has chosen to appropriate, and thus can no longer be read for what it is, "I think we have [seen it]." Her conjecture is that these cross-dressed killer-bugs will use the subway system to migrate out of the city and then spread across the entire country. Only the destruction of the one male living in the midst of this killer-bug colony that has placed its larvae all along the lower levels of the Delancey Street subway can stop this invasion.

The reason I choose to end with Guillermo del Toro's *Mimic* is, however, the fact that though following along the same rhetoric of mistaken identities as Wilder's comedy, his nightmare scenario offers a less palatable rendition of how dominant culture uses the performance of cross-dressing to police its own boundaries against an invasion of queerness. Not only does del Toro's phobic fantasy scenario render more visible the violence underlying the act by which its representatives come once more to fortify hegemonic regime. Rather, he gives a significant turn to this performance of cultural panic. The mutated Judas-breed, either attacking humans and abducting them, so as to feed on them in the safety of their subaltern realm, have usurped a foreign attire in a twofold sense. Only the female bugs can cross-dress, while the one male bug, the progenitor of the entire species, unable to transform himself, must remain close to the larvae. The female bugs, furthermore, not only cross-dress as human beings, but more importantly as tall men, dressed in long black coats. The moment of *anagnorisis* occurs when Susan, upon folding together a photograph that was taken of one of the bugs that was found dead in the sewer, suddenly finds herself looking at what to all appearances seems to be the image of a human skull. The toxic cross-dresser she has unwittingly created thus bears several layers of dress - the non-distinctive urban male and the figure of human death. So compelling

about *Mimic* is the fact that it plays through the consequences of a performance of cross-dressing, which by radically undercutting all attempts at distinguishing the one appropriating a foreign attire produces panic. For the logic of del Toro's narrative is that the perfect mode of cross-dressing can only elicit an act of total eradication.

That he is not only interested in horror fantasies is made poignantly clear by the explicit references to the iconography of Jewish immigration throughout the film. Not only is the blood-lusting Jew a staple of anti-Semitic rhetoric. Begining with the location - the Delancey Street subway - we recognize that del Toro is offering us a cruelly self-conscious parable about the way we police the boundary between ethnic groups by turning the unwelcome foreign body into a dangerous termite that can be eradicated. Delancey Street is, after all, the site of one of the most famous Jewish quarters during the big wave of immigration at the turn of the century, and indeed, the show-down between Susan and her troop and the bugs takes place in the Old Armory subway shaft, built around 1900, where the subway line leads from lower Manhattan to Coney Island. Furthermore, as one of the men tries to return to the upper level to get help, he suddenly finds himself in rooms with old sewing machines, as though these abandoned objects were to recall for us the mode of production that allowed for the successful integration of East European immigrants at the turn of the century. Furthermore, for one brief moment, del Toro shows us Tom, who has found an old newspaper inside the stranded subway car in the Armory shaft, smiling obliquely at the date, May 4, 1945, and the headline, declaring the end of the war in Europe and the surrender of the German troops.

The dictum at the heart of Jennie Livingston's drag queens - to look as much as possible like your counterpart - uncannily applies to both levels of del Toro's narrative about successful imitation, infiltration and assimilation; to the Jewish immigration he indirectly refers to as well as to its toxic refiguration - the threat of an invasion by killer-bugs. Equally uncannily resonating with the image of Marlene Dietrich joining the US Armed Forces to move into a real battleground, much as Amy Jolly had cast off her shoes to follow her lover Tom Brown into battle at the end of *Morocco*, the form of cross-dressing played through by del Toro reaches far beyond the world of urban night-club life, reformulating gender antagonisms into simple oppositions of clearly delineated sides. Having entered into the heart of the Judas-breed's provisional home, the machine

room underneath the Delancey Street subway, Peter strikes at the gas pipe he finds there, and, setting it on fire, causes a subaltern Holocaust, which successfully destroys all the mimics.

Not least of all because the bugs are eradicated at precisely the site which, fifty years earlier, had served to signify the point of arrival for those Jews, who, by virtue of immigration, were able to escape the Final Solution of the Nazis, del Toro's tale poignantly illustrates how vexed the issue of cross-dressing remains. We are always steering between the skylla of appropriation and the charybdis of subversion, and in this interzone a wide spectrum of negotiating scenarios can emerge, ranging from Billy Wilder's jubilant celebration of a game of genders to del Toro's traumatic horror scenario, in which the violent wound, which the transgression of the law inflicts upon a hegemonic norm, necessarily calls for an equally violent act of injuring retribution, so that the law we all need, so as to protect ourselves from unregulated violence, can be reinstalled. The felled female Judas-bugs, who, as corpses, once they are folded back onto themselves, give shape to men dressed in black coats, are as resilient a trope for the way social laws deal with the pleasures of transgression as is the figure of Jack Lemmon, who, holding his wig in his hand, realizes with stunned sobriety, that his lover has entered blissfully into the realm of romantic delusions and is no longer even looking at him.