

Passionate Failures: The Diva Onscreen

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Film and Media

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Summer 2019

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Abstract

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I place the origins of the diva in the 19<sup>th</sup> century artistic movement *l'art pour l'art* (“art for art’s sake”) in order to show that the diva was born of mechanization and the reaction against it. Therefore, to consider the diva “onscreen” is to acknowledge the very dialectic that birthed this paradoxical prima donna: uniqueness vs. reproduction, private vs. public, ritual vs. politics.

I understand the notion of the female voice as a way to anchor the meaning of “diva,” which has come to be used too promiscuously, sometimes denoting just about anyone whose manner of self-presentation puts them on some imagined scale between self-confidence and vanity. I do not aim to offer a strict definition of the term, but I *do* aim to draw from certain tropes of the presentation of the diva onscreen the contours of particular relations of desire that hem the specificity of what “diva” might mean. The common ancestor of the operatic prima donna, I argue, accounts for many other iterations of the diva type, which goes well beyond singers. The virtuosic female voice has historically been thought of as “expressing the inexpressible,” a melodramatic striving for an unattainable meaning that is also manifest in the grand theatrical postures of 19<sup>th</sup> century actors, in the violent and tortured D’Annunzian body language of the Italian silent film divas, as well as in the languid and swooning gestures of Hollywood silent film stars, and in popular American singers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, and Whitney Houston.

In this dissertation, I define “diva” as a cultural type that has broadened beyond opera singers to include nearly any woman with a theatrical manner of self-presentation who is narrated as a “public success,” and a “private failure.” Still, I posit that it is crucial to understand the diva’s origins in discourse around female opera singers because the diva’s overdetermined relationship to the notion of presence is determined by a history of ideas regarding the female voice. I divide the dissertation into three tropes surrounding the diva: The Voice, The Narcissist, and The Comeback. Using studies in musicology, and citing a history of ideas about the female voice, including psychoanalytic notions and queer theory, I explain the importance of the fact that “diva” came into currency particularly in association with a series of two-soprano duets in the late 1820s. It is this redoubled and self-referential femininity, coupled with ideas of the female voice as “beyond language” which trouble standard regimes of representation, such as those codified by mainstream cinema. Finally, I use theories of melodrama and cinematic time to explain the meaning of “the comeback” and the diva’s relation to nostalgia and pathos.

*For Ashley Putnam*

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## PRELUDE DIVA VS. MACHINE

In the mid-1960s, Judy Garland recorded her thoughts for a never-published autobiography using an audio tape recorder. This is how she began:

Well, for openers, I don't know how to work this machine. I'm just astounded at this machine. This is the silliest way I've ever known of spending the nights alone talking to yourself into an *obvious Nazi machine*. This is a Red China Manchurian Candidate machine because I can't get anything on tape and when I do recording anything I automatically erase it and I'm sitting in a room all by myself... ho ho, boy. And across the room on my library shelf are about 35 tapes of shows I've done for CBS... hmm... mmm hmm... Now, in those boxes that hold the tapes, *my life depends on those*, and yet I don't know how to work it, that's not my business! I was trying to be a singer. I don't read notes, I can't read music, and I can't count too well, and I don't know how to work this machine. But that's the story of my life: You go with it even if you don't know what's going on, keep talking, smiling, singing, and taping. Somebody told me this might be interesting, but I've gotten so involved with this Donovan's Brain machine, *tape machine*, it should be Johnson & Johnson tapes... *my wounds* I'd like to tape. I just am trying to get a few thoughts down and then I'm all by myself, as usual, and trying to go straight with myself. Now, that makes you feel kinda dumb! I can't find my glasses to find the directions.

I don't know what 33 1/3 means, that just means *out of synch* to me. Then they've got all kinds of kinda early *Franz Joseph* directions that I'm not equipped for. I have done — *believe me*, I have done — two, what do they call it, *spools* of tape, of talking. I think I erased the whole thing and just Peggy Lee and myself came on in a rehearsal tape that played backwards.

I wonder if Sid Luft's mother makes these machines. Could be, she makes all these machines. She made Sid. She spawned him in the Red Sea somewhere...

But to, yeah, let's just think about my trying to be heard. Do you realize how many people have talked about me, written about me, imitated me? Told my children that they really know me, they really *know* Judy Garland! My little girl Liza came home one day from school. She was about 10 years old and she said, "What is this?" — she has a kind of lovely Italian indignation, indignity, I should say — see, I can't read, write or talk too well... but it's all in the machine! Maybe Madison Avenue puts out these machines... Webster and Madison... At any rate, Liza came home from school one day and said, "What is this nonsense that I always hear at school, that everybody *knows*... *you*, Judy Garland? Everybody knows Judy, yeah, but they *really* know her, no they really know her, they knew her when she lived in Transylvania, they had the house next door, and they heard all the... insanity of mama. And Liza looked at me and simply said, "Look, I don't know you, Mama. And nobody ever will! *I never will!*" [chuckles] That's my girl. We know each other pretty well, I'm rather proud of that.

So far, I think I'm on a blank tape, *I don't know*. And I might admit defeat at this point. I doubt it. I have the tenacity of a Praying Mantis with a little Black Irish witch involved. Let's see if we got anything, hmm?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with humility and the deepest gratitude that I would like to thank the following individuals who made the completion of this dissertation possible.

Thanks goes first and foremost to my advisor and chair, Linda Williams, whose generosity and enthusiasm (and clarity!) will always be the exemplar of what I would like to be as a scholar. I wouldn't have made it without you. Deepest thanks also to Mary Ann Doane, who so wonderfully reconciles those seemingly paradoxical qualities, kindness and precision, and from whom I have learned so much. Thanks to James Q. Davies, for his sense of poetry, which always inspires me, and his good humor. Thanks also to Jane Gaines, to whom I undoubtedly owe a good chunk of my intellectual tastes, and whose imagination and passion made it seem desirable to make a life as a scholar. I would also like to thank Professor Tom Lindblade of Colorado College, who always "got" it and who inspires me to this day never to bore my readers. I would also like to recognize the entire Department of Film & Media Studies at UC Berkeley, particularly Professors Mark Sandberg and Kristen Whissel, who always have our backs. Thanks to Damon Young for being an exemplary colleague and an inspiring thinker. Thanks also to Mary Ann Smart in Music, who helped me a great deal with my Qualifying Exam field on the operatic prima donna.

Thanks to my mother, Victoria McElroy, for her unflagging love and encouragement, her excellent taste (which I inherited), and for always letting me be myself, AND for being the Master of Microsoft Word helping me to format this document at the **very last minute!!!** You're amazing, Mom! Thanks to my father, Christopher McElroy, and my step-mother, Lynda McElroy, for always doing everything that they can to love and support me, even if I did end up as a film major!

Thanks to my partner, Lauren Hewitt, for her constancy, love, and her brilliant cooking, for talking me down and talking me up, and for always following my abstract thinking. (Thank you, also, for the cat.)

Thanks to my Auntie Lorrie Ricciuti and my grandmother, Dolores Ricciuti, for their "operatic conception of life," and for always being so proud of me.

Thanks to my friend and mentor, Joyce Idema, who gave me opera and encouraged me to stay awake, in so many ways. Thanks to the entire of staff and all the performers at The Santa Fe Opera for giving me more beauty than I could ever have imagined.

Thanks to Robert Alford for being an outstanding mentor and an even more outstanding friend.

To my good friends at UC Berkeley: Meg Alvarado Saggese, Jennifer Blaylock, Alex Bush, Lisa Jacobson, Renée Pastel, Avy Valladares, and Justin Vaccaro; and my crew from Columbia University's MA in Film Studies program: Bethany Czerny, Marc Francis, Alessandra Luciano, Zack Olesen, Alece Oxendine, and Rachel Schaff. You made grad school bearable!

To my friend and colleague, Eileen Jones, whose love for stars rivals my own — thank you for your energy, laughter, and all the good conversation! Thanks to the other members of The Many Pots Writing Group, Asali Echols and Emily Robbins, for all the writing and not-writing.

Thanks to my aunt, Joan McElroy, and her cats, Haley and Kiera, who provided me with an excuse to write in lovely Madison, Wisconsin over the course of two summers.

Thanks to the Institute of European Studies at UC Berkeley for a grant to study films held in the archives at Cineteca Bologna and Cineteca Nazionale in Rome, and thanks to the archival staff at Cineteca Bologna and Cineteca Nazionale.

To all the coffee shops I have loved: Bicycle Coffee, Subrosa Coffee on 40<sup>th</sup> St, Akat Kalli, Haddon Hill, Sister, Woody's, Blue Bottle on Piedmont, Timeless, Hawk & Pony, and Burlap: thank you for the espresso, and for providing a space to think and write that was not the four walls of my room.

Lastly, I would like to thank the divas. None of this would have been possible without you.

## INTRODUCTION: *È TARDI!*

The diva was born at the end of an empire, but it was not that of Greece or Rome. The first uses of the term “diva” as we know it today appeared as exaltations of certain female opera singers in Paris in the late 1820s, particularly by Théophile Gautier and his circle (Davies “Gautier’s Diva” 126-7). Coincident with this moment was a critique from both the Right and the Left of French society, claiming that its art and politics had become “decadent,” meant as a comparison to the last, degenerate days of the Roman Empire. In terms of art, the critique was that “classical” values of unity and proportion were being sacrificed to excessive refinements of “mood” and ornamentation.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the charge of “decadence” was levied as an insult to Romanticism.

But the Romantics saw their movement as an antidote to the stultifying demand that art be edifying and convey conventional “morality,” as the neoclassicism of the Enlightenment dictated. They doubled down, rallying around the concept of *l’art pour l’art* (“art for art’s sake”), and it was, again, Gautier who made the sentiment famous.<sup>2</sup> In 1835, he wrote in the Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*: “Only those things that are altogether useless can be truly beautiful; anything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and the needs of man are base and disgusting” (translated in Jenkins 110). In his cry for art to be “useless,” Gautier was not only countering stuffy conventional morality, but the mechanization of life brought by the Industrial Revolution with its demands that all things and all time be “productive.”

The decade that followed would see the 1848 revolutions all over Europe. In 1868, one year after the death of Charles Baudelaire, Gautier wrote the Preface to a third edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* and praised his dead friend<sup>3</sup> as one whose style captured the spirit of his age. “*Le style du décadence*,” wrote Gautier, could represent “modern ideas and things in their infinite complexity and varied coloring” (Gautier 41). In other words, to Gautier, the Decadent style was the one most capable of representing the experience of life in modernity. Two years later, in 1870, the Second Empire collapsed and France lost the Franco-Prussian War. Napoleon III was exiled and the new German Empire became Europe’s dominant military power.

Meanwhile, all over Europe and in the United States, the Decadent style was taking hold. In France, the style was epitomized in Joris-Karl’s Huysmans novel, *À Rebours* (1884). In England, the aesthete and Oxford don Walter Pater argued for art’s ability to encourage

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<sup>1</sup> In 1834, conservative critic Désiré Nisard (1806–1888) wrote *Etudes des moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence*, which was a critique of popular Romantic writers, particularly Victor Hugo, in which he compared them to the Roman decadents. Here Nisard named the “decadent style,” which he characterized generally as, in the words of the Oxford *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, “excessive attention to detail at the expense of the whole, sacrificing unity to fragmentation” (Weir).

<sup>2</sup> It is likely that French/Swiss novelist and political thinker Benjamin Constant in 1804 brought the idea to France as a slightly misunderstood interpretation of Immanuel Kant’s *Aesthetics*. Constant wrote in a letter, “I have a visit with Robinson, pupil of Schelling’s. His work on the Esthetics of Kant has some very forceful ideas. *L’art pour l’art* without purpose, for all purpose perverts art” (as quoted in Sartwell). Crispin Sartwell writes: “This is a highly simplified version of Kant. Nevertheless, the notion that art should be created and appreciated for the sake of art alone has its origins in Kantian disinterestedness. This is true also of its use by Victor Cousin, who taught a course in aesthetics at the Sorbonne in 1818. The course focused on (roughly) Kantian notions of free beauty and the independence of artistic from religious, moral, and practical value. Cousin’s course was highly influential on the next generation of French thinkers.”

<sup>3</sup> In 1857, Charles Baudelaire dedicated his collection of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal*, to his “beloved and revered master and friend,” Théophile Gautier (3).

contemplation and allow one to live beautifully in the present moment. “Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake,” (239), Pater wrote in *The Renaissance* (1873). Again, one can speculate that this urge might proceed, at least in part, from the desire to arrest the onrushing mechanical time of industrial England. Pater’s student and disciple, Oscar Wilde, paid attention.

In Italy, Gabriele D’Annunzio was also reading the French, like Edmond de Goncourt who declared, “We are dying of civilization,” (Hughes-Hallett 152), and wrote a novel, *Pleasure* (1889), inspired, in part, by Huysmans’ *À Rebours*. D’Annunzio’s novel about a Roman aristocrat who is an aesthete and a seducer (thinly veiled autobiography, some have suggested) (Hughes-Hallett 152-5), was written in a highly florid, mannerist tone that inspired a generation of imitators in Italy. But unlike his fellow Decadents in France and England who disdained the notion that art should be morally instructive, D’Annunzio claimed that he had written “the saddest and most spiritual of books,” a novel that expressed “the highest morality” (Hughes-Hallett 154). At the same time, multiple forces throughout the fractious and newly-created nation of Italy were all crying for war — blood must be spilt in order for the new nation to prove its superiority and cement its character (Hughes-Hallett 156-7). Unlike France, Italy did not see itself in decline, but as just beginning — and *war* was the ultimate expression of the new nation that would take its place on the world stage on which D’Annunzio felt himself an important actor.

By 1915, D’Annunzio was a popular political agitator and gave a speech at a rally in Rome, advocating for the overthrow of the current Italian government, which remained neutral in the war that raged across the rest of Europe. He called for a “cauterization by fire, a holocaust (a word he used often), a great outpouring of blood to purge the stench of corruption (Hughes-Hallett 30).” Hundreds of D’Annunzio’s supporters were arrested at the rally, including Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Benito Mussolini (Hughes-Hallett 30). In the years that followed this speech, D’Annunzio’s work and Decadent aesthetic had an enormous influence on Italian cinema, inspiring an entire genre — the Italian silent diva film — known for its Decadent settings, lurid plots, and the languid poses and heightened expressiveness of its stars, actresses such as Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli, and Francesca Bertini.

D’Annunzio also had an incalculable impact on Italian politics. By 1919 he had raised an army and invaded the city of Fiume where he ruled for a year as *Duce*, appearing daily to address the citizens from a balcony where he whipped up excitement for continued war and further “liberation” of more cities (Hughes-Hallett 425). As his biographer, Lucy Hughes-Hallett notes, “In Fiume he was experimenting with a new medium, creating artworks for which the materials were marching men, cheering crowds, masses of pelted flowers, bonfires, stirring music — a genre which would be developed and elaborated over the next two decades in Rome, in Moscow and in Berlin” (Hughes-Hallett 426).

Surely, this proto-fascist experiment of D’Annunzio’s in Fiume was precisely the “aestheticization of politics” against which Walter Benjamin warns in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin explicitly links these ideas to Marinetti and his “Futurist Manifesto,” which extolled the aesthetic beauty of war and machines. Benjamin assessed the implicit motivations of Futurism thus: “only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technological resources while maintaining property relations” (35). But D’Annunzio introduced these ideas in his writings a full twenty years prior to Marinetti’s manifesto (Hughes-

Hallett 10), and in the first version of “The Work of Art,” Benjamin calls him by name: “With D’Annunzio, decadence made its entry into political life” (35).

The “aestheticization of politics,” argued Benjamin, was a result of the rise of technologies of reproduction, which changed art’s traditional relationship to religion and ritual, from which it was originally inextricable. He writes,

...when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction (namely photography, which emerged at the same time as socialism), art felt the approach of that crisis, which a century later has become unmistakable, it reacted to that which was to come with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*, which is a theology of art. This in turn gave rise to a negative theology of art, in the form of an idea of pure art, which rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of an objective purpose. (In poetry, Mallarmè was the first to achieve this standpoint.) No investigation of art in the age of its technological reproducibility can overlook these connections. For they lead to a crucial insight: for the first time in world history, *the technological reproducibility of the work of art emancipates the work from its parasitic subservience to ritual.* (16-17)

*Enter the diva.* Named after a “goddess,”<sup>4</sup> this creature of modernity had no such ancient lineage, but was produced by the same discourse that intuited a major shift in the meaning of art, the discourse that exalted *l’art pour l’art*, a discourse which Benjamin locates as the very key to understanding art’s relationship to modernity. Invoked by the Decadents to be their High Priestess of a dead religion, the diva was born of mechanization and the reaction against it. Therefore, to consider the diva “onscreen” (in cinema) is not to first learn something about famous opera singers and then try to apply that knowledge to film and media studies. It is, instead, to acknowledge the very dialectic that birthed this paradoxical prima donna: uniqueness vs. reproduction, private vs. public, ritual vs. politics.

The diva onscreen is both the apotheosis of and the threat to what Benjamin hated about cinema. As a figure that is virtually synonymous with the very height of the concept of “stardom” (there is no star brighter than the diva!), Benjamin is instantly ideologically opposed to her. According to him, the “cult of the movie star” is a primary way that capital uses the revolutionary potential of film for “counterrevolutionary purposes” (23-24), sounding quite Decadent as he denounces the “magic of personality” as only a “putrid glimmer of its own commodity character” (24). In other words, the conventional narrative film that features a diva protagonist is bourgeois trickery, faking *presence* and aura, a very close approximation of the “ritual” function of art which is, ultimately, a Black Mass, motivated not by a sense of the Sacred, which has long since fallen, but by capital.

But the diva’s association with a hyperbolic notion of presence is also the key to her revolutionary potential. In this dissertation, I define “diva” as a cultural type that has broadened beyond opera singers to include nearly any woman who is narrated as a “public success,” and a “private failure.” But it is crucial to understand the diva’s origins in discourse around female opera singers because the diva’s overdetermined relationship to the notion of presence is determined by a history of ideas regarding the female voice. As I will explain in Chapter 1, “diva” came into currency particularly in association with a series of two-soprano duets in the late 1820s. It is this redoubled and self-referential femininity, coupled with ideas of the female

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<sup>4</sup> “Diva” translates literally to “goddess” in Latin and modern-day Italian.

voice as “beyond logos,” beyond language, which trouble standard regimes of representation, such as those codified by mainstream cinema.

I understand the notion of the female voice as a way to anchor the meaning of “diva,” which has come to be used too promiscuously,<sup>5</sup> sometimes denoting just about anyone whose manner of self-presentation puts them on some imagined scale between self-confidence and out-and-out vanity. I do not aim to offer a strict definition of the term, but I *do* aim to draw from certain tropes of the presentation of the diva onscreen the contours of particular relations of desire that hem the specificity of what “diva” might mean. The common ancestor of the operatic prima donna, I argue, accounts for many other iterations of the diva type, which goes well beyond singers. The virtuosic female voice has historically been thought of as “expressing the inexpressible,” a melodramatic striving for an unattainable meaning that is also manifest in the grand theatrical postures of 19<sup>th</sup> century actors, such as Sarah Bernhardt, in the violent and tortured D’Annunzian body language of the Italian silent film divas, as well as in the languid and swooning gestures of Hollywood silent film stars, such as Alla Nazimova and Greta Garbo. What these different iterations of “diva” have in common is a highly emotive performance style that gestures grandly at an inaccessible meaning, carving out a space for women’s reverie, which is often a space of unresolvable yearning. This is the space of the aria, the mad scene, and the “comeback” number. “Diva,” unlike the often opaque “femme fatale,” puts women’s interiority center-stage.

### **The Italians**

To write of divas in film studies is usually to signal the Italians, and the Italian silent diva can, at first glance, trouble my theories. There is much of the femme fatale in, say, Pina Menichelli in *Il Fuoco* (1915).<sup>6</sup> But recent Italian film scholarship tends to agree that the diva is something separate from the femme fatale.<sup>7</sup> Still, where I differ from most scholars of Italian film is that I do not share their sense that the diva is an anomaly, unique to Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her wide-ranging study on the Italian silent diva genre (2008), Angela Dalle Vacche epitomizes this view: “The diva is an anomalous star compared to the Hollywood model that has defined film stardom for the rest of the world. The diva’s unusual contribution to the history of stardom stems from the cultural specificities of Italian modernity” (1). Marcia Landy, too, in *Stardom, Italian Style* (2008), considers the diva a kind of proto-star who existed in a very specific and finite period of time coincident with the D’Annunzian aesthetic (7-8). Yet, most scholars of Italian film stardom will admit the influence on the Italian divas of important theater actresses of the day, such as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse. In my view, “The Divine

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<sup>5</sup> According to Google’s Ngram Viewer, a data analysis tool that tracks the frequency of word use in a database shared with Google Books, the use of “diva” in material published in English has increased by over 200% since 1980.

<sup>6</sup> According to cinematografo.it, *Il Fuoco*, though written by (director) Giovanni Pastrone and (male lead) Febo Mari, is not strictly based upon but “inspired” by a novel by Gabriele D’Annunzio of the same name, published in 1900.

<sup>7</sup> Dalle Vacche writes, “... the equivalence between the diva and the femme fatale, in the genre of the diva film, was more the exception than the rule . . . the films I examine closely in the present study make it clear that the Italian diva was no simple national variation on the international figure of the femme fatale. In other words, she was not always and only a projection of male paranoia about the other sex, as has been argued until now, a stance that grossly confuses the Italian diva with the American femme fatale or vamp” (15). See also Maria Elena D’Amelio, “Belle e dannate: Donne di potere nel cinema storico-mitologico italiano” (306).

Sarah” seems a more obvious progenitor of *divismo*<sup>8</sup> — more over-the-top emotionalism and gesturing — than the high Modernist Duse, who, though Italian, was more interior and subtle in her style. But the interesting thing about Italian film scholarship is the bizarre way that it disavows the undoubted influence of opera on this early cinema genre.

In the same breath that scholars proclaim the diva’s status as a specifically Italian anomaly, they also follow Aldo Bernardini in his assertion that Italy actually imported *divismo*, and that it came to them from Danish vamp Asta Nielsen (Bernardini 3, Dalle Vacche 3). I can only imagine that this line of reasoning comes from an urge to assert the importance of medium specificity in film studies, but I do not think it is supportable. Yes, the films of Nielsen were influential around the world, but there were many other more obvious influences that conspired to create the style of *divismo* in Italy. Most importantly, at this time it was *opera*, not cinema, that was Italy’s most popular national art form (Dalle Vacche 19).

Even as late as the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci complained about the “operatic conception of life” demonstrated by the Italian proletariat (*Reader* 373). He blamed Verdi in particular: “Verdi’s music, or rather the libretti and plots of the plays set to music by Verdi are responsible for a whole range of ‘artificial’ poses in the life of people, for ways of thinking, for a ‘style’” (*Reader* 373). This “operatic conception of life” for Gramsci was false consciousness, a way for common people to “[escape] what they consider low, mean, and contemptible in their lives and education, in order to enter into a more select sphere of great feelings and noble passions” (*Reader* 373), but which could not, ultimately, deliver a better life, just a temporary distraction from misery. And even though the source material of many popular operas came from “serial novels and below-stairs reading (all that literature which is mawkish, mellifluous, and whimpery” (*Reader* 373), Gramsci ultimately blamed the music. Opera, thought Gramsci, was the “most pestiferous because words set to music are more easily recalled, and they become matrices in which thought takes shape out of flux” (*Reader* 373). Gramsci mistrusted music<sup>9</sup> and valued the word, lamenting, as did many Italian intellectuals, the lack of a truly Italian literature that was “of the people” (*Reader* 370-3). There are many reasons for the supremacy of opera over literature in Italy, one of which is the fact that the country had one of the lowest literacy rates in Europe (48% in 1901 (Dalle Vacche 270n19)). But the point is that opera had a tremendous influence on Italian popular culture, and had for quite some time (Verdi, a hero of the Risorgimento, was most productive in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century). So why, in a country where the average person could sing along to *La traviata*, should *divismo* be a style imported from abroad?

On the other hand, Verdi is also the key to understanding that “diva” is not a strictly Italian phenomenon. Those Verdi libretti to which Gramsci objected were often adapted from French novels or plays, as were the libretti of many Italian operas of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For instance, Verdi’s *La traviata* (1853) is an adaptation of Alexandre Dumas *filis*’ novel *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848) and later stage adaptation (1852) of the same story, Puccini’s *La bohème* (1896) is based on a French serial by Henri Murger (1851), and his *Tosca* (1900) is an adaptation of Victorien Sardou’s *La Tosca* (1887) (a French play about an Italian diva), originally written for Sarah Bernhardt, whose stage business of laying candles and a

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<sup>8</sup> This view of Bernhardt as exemplary of *divismo* is supported by Gabriele D’Annunzio’s remark upon meeting “The Divine Sarah” — “You are positively D’Annunzian!,” he exclaimed (Gold & Fizdale 273). Around the time of this meeting, D’Annunzio asked Bernhardt to star in his play, *The Dead City* (1902), even though he was currently the lover of none other than Eleanora Duse (Gold & Fizdale 271-4).

<sup>9</sup> Gramsci’s mistrust of music may have been partially defensible. When D’Annunzio invaded Fiume, he declared music a fundamental principle of the state (Parlato 88).

crucifix around Baron Scarpia after she murders him (Gold & Fizdale 232-3) was adopted by the prima donnas who sang the operatic version of the role (as well as by Francesca Bertini, who played Tosca in the Italian silent film version), and remains a staple of the staging of the opera to this day. The volley of influence between French literature and theater and Italian opera is too voluminous to catalogue here, but it is one indication that not even the divas of Italian opera are strictly Italian, nor are the divas of Italian silent cinema.<sup>10</sup> “Diva” is a pan-European phenomenon, and this is evident from the term’s inception. When Gautier, a Frenchman, first used “diva” to describe certain sopranos, these prima donnas hailed from Italy, Spain, and Germany, and regularly performed in Paris, London, and around the Continent.<sup>11</sup>

All this is to say that opera divas and the divas of Italian silent cinema both proceed from *l’art pour l’art*, and, as the opera divas predate the cinematic divas in a culture steeped in the operatic art form, I think opera’s influence on the Italian silent diva genre has been underestimated. But I also see the diva type as continuing far beyond these figures and into the present day. This dissertation does not seek to provide an exhaustive list of “divas throughout the years.” In fact, one of my aims is to initiate a move away from talking of divas in terms of individual performers and to move towards describing “diva” in terms of a cultural type that influences a style of performance. To speak of divas only in terms of performers (“Surely Callas was a REAL diva!”) and not performances is inaccurate, especially because performers typically play a variety of roles throughout their careers, many of which cannot not be classified as “diva” roles. This gets tricky because the press and other media often narrativize the lives of certain female performers, with whom these types of diva roles have become associated, in accordance with tropes about the cultural type of the diva. Cinema, too, generates, refines, and perpetuates the cultural type as a narrative and formal phenomenon. Conversely, the cultural type itself was also formed by the ways the press wrote about certain female performers, and continues to be defined today by press coverage, internet discourse, and documentaries.<sup>12</sup> But simply because the media at large would like us to think of someone like Maria Callas as a “diva” does not mean that there is any worth in conceiving of a complex human being in terms of this narrative unless the purpose is to understand the narrative itself, and not the human being. In other words, the only thing we can learn from stories about what a “diva” Maria Callas was, is what the culture thinks about divas, and, therefore, about certain intersections of femininity and power. But we can learn little about Maria Callas, herself, from such a lens.

### **Divine Decadence**

The diva type remains extant since the time of its inception, surviving on the operatic stage, in theater, film, and in popular music for the last two hundred years. But it flowers particularly during times of “decadence,” even if that “decay” is not on the scale of military empire. For instance, in film, I sense an efflorescence of mostly foreign-born<sup>13</sup> silent actors who

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<sup>10</sup> French literature provided the source material for many Italian silent diva films, too (Dalle Vacche 12).

<sup>11</sup> See Davies, “Gautier’s Diva.”

<sup>12</sup> Mary Ann Smart’s work on the “obsessive blurring of art and life” in the biographies and newspaper gossip written about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris Opera diva Rosine Stoltz is exemplary of the reciprocal relationship between diva tropes and the narrativization of the lives of female performers (See: Smart, “The Lost Voice of Rosine Stoltz”).

<sup>13</sup> The United States was historically wary of divas, which smacked too much of papist decadence and debauchery. See Lowell Gallagher, “Jenny Lind and the Voice of America.”

demonstrated the diva style, such as Alla Nazimova, Greta Garbo,<sup>14</sup> Pola Negri, and, at times, Gloria Swanson, right before the studio system took over and implemented more fiscal, formal, and ideological restraints, including the Production Code. These were the heady days of late silent cinema, where stars wielded great power and often produced their own, extravagant star vehicles (think Nazimova's *Salomé* (1922) and Swanson's *Queen Kelly* (1929)), before the studio bosses united and wrested power from their runaway assets who would soon be yoked to seven-year contracts and morality clauses. It also seems that divas were largely absent from the products of the "Golden Age" of the Hollywood studio system, although stars such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford sometimes played characters who were "public successes," but "private failures."

Still, there were few musicals featuring diva protagonists during the Golden Age. Yet, some of the stars raised in the studio system would come to play diva roles as the system crumbled. For instance, I argue in Chapter 3 that Judy Garland (whose home studio, MGM, boasted the motto "Ars Gratia Artis" — Latin for *l'art pour l'art!*), was not presented as a diva onscreen until 1954's *A Star Is Born*, a film that also takes for its very plot the dissolution of the studio system. The 1950s mark the beginning of a trend of "dark musicals" that continues throughout the 1960s and 1970s, featuring narratives which are largely about the entertainment industry and its discontents, with performers like Barbra Streisand and Liza Minnelli. It is as if the diva, suppressed during its "classical" era, returns to narrate Hollywood's decline.

What I find useful about the diva's association with moments of "decline" is that it emphasizes her kinship with that which is baroque, excessive, "too much," qualities that are the enemies of classicism. To note this sense of "excess" is also to acknowledge the diva's deep connection with melodrama, a form that was developing and ascending to dominance, along with the diva, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, "melodrama" is another way of naming part of the cultural context which allowed the flights of individual emotional expressiveness and emphasis on the individual by which the diva was crowned. I will return to the diva's embeddedness in the melodramatic mode in Chapter 3, but here it is important to note that the charge of melodramatic "excess," as Linda Williams writes, is often a denigration of the form, and related to the perception of, "the related 'excess' of emotional manipulateness and association with femininity" (44). In other words, a respectably contained "classicism" is at odds with femininity, and the diva's associations with melodrama have a misogynist cast.

But these associations did not originate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Chapter 1, I use Anne Carson's article, "The Gender of Sound," to explain the Classical Greek concept of the "sophrosyne," a set of values which emphasized the virtue of balance, proportion, and containment, and were associated with masculinity. Women, on the other hand, did *not* possess the sophrosyne virtues, according to the Greeks. What's more, they were a danger to them. Women's voices, in particular, sounding of uncontrollable horrors and the leaky unruliness of the female body, were thought to damage the virtue of any man who heard them. Femininity, then, has been at odds with the sophrosyne virtues of masculine classicism for quite some time.

This fluidity and amorphousness that pits the woman as "beyond representation" is the source of the diva's appeal to decadence, the sign of her affiliation with melodrama, and her

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<sup>14</sup> Garbo, it should be noted, never produced her own films and was very much under the thumb of MGM, the studio to which she was contracted upon her arrival to the United States (Sands 69-73). But I think she is still worth mentioning in connection with *divismo* because she often demonstrated a similarly swooning, expressive performance style. Garbo also starred in *Camille* (1936), yet another adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias*, which also features quotations of Verdi's *La traviata* throughout the original orchestral score by Herbert Stothart.

trouble to cinema. It is as if the diva can never be fully “seen” and fully “heard” at the same time in cinema. Film, which masters so completely the form of the femme fatale, a fiction “cut to the measure” of male fantasy,<sup>15</sup> stutters at the depiction of the diva, a figure defined by the expression of feminine desire, rooted in the female voice: the soundtrack skips, the image blurs. Sometimes this happens literally, as in Werner Schroeter’s *The Death of Maria Malibran* (1972), (titled as a tribute to the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century opera diva) where two feminine figures languidly mouth lyrics that are out-of-synch with the arias on the soundtrack; or in *A Star Is Born* (1954), where Judy Garland rushes towards the camera during the climax of “The Man That Got Away,” and the image blurs, seemingly unable to focus the female body and the virtuosic female voice simultaneously. But this “stutter” takes many forms, and, more generally, expresses itself in cinema’s failure to yoke a fetishizable female body to a virtuosic female voice. The instability wrought between sound and image by the diva onscreen troubles notions of unity, the idea upon which many theories of cinematic pleasure rest.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, films that dare not risk such obvious asynchronicity often obscure or de-emphasize the diva’s body during moments of vocal virtuosity or reverie (by costuming her in black and filming her against dark backgrounds, for example). Meanwhile, films that rely upon simulating the diva’s “live” presence, such as the melodramatically-structured “backstage musicals” featuring diva protagonists, develop complex strategies of “authentication” to compensate for her actual absence.

Perhaps Benjamin would appreciate how, in striving so desperately to recreate the ritual presence of the diva, film not only exposes its shortcomings, but betrays art’s relationship to ritual as defunct. But this view does not adequately acknowledge that, even in the opera house, the diva’s “ritual” was never straightforwardly religious or even reverential. To deem a singer a “diva” in 1820s Paris or London, very “modern” places and in a modern time by nearly any definition, was an ironic gesture. Not only did goddesses no longer carry any legitimate religious currency in the West, but to give a nineteenth century opera singer this name—a performer with all the rights and respectability of a prostitute<sup>17</sup>—was to do so with a heavy sense of irony.<sup>18</sup> This irony is a mark of the ambivalence that is central to the diva’s meaning as a creature of modernity, a fact that is sometimes glossed over by gratuitous comparisons of the diva to ancient goddesses. The modern diva has never been straightforwardly “worshipped.” She has always been regarded with a mixture of admiration, discomfiture, and derision.

### **Passionate Failures**

Another way to understand Gautier’s use of “diva” is as a *camp* gesture. Camp as a modern sensibility is an ironic pose that nonetheless betrays deep investment. As Richard Dyer writes in his assessment of “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” camp “holds together qualities that are

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<sup>15</sup> In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey writes, “Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into, the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire” (208).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” Christian Metz’s *Film Language: Semiotics of the Cinema*, and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

<sup>17</sup> In *The Queen’s Throat*, Koestenbaum writes, “Though fêted by crowned heads, the nineteenth-century diva, like other musicians, was not considered part of polite society. A silken cord at private gatherings separated her from the wealthy partygoers she was paid to entertain. Nor did she have full civil rights: governments classed her as a prostitute. Many performers in Europe, whether musical or dramatic, were similarly disenfranchised. France gave theatrical players their religious rights (Communion, marriage, burial) only as late as 1849” (107).

<sup>18</sup> Even the Italophile cast of “diva” is camp, Italy viewed as paradoxically backward, but also a country of aesthetes.

elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity... intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity.” Camp is the Decadent style of feeling — a pose towards art at the godless end of civilization that oscillates between total emotional investment, and the feeling that one should know better than to invest.

Camp “finds the success in certain passionate failures” (291), writes Susan Sontag in her seminal 1964 essay, “Notes on ‘Camp.’” “Passionate failure” seems to me the essence of the diva onscreen. Mind you, these failures are not the “fault” of the diva, herself. They proceed from the failures of a cultural and representational system that cannot accommodate her. Try as she might, the diva’s suffering — and her power — comes from the fact that she cannot quite be understood.

Chapter 1 deals with the legacy of thought about the female voice and the diva’s historical roots in a series of two-soprano duets. The redoubled femininity of these duets, I argue, undergirds the power of the diva, a relation that has traditionally been understood as alluring yet unrepresentable, destabilizing notions of “unity” central to conventional cinema, particularly in the trope of asynchronicity around the figure of the diva onscreen. Chapter 2 addresses the charge of “narcissism” levied at divas, and makes a case for a reassessment of female narcissism, which, like the female voice, is often also conceived in terms of representational aporia. Here I define the diva protagonist by her occupancy of a lavishly elaborated space of “self-regard,” a scene of reflection, which is often also a space of yearning. Chapter 3 takes most literally the roots of the word “passionate,” meaning “full of suffering,” and examines the melodramatic structure of time at play in the trope of the “comeback.” The “comeback,” as a fixture of narratives about female performers, turns on spectacularized scenes of suffering for these women who are “public successes,” but “private failures.” Producing a temporary reconciliation of unreconcilable feelings and expectations, the “comeback” nonetheless evokes a yearning for a better world that would not demand such a fate.

According to Philip Core, essential to camp is a “secret within the personality which one ironically wishes to conceal and to exploit” (Core in Cleto, 82). This is the diva’s relationship to her mechanical reproducibility — conventional cinema wishes to conceal its heterogeneity (shots, cuts, editing, the Frankensteinian suture of sound and image, all disavowed in cinema’s quest to become Benjamin’s “Blue Flower in the land of technology”<sup>19</sup>) especially around a figure as hyperbolically invested in presence (which depends on the illusion of unity) as the diva. But cinema also exploits the diva’s power to overwhelm and expose cinema’s “failures.” For instance, acknowledging cinema’s (often avowed) failure to present the Great Auratic Diva builds the diva’s myth, and cinema can profit from this myth, disseminating it more powerfully and efficiently than any live tour could ever accomplish.

### **Ars Gratia Artis/ Fiat Ars—Pereat Mundus**

But the deeper “secret within the personality” around which the meanings of the diva turn is not reproducibility or aura. It is femininity. The understandings and misunderstandings of femininity in Western culture structure the diva’s relationship to representation from music to

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<sup>19</sup> In “The Work of Art,” Benjamin writes: “In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of the apparatus, is the result of a technological procedure peculiar to it—namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The apparatus-free aspect of reality has here become artifice, and the vision of unmediated reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology” (28).

cinema to the gossip columns. Unfortunately, “femininity” is also what gets sacrificed by the Marxist critics, such as Benjamin and Gramsci, who deem it suspicious, casting its cadenzas and curlicues upon a pyre in their efforts to cauterize the widening wound of fascism. “‘Fiat ars — pereat mundus,’ says fascism, expecting from war, as Marinetti admits, the artistic gratification of a sense perception already altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *l’art pour l’art* (36),” writes Benjamin. For him, *l’art pour l’art* could only lead to fascism and war.

Since Beckett championed Flaubert’s maxim, “form is content, content is form” (Beckett 27), this has been the reigning view of modernism. Yet, this may be an overstatement. Form certainly informs content, and vice versa, but no style on its own has inherent meaning. Yes, D’Annunzian dandyism was intertwined with the ascendance of fascism in Italy, but the later rise of the strong jaws and hard lines of Futurist-influenced design of both fascist *and* Soviet propaganda proves that Decadence has no monopoly on Authoritarianism. Nor did these (dare I say?) sophrosyne aesthetic values have any inherent ideological value, used as they were for both ends of the political spectrum. What they had, instead, was a *history* of meanings and connotations against which to assert themselves, the history of *l’art pour l’art* against which to rebel.

Decadence was charged with valuing style over content. But what does this mean except that critics of Decadence were blind to its content? “Art for art’s sake” is not literal. It is not an instruction for living. It is, instead, a provocation, and a defiant refusal to bow to old, outmoded morality. When Oscar Wilde wrote, “All art is quite useless” in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (4), the novel that follows is hardly an endorsement of hedonism. On the contrary, it is almost a cautionary tale, and it is a *painting* that shows the true decay of Dorian’s soul. There is a great deal of “content” here, but it is not content that provides any clear directives for living in the modern world. Instead, the content of the Decadence movement is the elaboration of the ennui, the yearning, and the fear of a new world at the end of the old.

There is another group that has been historically charged with valuing style over content: women. Prominent Marxist critics betray quite a bit of misogyny in their choice of cultural whipping boys (girls? “A Diva Is Being Beaten?”). Benjamin blames the cult of the *female* film star (*la vedette*)<sup>20</sup> for its pernicious drive to reassert aura in a counterrevolutionary move to combat the revolutionary promise of cinema. Meanwhile, Gramsci laments the “melodramatic disease” of the Italian working class, and blames, in part, the power of women within the families who decide to buy newspapers that publish all that old-fashioned French literature in serial form (366)<sup>21</sup>! Furthermore, all those Verdi operas to which he objects, tend to be based on French plays and literature that center female protagonists. Gramsci also singles out the Italian silent film divas, writing in a stage review of actress Lyda Borelli (who was both a theatrical actress and film star) that she is capable only of playing only “herself” (Gramsci *In principio era* 336), which, confusingly, was also the performance of a “prehistoric and primordial humanity” (Gramsci *In principio era* 334). according to him. In the latter assertion, where he claims Borelli represents an example of “prehistoric humanity,” he is falling for the Decadents’ joke without seeing the humor. He guns for the “diva” as if she were a literal goddess which modern Marxist

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<sup>20</sup> In the original French text of “The Work of Art,” Benjamin writes: “Favorise par le capital du film, le culte de *la vedette* [my emphasis] conserve ce charme de la personnalite qui depuis longtemps n’est que le faux rayonnement de son essence mercantile” (Benjamin “L’oeuvre d’art” 55). In French, “*la vedette*” is a term that means a female star, and has connotations of a cabaret or burlesque performer.

<sup>21</sup> Gramsci writes regarding “the man of the people” buying a newspaper with a serialized French novel in it: “women have a large say in the choice and insist on the ‘nice interesting novel’.” (Gramsci *Reader* 366)

politics must hurry to outpace, maybe Diana,<sup>22</sup> the moon and the sky. But, as Benjamin knew, the Decadents were exhuming a *fallen* Sacred, and “diva” was an ironic move, crowning a singer or an actress, a *fallen woman*, to be their divine ruler, “The Goddess of Art.” On the other hand, where Gramsci actually understands Borelli’s modernity is when he asserts that she can play “only herself.” This is the modern art of personality, an art at which the diva is a *virtuosa*.

If only Oscar Wilde had lived! Imprisoned for acts of “gross indecency” (i.e. homosexuality) in 1895, just as the Lumière Brothers screened their first film shorts at the Grand Café in Paris, Wilde died in exile in Paris in 1900, never to see the themes to which he dedicated his life come to full fruition. What tends to be forgotten is that Wilde would probably not disagree with Benjamin’s implicit argument at the end of “The Work of Art” that our age of technological supremacy has two possible directions, fascism or communism (36). Unlike D’Annunzio, his fellow aesthete and disciple of *l’art pour l’art*, Oscar Wilde was a socialist. But, as he details in his essay, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” he actually understood socialism as the system that would allow for each person to realize her personality most fully. Wilde writes:

Under the new conditions [abolition of private property] Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively-realised Individualism of such poets as I have mentioned [Byron, Shelley, Browning Victor Hugo, Baudelaire], but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally. For the recognition of private property has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. It has led Individualism entirely astray. It has made gain not growth its aim. So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be.

The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is. vii

In other words, for Wilde, the abolition of private property was the path to a harmonious and free Individualism. In Oscar Wilde’s socialist utopia, Lyda Borelli’s ability to play only herself would be the highest achievement of humankind.

### **Judy Garland Threw the First Brick at Stonewall**

On the night of June 27-28, 1969, fresh from attending Judy Garland’s funeral along with 21,000 other people at the Frank. E. Campbell Memorial Funeral Home on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, self-described drag queens were commiserating four miles south over drinks at the Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village gay bar, when the cops raided the premises, as they frequently did. But that night, the drag queens and other patrons fought back, and what is now the Movement for LGBTQIA+ Rights began.<sup>23</sup> Renowned trans activist and self-described drag queen Sylvia Rivera, who fought alongside fellow drag queen Marsha P. Johnson, a black transwoman, as she threw the first brick at the cops during the riots, confirms that many patrons of the Stonewall Inn had been to Garland’s funeral that day.<sup>24</sup> Rivera, too, was mourning

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<sup>22</sup> In “Gautier’s Diva,” Davies notes the importance of the Roman goddess Diana to the diva type (125-6).

<sup>23</sup> See Dave Isay’s documentary, “Stonewall Riots 40th Anniversary: A Look Back at the Uprising that Launched the Modern Gay Rights Movement” (democracynow.org, June 26, 2009), and Martin Duberman’s *Stonewall: The Definitive Story* (235-6). See also Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis 1940 – 1996* for evidence that Garland was an important figure for patrons of the bar, many using “Judy Garland” as a pseudonym in the bar’s customer log (198).

<sup>24</sup> See Sylvia Rivera’s testimony in Dave Isay’s documentary, “Stonewall Riots 40th Anniversary: A Look Back at the Uprising that Launched the Modern Gay Rights Movement” (democracynow.org, June 26, 2009).

Garland<sup>25</sup> and said of that night, “I was just not in the mood” (Duberman 238). Some recent commentators have tried to debunk Garland’s connection to Stonewall,<sup>26</sup> often betraying some embarrassment at the existence of the “Judy Queens,” which are disavowed as something “of the past,” an unfortunate symptom of oppression which the contemporary mainstream gay person need only look upon with tacit acknowledgment, and passing regret. As usual, this agenda is usually a bid for some notion of homonormativity,<sup>27</sup> and rests on an implicit bias against femininity. To these commentators, Judy Garland, like the drag queens who mourned her, was a hysterical symptom of a social disease that no longer exists in this new era of “acceptance” for gays.<sup>28</sup> Mark Segal, founder of Philadelphia’s *Gay City News*, went as far as to write an op-ed critiquing the use of the Garland “myth” in a recent film about the riots (*Stonewall*, 2015): “The most disturbing historical liberty, one brought up again and again in the film, is that Judy Garland’s death had something to do with the riots. That is downright insulting to us as a community, as inaccurate as it gets and trivializes the oppression we were fighting against.”

If there is one thing I hope to accomplish with this dissertation, it is to prove that Judy Garland is not “trivial.” Drag queens are not trivial, women are not trivial, nor is art “useless” (Oscar Wilde never really thought it was). The collective yearning to which Garland gave voice was became a tool that led, in part, to liberation for queer people around the world.

In 1979, Richard Dyer wrote “In Defense of Disco” for *Gay Left* magazine, and implicitly made a case for the Judy Queens. In this short work, Dyer, a socialist, bemoans the Left’s tendency to uncritically (or not critically enough) overvalue music with “masculine” aesthetics – old coal mining ballads, rock ‘n roll. Dyer is not opposed to this music, but he deflates the pretension that folk or rock have any higher claim to a notion of “authenticity” than any other type of music. The party line was that folk and rock were “of the people,” popular forms that sprung from the working class. Yet, as Dyer points out, virtually any form in the modern era no longer proceeds from a folk culture, but from professional musicians who create their music in a capitalist system, which means it isn’t any more or less ideologically “pure” than anything else. He addresses the common means of (capitalist) production of all recorded music, but he also addresses the form of the music, itself. Disco, much derided by the Left in his day as escapist and overproduced, is for him an expression of eroticism and Romanticism. And Romanticism, for Dyer, opens the door for possibility, for a vision of a more fulfilling, more beautiful, and better life. He writes, “Romanticism is one of the major modes of leisure in which this sense of an alternative is kept alive. Romanticism asserts that the limits of work and domesticity are not the limits of experience” (41). He continues, “What I do believe is that the movement between banality and something ‘other’ than banality is an essential dialectic of society, a constant: keeping open of a gap between what is and what could or should be” (41).

Transphobia, misogyny, and Judy Garland-denial all come from the same root: fear of women. Like the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxists before them, the mainstream homonormative press

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<sup>25</sup> Duberman writes, “It’s the end of an era,” she [Rivera] tearfully announced. “The greatest singer, the greatest actress of my childhood is no more. Never again ‘Over the Rainbow’” — here Sylvia sobbed loudly — “no one left to look up to” (238).

<sup>26</sup> See Waxman and Segal.

<sup>27</sup> “Homonormativity” is a concept developed by Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), which is a critique of the expectations that idea that queer people should adapt (or should want to adapt) to heterosexual social expectations, such as monogamy and marriage, among many other things. Warner argues that this is a privileged position that will leave those who do not have a place in this “normative” scheme even more vulnerable, and forfeits the chance for the LGBTQIA+ movement to radically reshape social relations more equitably for all.

<sup>28</sup> See Gross. And see, for an example of this view, Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (1997)

underestimate what a diva can mean to revolution. Thankfully, queer theory has made strides in redeeming the diva's outrageous femininity for revolutionary purposes. But the critique of the often dour (read: "serious," i.e. masculine) aesthetics of the Left (from the Left) had to wait over 80 years between the death of Wilde and Dyer's "In Defense of Disco."

Queer theorists have done significant work to redeem the diva in the decades that followed. Most of this work involves the diva and the queer fan, and queer reception of the diva now constitutes a significant sub-genre of scholarship. The work of Wayne Koestenbaum, Richard Dyer, D.A. Miller, Alexander Doty, Brett Farmer, Michael Montlack, David Halperin, Esther Newton, and Camille Paglia has elaborated the ways queer fans appropriate the diva as an emblem of defiance, often patterning individualized versions of empowerment on her style. This dissertation will not re-tread that well-mapped ground, but it owes a great debt to this queer scholarship on the diva and implicitly and explicitly rests on the ideas of these writers.

Queer theory has also influenced feminist theory in important ways, perhaps even showing traditional feminism how to revalue femininity to an extent, and mitigating some of its tendencies to overvalue "realism" as opposed to myth, or the value of work over the value of style. This (understandable) backlash against misogynist stereotypes led many feminist theorists and scholars to be wary of the diva, at least *as a diva* and not as a much-maligned "working woman" in disguise.<sup>29</sup> But the tendency of diligent feminist biographers to write away the diva by focusing on the "real story" of female performers is another reason that it is more productive to think of the diva as a cultural type and not a person. Still, some feminist biographical projects neglect the extent to which people narrate their own lives based on cultural types. In other words, I wonder if the singers and performers who have been "demythologized" were actually quite a bit more "mythic" in their everyday lives than some writers would allow us to believe.

Happily, there have been many productive meetings of feminist and queer theory on the topic of the diva since the 1990s. The journal *Camera Obscura*, for instance, released two volumes on *Divas! (Fabulous! Divas Part 1 2007, Fabulous! Divas Part 2 2008)* that demonstrate this theoretical balance. This seems as good a time as any to acknowledge that much of queer and feminist theory also relies on psychoanalysis, and so do I, frequently, in this dissertation, because it is the one theoretical framework that makes gender central.

Melodrama studies, too, has taught us how to revalue all that "excess" that may not be excess at all, but merely a complex and ever-changing mode<sup>30</sup> of modern storytelling in search of

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<sup>29</sup> In "Gautier's Diva" Davies foregrounds the historicity of the concepts of "realism" and the protestant ethic of the "dignity of work" as values that often inform the studies that seek to find the "real" woman behind the diva in opera studies, such as the work on diva biography done by Mary Ann Smart and Susan Rutherford (127-8). For an example of this drive for "realism," see Rutherford, "Divining the Diva" (2016), where she writes, "It is time to acknowledge the female singer in more accurate and rational terms, as a professional musician and working woman with full rights to our respect — and in full possession of her own, very human, dignity" (59).

<sup>30</sup> In 1998, Linda Williams made the claim in "Melodrama Revised" that melodrama is, in fact, "the fundamental mode of popular American motion pictures, it is not a specific genre like the western or horror film; it is not a 'deviation' of the classical realist narrative [...] melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic elevation of moral irrational truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie" (42). Williams argument builds upon Christine Gledhill's claim in *Cinema Journal* (1986) that there are "three modern modes of cultural perception/expression — realism, melodrama, and modernism," and that melodrama, "insists on the realities of life in bourgeois democracy—the material parameters of lived experience, individual personality, the fundamental psychic relations of family life—and, in an implicit recognition of the limitations of the conventions of representation—of their repressiveness—proceeds to insist on, force into an aesthetic presence, desires for identity, value, and fullness of signification beyond the powers of language to supply (45). For further discussion of melodrama as a pervasive mode of modern culture, see Gledhill

an unattainable moral certainty. Melodrama, historically associated with feminine “excess” vs. masculine “classicism” (whether in the form of the Hollywood Golden Age or Greek tragedy), like the diva, is also a form that adapts to suit the needs of its time and place.<sup>31</sup> It need not be reactionary, but can be used for either revolutionary or counterrevolutionary aims.

Yet, I’d still put the diva on the side of revolution. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the meaning of the diva’s passionate failures is first and foremost a protest: her suffering declaims the injustice of the rules and expectations that govern women; her unrepresentability is a critique of the current regime of signs. This is not a blueprint for a new world, but the importance of protest should not be dismissed. The diva gives form to yearning — a yearning for a better life, for fulfillment. She takes this pain and makes it beautiful, which also makes it bearable. But this need not be a pacifying operation. Some pacification is fine—one cannot always be battling, and beauty is necessary to sustain one’s sense of humanity. “The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too,” said suffragette and member of the Women’s Trade Union League Rose Schneidermann in 1912 (Miranda Brooks 288)<sup>32</sup>. Sometimes beauty breaks us open and makes us realize that we have not been living fully, and that we would like to live in a world where “the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.” This is more than a protest, it is a wish; a wish that might lead us to decide that we will not settle for less than its fulfillment. This art, it seems, could be quite useful.

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“The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation” (1987); Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, “Introduction,” in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (2018); Despina Kakoudaki, “Melodrama and Apocalypse: Politics and the Melodrama Mode in Contagion” (2018) (311-312); and Linda Williams, “Tales of Sound and Fury...’ or, The Elephant of Melodrama” (2018) (169-184).

<sup>31</sup> Using Henry James’ description of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a “Wonderful ‘leaping fish,’” springing from medium to medium until it is a “state of vision, of feeling and consciousness” (*Playing the Race Card* 10), Linda Williams argues that the adaptive strategies of the entire melodramatic mode could be understood in much the same way, modifying itself to suit changing times and media (*Playing the Race Card* 10-13).

<sup>32</sup> This quotation is often misattributed to Emma Goldman, but it was, in fact, Schneidermann who originated it.

# 1

## Sinister Sonorities: The Double Feminine and the Asynchronous Voice

I contend that cinema's desire and failure to see and know the diva onscreen is rooted in the diva's operatic origins and aura of live presence, and, by extension, Western cultural notions and fears about the female voice and its connection to female sexuality. In this chapter I will analyze one trope that dramatizes cinema's failure to know women via the diva onscreen: the asynchronous voice. I argue that the diva is a cultural type defined by the elaboration of a space of feminine reverie rooted in ideas about the female voice. This distinction can be traced back to the diva's origins in a series of two-soprano duets in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The diva's original "doubleness" is the source of her allure, permitting the spectacle of intra-feminine desire that is also figured in Western culture as "duplicitous" — sumptuous, yet sinister. Furthermore, the diva's challenge to cinema's traditional aim of suturing a viewer into a seamless world over which they have the illusion of mastery is rooted in her origins as a figure of feminine doubling.

In his article, "Gautier's Diva," from the 2012 collection, *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press), music scholar J.Q. Davies writes of the historical moment when Théophile Gautier and his circle first dubbed certain prima donnas "divas" in tandem with a vogue for two-soprano duets in the late 1820s (Davies "Gautier's Diva" 128). Although the term appeared a few years prior, it came into more regular currency in connection with a series of concerts given in Paris and London in 1829 by Maria Malibran, the fiery Spaniard, and Henriette Sontag, a fair German. These two powerhouse singers were lauded for their intimate and soaring duets, featuring close harmonies from *bel canto* operas such as *Tancredi* and *Semiramide* (Davies *Romantic Anatomies* 78-82). Everyone who was anyone saw them, and they were the hit of the cultural season (Davies *Romantic Anatomies* 78). The cultural journal *The Atheneum* wrote the following review of the Sontag and Malibran concerts in 1829:

Nothing can exceed the sweetness of the union of these two voices, their ornaments and variations are like the flights of mated birds; their wings are spread together and twinkle in the air — they rise or sink, and float here and there, in circles or angles, or straight onwards; but still inseparable at first, their pinions keeping the same aerial track, their bodies almost commingled. Their duets are like a succession of the sweetest of earthly sounds heard simultaneously with their echoes, and, in the minute cadences and florid interpolations, the effect of these quick reverberations is almost miraculous. (Davies *Romantic Anatomies* 79-80)

The sexiness of this review is not incidental. Not only were the two high voices of these duets conventionally "feminine" in timbre, but when Sontag and Malibran performed an aria such as "Giorno d'orrore" from *Semiramide* (Rossini, 1823) the stage picture they presented was also doubly, sumptuously feminine. Although this particular aria would normally feature one woman *en travesti*<sup>33</sup> on the operatic stage, *in concert* neither of them were "wearing the pants," so to speak. What this meant is that during the duet, which occurs at the point in the opera just after Queen Semiramide (Sontag) recognizes the hero, Arsace (Malibran) — a man she has tried to seduce and marry — as her long-lost son, the audience was treated to the spectacle of two

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<sup>33</sup> In Italian, "en travesti" literally means "in disguise," but is used in opera to refer to singers dressed as the opposite gender.

beautiful women, one light and one dark, gathering each other in their arms, their voices rising and falling with the peaks and valleys of the cabaletta, simultaneously indulging and fighting their attraction to one another.<sup>34</sup> This is the cultural moment to which the word “diva” was first attached. And it wasn’t just “Giorno d’orrore” — as Davies’ research shows, during this “dawn of the diva,” the double-feminine pairing was a part of nearly every major early diva moment (Davies “Gautier’s Diva” 123-146).<sup>35</sup>

What is important to understand from this early history is that “diva” was ascribed to a two-soprano sonority and spectacle, a double femininity that was understood as both alluring and decadent (Davies “Gautier’s Diva” 136-7). Indeed, these two-soprano duets replaced a tradition of soprano-contralto duets, wherein women with lower voices sung male roles *en travesti* opposite sopranos singing female roles in romance plots. As scholar Heather Hadlock writes of the two-soprano Norma-Adalgisa duet in the quintessential early diva opera, *Norma* (1831), by Vincenzo Bellini, “The once-conventional love scene for prima donna and female *musico* [contralto] was thus converted into an expression of women’s friendship and maternal concern, a situation more congenial to the emerging taste for theatrical realism (421)”. Davies elaborates, “As such these interactions were increasingly turned into two-soprano expressions of shared emotion: companionship, togetherness, rivalry, disagreement, mutual anger. In-parallel vocal displays had become rare, and when they did occur, they were no longer only redolent of amorous exchange but of ‘sameness,’ a doubled sense of womanhood — the effect of one voice sung from two mouths. In response to the new ‘realism,’ Hadlock implies, conventional operatic dramatizations of sexual love had to shift idiom or accept modification” (Davies “Gautier’s Diva” 137).

It is significant that the two-soprano duets (femme-femme) replaced an earlier convention of soprano-musico duets (femme-but) because, although they could be received as “sisterly,” they also inherited the earlier relation’s sexual charge. Regarding the casting of two beautiful soprano sisters, Giuditta and Giulia Grisi,<sup>36</sup> in the roles of Romeo and Juliet in Bellini’s *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* in Paris in 1833 (a moment hard on the heels of the Sontag-Malibran phenomenon), Davies writes of this new “aesthetic of sameness”:

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<sup>34</sup> The lyrics at this moment (“Giorno d’orrore”) include the following: “Day of horror! And of happiness! In your arms right now my heart forgets all the rigor of its terrible predicament. It is sweet for one who moans in anguish to share their burden and weep together, and find mercy in a sensitive heart...” (Rossi).

<sup>35</sup> In “Gautier’s Diva,” Davies list many examples of this doubling. Both Malibran and Giuditta Pasta sang the eponymous heroine of Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* (1831), the druid priestess who sacrifices herself for her people and prays to the moon for temperance in the quintessential diva aria, “Casta diva,” and shares soaring two-soprano duets with her close female friend, Adalgisa (123-5). Giuditta and Giulia Grisi were another set of “doubles,” sisters who duetted as Romeo and Juliet in Bellini’s *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* (1830). Giulia Grisi inspired Gautier’s 1837 short poem, “La Diva,” and both Grisi sisters seem to have inspired “Le Nid de Rossignols” (“The Nest of the Nightingales”), a short story published in 1833 that presages the spectacular death of Maria Malibran in 1836 (Davies “Gautier’s Diva,” 138-42). “Le Nid de Rossignols” tells the story of two sisters who are so musically gifted that the nightingales challenge them to a singing contest, but their voices are so preternaturally beautiful that they themselves turn into nightingales before ascending to the heavens and finding their places as stars in the night’s sky. Malibran (who also had a famous singing sister, Pauline Viardot — yet another “double”), was believed to have expired after sustaining a high trill for an implausible amount of time during another perilous duet with her rival, Maria Caradori-Allen in Mercadente’s *Andronico* (Davies “Gautier’s Diva,” 138-42).

<sup>36</sup> Gautier was in love with three Grisi women: the soprano, Giulia Grisi, whom he lusted after from afar, ballerina Carlotta Grisi, and cousin to Giulia (never reciprocated), for whom he conceived *Giselle*, and Carlotta’s sister, Ernesta, a famous contralto, who became Gautier’s lover and would remain with him for twenty years (Davies “Gautier’s Diva” 133).

For ‘realist’ critics what was at once disturbing and exciting about the parallel amorous aesthetic was the merging of female identities or mixing together of subjectivities that such vocal blending implied. The Parisian production, thus, harnessed the socially transgressive aspect of the idiom, while also appealing to a ‘union of identical sounds’ (as *Le Consitutionnel* called it) fortified on the basis of an innate familial, genetic or sisterly accord. In the Grisi staging, two singing subjects became ‘identical.’ At once exploiting the sexual energy of the sonority and deflecting moral attention to a performance of sisterhood, two singers effectively became one.

This is precisely what the Giulia-Giuditta partnership offered ‘for real’: a performative expression of the mutuality of sisters, an attempt perhaps to manage or excuse the illicit sexual charge that the two-soprano aesthetic had so forcefully acquired. Always in the background of these Grisi performances, in other words, was the ‘horrific’ Sontag-Malibran double-woman — the ‘diva’ of Gautier’s ‘Albertus’<sup>37</sup> — an explicit embodiment of feminine mutuality and power which, for the culture of the time, was both confusing and provocative, beautiful and threatening, alluring and duplicitous, irresistible and — in the best sense of the word — dangerous. (“Gautier’s Diva” 137-138)

The double-feminine pairing is a confounding one. In terms of sexuality, it lacks legibility from nearly every perspective. From a “straight” or mainstream vantage point, it is difficult to define this pairing as precisely “lesbian” (i.e. precisely “sexual”), and from a lesbian perspective, it is equally difficult to pin down, lacking the legibility that would come from any degree of “butch”-ness. Even if confidently categorized as “lesbian,” that, too, has its conceptual issues, namely the perception that lesbian sexuality is both “nothing” and “too much.” As Patricia White writes, “Discursively, lesbianism wavers between hypervisibility, as in the spectacle of female sexuality times two, and invisibility, as epitomized in Queen Victoria’s famous inability to imagine why lesbian sex would be criminalized, given her inability to imagine lesbian sex,” (White “Sketchy Lesbians” 10). In other words, a doubly feminine sexuality is barely perceptible because culturally (and often legally), the idea of “sex” is inconceivable without a phallus, a lack which is only emphasized by the dearth of “butch”-ness in the diva scene, the absence of a “phallic” female.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, two feminine-looking women on display — particularly in situations as tinged with sexuality as the early operatic diva duets — is double the fodder for the public gaze, whose primary object is the spectacle of the female body.

And yet, I hesitate to call the desire in which the diva dwells precisely lesbian. It certainly *can be* lesbian, as in the scene from *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001) that I will examine later in this chapter. But lesbian theory can help illuminate the diva not because the diva is a lesbian, necessarily, but because the *desire* expressed and embodied by the diva has much in common with lesbianism, particularly in the way it has been defined and, more importantly, *undefined* in the cultural imagination. This has everything to do with the ways we understand and misunderstand feminine desire, and tend to be confounded by its operation outside its relation to a masculine term. I use “feminine” instead of “female” here because I understand the diva position as open to all genders, as long as the subject chooses — in that moment, in that pose, in that performance, on that night — the feminine *position*, which has everything to do with desire,

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<sup>37</sup> Gautier wrote a long poem called “Albertus” about a beautiful witch who is really an old hag in disguise, containing explicit references to Sontag and Malibran (Gautier “Albertus” 217-79).

<sup>38</sup> See Terry Castle’s “A Polemical Introduction; or, The Ghost of Garbo” (1-19) in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) for more on lesbian “invisibility.”

but very little to do with object choice. For instance, I refute Thomas Waugh's concept of the "diva syndrome" in *Hard to Imagine* (1996) in which he posits that gay men identify with flamboyant women specifically so that they can live vicariously through narratives that emphasize their shared male object choice (109).<sup>39</sup> The aspect of this theory that I most take issue with is the idea that gay men love divas because both gay men and divas love men. Object choice has nothing to do with it, because, as I hope to show, the diva's foremost "object" of desire is usually not a man. The "diva syndrome" hypothesis is further complicated by the fact that divas are equally (if less famously) beloved by lesbians.<sup>40</sup> Instead, I argue that what divas and many gay men often have in common is not their mutual love of men, but their occupation of a feminine position, which is a *cultural position* that has nothing to do with actual sexual positions or preferences, and everything to do with where one understands or places oneself in terms of power in the culture. What a closer look at the diva can show us is that femininity does not equal passivity. So "diva" is open to all, but I do want to emphasize that because of its vital ideological and historical links to ideas about femininity, it is a pose that has been largely defined by the historical positions, experiences, and strategies of women.

I argue that "diva" is the elaboration and performance of feminine desire that is not dependent upon, and usually makes little or no reference to, masculine desire or reciprocation inside the heterosexual couple form. The reciprocal relationships of the diva's desire are found, instead, in the creativity, inspiration, and sensual excitement generated by its answer either in the mirror (the famous diva narcissism — an autoerotic multiplication), or in another feminine presence: the "double" provided by a professional rival, mentor/mentee, or a female lover. Is this lesbian? Sometimes, but not necessarily. But it is most definitely *queer*, if by queer we mean desire that is *askew*<sup>41</sup> of normative aims and expressions. Wayne Koestenbaum's explanation of the term explicitly includes this doubleness. He sees *queer* as "an illogical stab of doubt, the sensation of wavering between two interpretations — a hesitation that marks [...] the horror that comes from not being able to explain away uncanny doubleness" (*Double Talk* 147).

Davies' account of the Sontag-Malibran duets and Gautier's circle, published in 2012, is the first to address the relation between the diva and the two-soprano duets, but the rendering of a double or multiple femininity has been a continuous, if ignored and under-theorized, trope of the diva on film. In cinema, the diva "doubling" often results in a sinister *asynchronicity*. The uncanny "effect of one voice sung from two mouths" that troubled nineteenth century Parisian opera critics continues to trouble cinema, which stages the unfathomable origins of the female voice as connected to a dangerous and duplicitous double feminine pairing. Rotating pairs of feminine figures in Werner Schroeter's experimental *The Death of Maria Malibran* (1972) are mouthing lyrics that are out-of-synch with the soundtrack; in *Mulholland Drive*, the voice of

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<sup>39</sup> Waugh calls the "diva syndrome": a "homoerotic cultural tradition: gay male identification with the subjectivity of the (heterosexual) heroine, whether in fashion or arts photography, whether in Beatonesque decorativeness or in her grand operatic desire for the hero . . . Enough to say that a diffuse polysexual eroticism, situated beyond gender difference, enters the lavish cinematic vehicles of the diva syndrome, both in the indulgent histrionics of thwarted passion and in the gay male appropriation of the female gaze upon her male love object" (109).

<sup>40</sup> Work by Terry Castle ("In Praise of Birgitte Fassbender"), Elizabeth Wood ("Sapponics"), and Ann Pellegrini ("Unnatural Affinities") attests to lesbian investment in divas, and some literary examples include lesbian author Willa Cather's *Song of the Lark* (1915), which was inspired by opera diva Olive Fremstad, a diva who also moved Marcia Davenport to write *Of Lena Geyer* (1936) (Wood "Sapponics," 33), a novel which features a close relationship between a famous diva and her female secretary, which has queer undertones.

<sup>41</sup> Fabio Cleto writes that "...queer seems to have entered the English language through the queer gates of the Elizabethan underworld (...) in the eighteenth century with the value of *oblique, bent, twisted, crooked*" (12).

Rebekah Del Rio continues to sing "Llorando" (a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying") even after her body has collapsed motionless on the floor, a scene that plays out before a diegetic audience of which Naomi Watts and Laura Harring, as a lesbian couple with matching wigs (more doubles), are a part; in *Callas Forever* (Zeffirelli, 2002), the older and younger Callas are, in a sense, both present in a scene where Fanny Ardant as the older Callas tries and fails to produce the voice of her youth while lip-synching to her old recordings. These scenes of the doubled diva foreground cinema's promise of delivering the diva in a "unified" spectatorial experience, and stage its ultimate failure to do so.

### **Troubling the Machine**

The specificity of the diva can be illuminated by contrasting her to the femme fatale, another modern cultural type. In her book, *Femmes Fatales*, Mary Ann Doane writes, Sexuality becomes the site of questions about what can and cannot be known. This imbrication of knowledge and sexuality, of epistemophilia and scopophilia, has crucial implications for the representation of sexual difference in a variety of discourses — literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, the cinema. Both cinematic and theoretical claims to truth about women rely to a striking extent on judgements about vision and its stability or instability. Although her origins are literary and pictorial, the femme fatale has a special relevance in cinematic representation, particularly that of Hollywood insofar as it appeals to the visible as the ground of its production of truth. (1)

In many ways, the femme fatale is the most thoroughly theorized figure in film studies.<sup>42</sup> Laura Mulvey's touchstone work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," roots its analysis of the "male gaze" in the figure of the femme fatale, a glittering and unknowable object of desire, who nonetheless promises knowledge: of her body, her history, her motives. Cinema usually makes good on this promise, and most femmes fatales have a moment of revelation where they expose their desires and motivations (usually money or power). And while the femme fatale is revealed to us at the level of plot and at the level of the body (she is on display), what is not "revealed" or unmasked by the femme fatale is the cinematic apparatus, itself. In fact, the femme fatale is completely in league with conventional cinema, the ultimate expression of "an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (843), as Mulvey would term it.

Doane reinforces this point in her analysis of the film, *La signora di tutti* (1934), an Italian film by Max Ophuls about the life of a movie star, featuring Isa Miranda. There is some potential confusion here because Doane refers to Miranda's character as a *diva*,<sup>43</sup> but "diva" is a muddled term in Italian film studies, used to mean just about any glamorous female star. In my analysis, Miranda's character in this film is actually more of a femme fatale, possessing an

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<sup>42</sup> See E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1978); Nicholas Christopher's *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Owl, 1998); Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993); Bosley Crowther's *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror* (London: Virgin, 1990); Foster Hirsch's *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (New York: Barnes, 1981); Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> In the context of Italian film, *diva* has a more expansive definition and is often applied to nearly any glamorous leading actor. This is further confused by the fact that in Italian film studies, *diva* has also come to refer specifically to the stars of certain silent cinema melodramas made between 1918-1922, starring actors such as Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, and Pina Menichelli, and influenced by the work and aesthetic of Gabriele d'Annunzio. This confusion is one of the reasons that we need a greater awareness of the history and meaning of the term! Isa Miranda is more accurately described as "femme fatale" which Doane recognizes implicitly by including her chapter on *La Signora di tutti* in her book on the femme fatale.

unknowable allure and a beautiful appearance, bringing doom to those who fall for her charms, lacking an interior life (she motivates the plot, but is given few moments of reverie or reflection that gives us access to her thoughts), and expressing a complicity with the cinematic apparatus. Doane also implicitly recognizes Miranda as a femme fatale by including *La Signora di tutti* in a chapter in her book on the femme fatale. In her analysis of Miranda's character, Doane writes:

The *diva* [femme fatale], in the very predictability of the doom she incarnates, the mechanicity of her effects, embodies a view of history and temporality which is consonant with the era of mechanical reproduction. For all her allure, her aura, her eroticism, the *diva* [femme fatale] is a machine, a narrative machine. Ophuls perhaps perceives this in his recourse to a framing device in which the image of the woman is a function of the machine (the shots in which posters roll off the assembly line). The ostensible desire here may very well be to demonstrate the contrast between the commodified image of the star and the 'real' woman of the personal melodrama, but the result is the opposite insofar as the woman — as *diva* [femme fatale] — is shown to have an affinity with the machine. (138)

This, to me, is one of the central differences between a diva, as I define the type, and a femme fatale, as defined by Doane and Mulvey. The femme fatale is complicit in mainstream narrative cinema's framing of women as objects of desire (and, therefore, punishment and control). In fact, she is the apotheosis of this aim! Strategies of continuity editing and conventional cinematography work to frame the femme fatale as a tantalizing object, solidifying the cinematic idea of "woman" as something to be investigated and possessed. The diva, on the other hand, troubles the machine. As I will show via the trope of the asynchronous voice, the diva may promise presence, but it is a promise that cinema cannot make good on. And when this impossible presence is not being smoothed over by strategies of melodrama and music, often, the diva's appearance will expose cinema's lack, rending the marriage between sound and image, and exposing the illusory unity engendered by conventional narrative cinema as a lie.

The difference between the femme fatale and the diva is rooted in the difference between the body and the voice. This is complicated because the voice is, in many ways, *of* the body, encouraging the fantasy that we might "know" the woman's voice as we might "know" the body of the femme fatale. But before I discuss what is unique to the voice, I will explain its affinity with the body, and how it often promises an embodied expression of a unique subjectivity that makes itself available for investigation.

### **Song of the Body**

The idea that women's voices yield knowledge of women's bodies is ancient. Anne Carson's influential article, "The Gender of Sound" (1992), argues that these associations date far back in Western culture. She cites numerous texts from the ancient Western world that characterize the female voice as "bad to hear." She traces these attitudes back to archaic and classical Greece, and demonstrates the way that Greek women were discouraged from speaking — or making sounds — in public (128-9). She writes,

Greek women of the archaic and classical periods were not encouraged to pour forth unregulated cries of any kind within the civic space of the polis or within earshot of men. Indeed, masculinity in such a culture defines itself by its different use of sound. Verbal continence is an essential feature of the masculine virtue of *sophrosyne* ('prudence, soundness of mind, moderation, temperance, self-control') that organizes most patriarchal

thinking on ethical or emotional matters. Woman as a species is frequently said to lack the ordering principle of *sophrosyne*. (126)

The theme of the “leaky,” “incontinent” female body, out of which the voice was just one more uncontainable substance that flowed, is one that recurs throughout classical literature, demonstrating that the 19<sup>th</sup> century associations between voice and female sexuality, voice and female interiority, and voice and the female body were nothing new. Carson writes that in both ancient Greece and Rome, men believed that they could tell details about a woman’s sexual life and history (whether or not she was a virgin, if she was menstruating, etc.) simply by hearing her voice (129). Carson also notes the existence of a series of statues from 4<sup>th</sup> century Asia Minor that make the connection undeniable: these statues consisted of nothing but the “two mouths” of women, featuring the “upper mouth” on the bottom and the “lower mouth” — alarmingly — on the top (135). These statues are associated with a mythical figure called Baubo, an old woman famous for leading the obscene, but useful, ritual gesture of lifting up one’s skirt and shouting obscenities to scare away enemies. Baubo’s name is synonymous with the term for “uterus” in ancient Greek, thus completing the circuit between female voice and sexuality (135).

Aside from its association with female interiority, the female voice also signaled a disturbing *exteriority*, an uncontainable wildness outside the Greek city’s walls. Female voices were discouraged in public, but when they *were* heard, they were most associated with the *ololyga*, a “eulogy sound” made by women in rituals of mourning (125). The *ololyga* was an onomatopoeic sound with no specific referent, reflecting the status of the female voice as outside *logos*. And although the *ololyga* served a ritual purpose, it was not always “contained.” In fact, the definition of the sound seems to depend upon its status as “out of bounds,” a disturbing howl from the wilderness. Carson writes of these eulogizing exclamations:

These words do not signify anything except their own sound. The sound represents a cry of either intense pleasure or intense pain. To utter such cries is a specialized female function. [...] No man would make such a sound. No proper civic space would contain it unregulated. The female festivals in which such ritual cries were heard were generally not permitted to be held within the city limits but were relegated to suburban areas like the mountains, the beach or the rooftops of houses where women could disport themselves without contaminating the ears or civic space of men. (125)

Intriguingly, in this description, the idea of women’s voices as a fearful synecdoche for women’s sexuality seems most intense when *multiple* women relate to each other at once. In other words, the threat depends upon more than one voice. Thus, the female voice in antiquity signifies not only the interior of the female body, it also serves as a reminder that women together give voice to uncontainable terrors, an uncivilized and uncivilizable animal nature, shrieking outside the city walls. Like the lesbian relation in the modern cultural imagination, women together in antiquity envoice things that are inarticulable and beyond language, nonsense forms. But this “nonsense” is as powerful and disturbing as the wilderness that perpetually threatens the *sophrosyne* virtues of civilization in the Western imagination.

There’s a downside to being cast as the “natural,” of course, which is that one is reduced to a body. With the emergence of the diva in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of singing became much more concerned with embodiment than it had been in previous centuries. The diva would come to exemplify the idea of the singing voice as “grainy, powerful, bodily and individual” (Davies “Veluti” 247). She was lauded as a great wonder of nature: “a Pythoness expanding with inspiration... her very impatience of the [orchestral] accompaniment shows the fullness and force of her conceptions, anxious for melodious birth,” wrote one reviewer of the soprano

Angelica Catalani in 1829 (Davies *Romantic Anatomies* 18). Here the equation of the female voice with the female body is grounded in a metaphor that reaffirms a closeness to nature, and links the production of sound to procreation.

Marco Beghelli writes an eloquent description of a notion that became popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that of the singing voice as an “acoustic exhibition of embodiment”:

The emission of song is, in and of itself, the acoustic exhibition of embodiment. It is not a sound that comes from a mechanical instrument; rather, it is produced by the very body of the singer, the corporeal flux that emerges from the most hidden cavities, and which determines its particular ‘grain’ ...; not a generic timbre, codified in advance by technical instruments, but rather a peculiar, elusive, highly individualized, acoustic image of a specific embodiment. (“*Erotismo canoro*” 125)<sup>44</sup>

This passage highlights an understanding of the uniqueness of each voice as linked to the uniqueness of each body.<sup>45</sup> In *Hard Core* (1989), her study of moving image pornography, Linda Williams understands the invention of photography and cinema as part of a scientific mode that seeks confession, a modern regime of thought and inquiry that strives to uncover the “truths” of the body and the psyche. Following Michel Foucault on the importance of “confession” to the history of sexuality, Williams argues that these “techniques of confession ... are applied first and foremost to female bodies” (48). This scientific mode of confession also informed the medical discourse surrounding the voice, and led to the development of the laryngoscope and other instruments that allowed one to see the vocal apparatus. In fact, singing teacher Manuel Garcia, father of the great diva Maria Malibran, was the first to view the glottis and larynx of a living human (Koestenbaum 158-60). The organs of vocal production have often been linked with the female genitalia due not only to their similarly labial appearance, but also the fact that they are hidden from view, producing a desire to *see* them. But to see a larynx or a glottis is not to see a voice. Similarly, Williams suggests that the central desire of pornography is its “(impossible) attempt to capture visually the frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured” (50). Like the “mystery” of the female body manifest in the female orgasm, the voice, especially the voice of the diva, is an object of desire that inspires technological investigation that will never produce absolute knowledge.

“Now that vocal sounds are heard as a form of evidence, a desire to identify — a hermeneutic curiosity — begins to characterize their reception” (31), writes Davies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the diva, that curiosity begins in the throat, and it was her virtuosity — as expressed in a style far more individual and “embodied” than that of the castrato, the prized operatic voice type which preceded her — which gave rise to this curiosity. “Virtuosity — and here the stock nineteenth-century operatic heroine comes to mind,” writes Davies, “only added to the vivacity of the preternatural cry. The throat, in other words, was ‘revealed’ to have a sexual density proper to its bio-evolutionary function. More than any nonreproductive body part, it was heavily sexual” (31). Here Davies’ recap of 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes towards female virtuosity seems very akin to Carson’s discussion of the ideas about the female voice in antiquity: that “preternatural

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<sup>44</sup> Translation by Adriana Cavarero in *For More Than One Voice* (2005) (117).

<sup>45</sup> In *Romantic Anatomies of Performance*, Davies emphasizes an opposing view, namely that bodies are trained to produce meaning. In other words, there is not one primordial “truth” of a body which is simply “performed,” but the body is, instead, practiced, rehearsed, and trained into producing meaning (5-6). Davies’ claim supports Barthes’ argument in “The Grain of the Voice,” because for Barthes the “grain” is linked to language, culture (but not the mass-produced kind, the particular kind) – the *grain* is the embodiment of language, of a kind of “training,” but language without its first-level signification.

cry,” something the ancients sought to keep at bay, was the very thing the decadent Romantics would come to fetishize.

As these descriptions make evident, discourse on the diva’s embodied voice was heavily gendered. However, as Davies’ work on tenors Gilbert-Louis Duprez and Adolphe Nourrit shows, men were not excluded from the 19<sup>th</sup> century trend of thinking voice as body, but women were its most dramatic and vivid obsession (*Romantic Anatomies* 123-151). By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the diva had become the centerpiece of the operatic repertoire: the great roles were now being written for female sopranos, and a corporeal femininity was at the heart of their conception. This was the Age of Romanticism, after all, a time that emphasized the importance of “natural,” inborn differences (individualistic, nationalistic, racial, gendered, etc.) (Davies *Romantic Anatomies* 18), and the unruly female body as expressed by the unruly female voice became the emblem of that age. As Davies argues, “What becomes fascinating for many an audience, no matter who the singer, is to extrapolate backward, from the sonority heard to the situation of the expressive body that generated it” (31). In other words, audiences sought to read backwards from sonority to identity — they began *listening* for “essence.”

Davies’ work on the transition from the reign of the castrati to the reign of the diva in opera shows that earlier conceptions of the singing voice were far less attached to notions of embodiment. This was due to both the different goals of the work of the voice in earlier eras of opera, as well as to the growing importance of the classification of bodies and gender types in the Victorian imagination. The castrati, the male super-star singers of the first two centuries of opera, whose testicles were removed before puberty in order to preserve their soprano voices, were in fact prized for the *disembodied* quality of their voices.<sup>46</sup> This seems counterintuitive, particularly since the bodily price paid by the castrati for their fame seems to bring lurid questions of corporeality to the fore. But even though the castrati were certainly objects of fascination (and titillation), their voices were not understood as embodied expressions of individuality, but as empty vessels which served the heroic messages of music itself. In fact, “emptiness” or “nothingness” are words that surface time and again in relation to the castrati: “He in no way expressed himself or some inner sex, impulse, or feeling. Rather, he expressed others’ feeling, or, more widely, that economy of universal emotions. To be all, to acquire all, one must first make oneself nothing” (*Romantic Anatomies* 20), writes Davies of the castrato. In other words, the castrato is a creature of the Enlightenment — a vessel who sacrificed his body in order to voice the higher and absolute ideals expressed in the music of his time. But as the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on and gender roles became more rigid as a consequence of the drive to categorize and catalogue the “natural” world, the castrato could no longer be accommodated in the Western imagination. Davies marks the decade of the 1820s as the “twilight of the castrato,” and the attendant rise of the diva. He cites a review of the castrato Paolo Pergetti from the British publication *Musical World* at the late date of 1844 that, in many ways, exemplifies the inability to make sense of the figure. “Only consonants could do Pergetti’s performance justice,” writes the reviewer, “Sbgrdml-d-vxgspl-tdpmbg-qz” (Davies “Veluti” 19). This nonsense string of consonants — all empty logos at the level of signifier, without a signified — is almost the

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<sup>46</sup> In his article, “Veluti In Speculum: The Twilight of the Castrato” (2005), Davies writes: It was not for nothing that British critics made ironic reference to Cipriani’s motto, still eccentrically displayed above the Covent Garden stage when they brought the last operatic castrato into question: ‘Veluti in speculum,’ literally ‘as in a mirror’. Even in the 1820 it was understood that the singer-actor had honed his art precisely in order to ‘mirror’ Truth. All in all the singer in ideal form — Velluti at his best — was the blank that signifies, inviting his audience always and everywhere to inscribe their passions back on him. The perfect reflection of every figure and every form, Velluti echoed those six sharply defined Cartesian emotions — wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness — without distortion” (280).

inverse of the diva, who would also fail to signify, but for different reasons. While the castrato was mired in letters, in the empty ruins of a language that no longer meant what it said, the diva was excluded from (or perhaps exceeded), the notion of language itself.

### **Beyond Logos**

While the ancient Greeks feared, and sought to contain, the female voice for singing the uncivilized song of the body and the wilderness, 19<sup>th</sup> century opera audiences lauded the voice of the diva for the very same qualities. And while the ancients certainly meant to exclude women's voices from the public sphere, to banish them from logos, and, therefore, from specific meaning, one could argue that this very position outside language afforded the 19<sup>th</sup> century diva a degree of freedom.

The idea of the female voice as "beyond language" is a persistent one. In her book, *For More Than One Voice* (2005), Angela Cavarero contends that the idea of song itself in Western thought is embodied, and, specifically, female-bodied: "song is heard as naturally feminine, just as speech is naturally masculine" (118). Stanley Cavell in his chapter on opera in *The Pitch of Philosophy* (1995), echoes this idea, citing the female operatic voice, in particular, as exemplifying that which exceeds language (141). As Cavell intimates, and Cavarero rightly notes, the female voice as exemplified by the prima donna is the "fulcrum" of nineteenth-century opera" (122), and opera, for Cavarero, is "essentially the sublime working of the human voice, which conquers the meaning of words as well as the visible realm of representation" (121). Roland Barthes, too, in his famous essay, "The Grain of the Voice," acknowledges the usurpation of language by voice in opera, and urges readers to disregard opera in his discussion of the "grain," which he defines as *the encounter between a language and a voice*. Opera is useless in pondering this encounter because "opera," he writes, "is a genre in which the voice has gone over in its entirety to dramatic expressivity, a voice with a grain which little signifies" (181).

While many of these thinkers understand voice as conquering language, *overruling* and overpowering it, launching expression into an inarticulate sublime, there is an equally persistent view of the voice-beyond-language as sinister and fearful, dating at least as far back as Plato's mistrust of music in *The Republic*. Plato cautioned that music should adhere to strict rules, else risk collapsing society. His advice was that "The music and rhythm must follow the *speech* [my emphasis]" (Dolar 44), even going so far as to decry wind instruments, such as the flute, as the least desirable because one cannot speak and play them at the same time, disparaging them as "feminine" for this emancipation from the word (Dolar 46). This mistrust of music beyond the word continued in the Christian tradition. As Mladen Dolar writes in *A Voice and Nothing More*, the "codification of sacred music [...] ultimately always took the form of confining the voice to the letter" (48). Yet, no less a Christian than St. Augustine continued to wrestle with the place of the voice in sacred music, valuing its unique ability to evoke the divine, but on guard against its inherent carnality. Dolar characterizes Augustine's views thus: "music is both what elevates the soul to divinity and a sin, *delectatio carnis*. It presents carnality at its most insidious, since in music it seems liberated from materiality; the voice is both the subtlest and the most perfidious form of the flesh" (48). A particular case of interest for Augustine was the *iubilus* ("Alleluia"), a passage of sung sacred music that defied "the general principle of one syllable to one note" (Dolar 48-9). Surprisingly, Augustine lauded the power of these moments of vocal exhibitionism to express "what cannot be expressed by words," endorsing their divine power with the query, "And to whom does this jubilation pertain, if not to the ineffable God?" (Dolar 49).

Yet, the trouble persisted, and new problems were introduced by polyphony (the simultaneous singing of more than one voice not in unison, but on different notes of a single chord), and chromatics (the singing of notes between A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, such as B flat, etc.), for the usual reason that the text would become unintelligible. As Dolar explains, “Each new musical invention had devastating effects and was immediately seen, in a very Platonic manner, as a road to moral ruin” (49). Dolar cites among the concerned, Pope John XXII in 1324 and the 16th century Council of Trent, both of which emphasized the importance of the intelligibility of the word in singing, in order to “pin down the voice to the letter, to limit its disruptive force, to dissipate its inherent ambiguity” (49).

Ultimately, it is this ambiguity that characterizes the voice, its relation to language and representation, and its feminization. As Dolar contends, “There is no assurance or transparency to be found in the voice — quite the contrary, the voice undermines any certainty and any establishment of a firm sense. The voice is boundless, warrantless, and — no coincidence — on the side of woman” (50-51).

Perhaps the 19<sup>th</sup> century re-valued the out-of-bounds associations of the female voice in the form of the diva because of the destabilization wrought by forces of modernization throughout Europe and elsewhere. In *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell makes the connection between opera and a general crisis of meaning in the Western world. He tracks this crisis in terms of a burgeoning *skepticism* which he describes as “the discovery of the fact that we cannot achieve certainty of existence” (138), and dates it to roughly the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the historical period that saw the birth of opera as we know it.<sup>47</sup> Cavell understands this skepticism as “bound up with the fate of language, expressed as the condition of the human voice, its being always before and beyond itself. [...] in which conditions of a catastrophe of human understanding came together, in which, for example, language as such comes to seem incapable of representing the world” (138-9). Significantly, although he is writing about opera in general, he chooses the figure of the *female* singer — the diva — to represent this crisis. What better figure, after all, to epitomize grandly expressive acts that seem to be full of meaning, yet have difficulty signifying anything precise.

Dolar recognizes the voice’s role in a similar fantasy, that of an eloquent pre-linguistic utterance. He writes, “The voice is endowed with profundity: by not meaning anything, it appears to mean more than mere words, it becomes the bearer of some unfathomable originary meaning which, supposedly, got lost with language” (31). Dolar names this imagined profundity “the core of a fantasy that the singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order” (31). Yet, this fantasy is impossible and paradoxical because “it is only through language that there is voice, and music exists only for a speaking being” (31). Still, there is a sense that there is something *more* to the voice beyond its function as purveyor of language, something it gives us which is beyond language, and lingers as a “remainder” (36), argues Dolar. This “remainder” is what’s left when one tries to parse the voice as either the province of language or the body. “What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor the body” (73), says Dolar. The sense of “remainder” that the voice inspires is also related to its operation within a linguistic structure of difference, confounding the differential logics of psychoanalytic theory with its insistent presence. “The differential logic always refers to absence,” writes Dolar, “while the voice seems to embody a presence” (36). This mythical presence is what cinema strives to deliver in its presentation of the diva onscreen, but of which it must always fall short.

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<sup>47</sup> Cavell and Cavarero and many others mark this beginning with Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* (1607).

### **The Death of Maria Malibran: Silencing the fantasy of non-differentiation**

In his discussion of the fantasy that the “singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture,” Dolar neglects to note the gender of this voice. But many scholars of sound on film, from Walter Murch (Chion vii-viii) to Doane (Voice in Cinema 44) to Kaja Silverman (84-5), have expounded on the psychoanalytic fantasy of “non-differentiation” promised by the female voice, in particular. The source of this fantasy is the idea of the voice of the mother. According to psychoanalytic theories, the mother’s voice harkens to a time before the child understands itself as a separate being, either in utero, or simply a time in early infancy before the child understands itself as a subject, and, therefore, as discontinuous, separate, and beleaguered by lack and desire.

But I think that the diva onscreen, particularly in her radically asynchronous moments, can challenge the fantasy of regression promised by the female voice, although critics tend to cling to it. The key to resisting the regressive fantasy of the pre-symbolic maternal voice is rooted in the Sontag-Malibran duets and their legacy of feminine doubling. Werner Schroeter’s 1972 avant-garde masterpiece, *The Death of Maria Malibran*, stages how the feminine doubling at the root of the diva troubles expectations of “unity” in cinema, and shows how the female voice can open a space to something other than the promise of pre-linguistic, pre-civilized fusion with the mother, which is, after all, just another way of reducing women to a body.

Schroeter, one of the most soaring avant-garde talents of the post-1968 era, devoted much of his career to elaborating his obsession with the operatic art form, including as a director of operas on stage.<sup>48</sup> A super-fan of opera diva Maria Callas (about whom he made the film *Eika Katappa*, 1969), his films evince a queer sensibility and often reference opera or include operatic arias and elaborate a swooning, hysterical relation to the form that can be taken as both overwhelmingly opulent in its devotion, and as camp. Schroeter frequently deals in sumptuous images featuring hyper-saturated color, and his actors strike swooning poses in self-conscious series of melodramatic tableaux. Although Amos Vogel, upon seeing *The Death of Maria Malibran*, claimed that, “One cannot ‘explain’ Schroeter’s work, other than recognize his debunking of opera as a metaphorical rejection of bourgeois society” (70), it is difficult to agree with this assessment, especially in light of Schroeter’s later opera-centric filmic output, and his time spent directing opera on the stage. In *The Death of Maria Malibran*, it is not really opera that Schroeter is debunking, but cinema.

The film is decidedly odd, if also transcendent, and there is certainly a tongue-in-cheek quality to it. There is no narrative per se, but a recurrent motif is that of two feminine figures – sometimes two women, sometimes one woman and one drag queen, sometimes two drag queens — facing each other in tight close-up, mouthing dialogue or lyrics to a soundtrack of operatic arias or famous works of theater, such as *Hamlet*, out of synch. The title of the film references the great 19<sup>th</sup> century opera singer, Maria Malibran, to whom, in her duets with Henriette Sontag, the term “diva” first adhered. Significantly, Malibran was alleged to have died after singing a spirited duet with her rival, Maria Caradori-Allen, in Mercadente’s *Andronico* (Davies “Gautier’s Diva” 138-42). Indeed, one is tempted to understand the obsessive doubles featured in the film in terms of Malibran’s last duet, or perhaps as an expression of her famous coupling with Sontag on the concert stage. No matter the origins of Schroeter’s vision, the

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<sup>48</sup> For an overview of Schroeter’s career, see Ulrick Sieglor’s “Excess and Yearning: The Operatic Work of Schroeter’s Cinema” (1994) and “divinerapture” (2012).

primary relation of the characters is that of a doubled femininity, which stages a disconnect between the image and the soundtrack.

At a basic level, the disruption of the expectation that sound will be matched to image is a disruption of the feeling of unity sought by mainstream narrative film. In general, the idea of “unity” is a cornerstone concept in the theorization of pleasure in film studies, as well as music studies. Theorists such as Baudry and Metz believed that the pleasure of dominant cinema lay in the simulation of a unifying experience, the pleasure of the omniscient eye of the camera, which is analogous to the fetishizing gaze which staves off “lack” (Mulvey) (produced by an understanding of sexual difference), which is ensured, in part, by the synchronization of sound and image. In his essay, “The Romantic Song,” Roland Barthes writes of the way that the pleasure of listening to romantic music (the era of the diva), “utters this song of the natural body: it is a music which has a meaning only if I can always sing it, in myself, in my body [...] For *to sing*, in the romantic sense, is this: fantasmatically to enjoy my unified body” (*The Responsibility of Forms* 288). Therefore, in many influential theoretical conceptions, the expectations of both the music listener and the cinematic spectator are similar in their desire for the feeling of unity.

The unexplained and unapologetic employment of asynchronicity in *The Death of Maria Malibran* is one way to confidently categorize it as avant-garde—it does not seek to lull with a feeling of wholeness and mastery, as does traditional cinema. One can interpret the asynchronicity as an attempt to create pathos, as Ulrike Sieghlor does when he argues that in this film, “non-harmonization between image and sound (even further compounded by the fragmentary structure of the respective tracks), conveys the painfully nostalgic yearnings that can find no fulfillment, thereby death becomes a kind of liberation” (211). The film certainly produces nostalgia and longing. Aside from the pull of the music, the actors often move at an agonizingly slow pace, leaning into almost-kisses in the tight close-ups, kisses that never quite become passionate, but simply rest as one set of lips upon another, denying complete satisfaction.

But “death” in this film, is difficult to define. From the title, one would expect to witness the death of Maria Malibran. But “Maria” is a role occupied by at least two different actors in this film. The Warhol superstar, Candy Darling, appears in different guises throughout and, at points, is referred to as “Maria,” but so is Magdalena Montezuma, who also takes on several different personae throughout the film. This interchangeability is highlighted when Anette Tirier as a red head and Montezuma as a brunette (the brunette is sometimes referred to as “Maria”) face each other and have the following exchange: “I am a singer, you, too?,” asks the brunette. “I am a singer, too,” replies the redhead. Indeed, these two are later seen performing a duet, from one of the operas famously included in the Sontag-Malibran concerts (“Alle piu calde immagini” from Rossini’s *Semiramide*). But the point of this exchange, and of the interchangeability of the actors and the “roles,” is that, in this film, *everyone is a singer*, and their presences engender asynchronicity.

*The Death of Maria Malibran* is non-narrative, but there are several threads of distinctive story arcs that can be followed, and one of those arcs explicitly deals with the tension between sight and sound. The film begins with an image of blood trickling from actor Christine Kaufmann’s eye, presumably having just been stabbed by the knife in the frame. There is a matching image near the end where Montezuma as “Maria” faints away as blood trickles out of her mouth. Thus, sight and sound or image and voice are set up as opposed, but related terms.

Because of the asynchronicity and because of the “death” in this film, it seems clear that the characters, “singers,” all, will never find satisfaction. Sieghlor argues, “Incoherence becomes

a means to convey the psychic toll which this regressive movement towards non-differentiation entails,” (212), but I am unconvinced that this film evokes a fantasy of regression. I agree with Sieglor that the asynchronicity of the image and soundtrack produces nostalgia and pathos by denying a feeling of unity, by being “never together”.<sup>49</sup> But I am not so sure that “death” in this film is the *liebestod* that Sieghlor imagines because the film uses several strategies to keep us from wallowing in these melancholy sentiments. The actors’ performances are often hilariously inept, and the camera sometimes whirls comically around them as they stumble across various landscapes, tripping over 19<sup>th</sup> century gowns, and striking melodramatic poses. Their wardrobe and hairstyles have no pretensions to historical accuracy (no single historical period is highlighted, but all are marked by some sense of “pastness”), and their makeup is characterized by hysterical blue eyeshadow, thin, penciled brows, and highly artificial lip lines. This hyperstylization at the level of costume, hair, and makeup is an extension of the film’s evocation of the theme of *tromp l’oeil*.

In one of the several settings to which the film frequently returns, “Maria Malibran,” played by Montezuma wearing a red 19<sup>th</sup> century gown, cavorts with various other characters in an outdoor area that looks like the courtyard of a castle. She spends a great deal of time in front of what appears to be a clearing in the woods, with a view looking out onto a river, but it eventually becomes apparent that, though she is outdoors, the “clearing” is actually a rather realistic-looking painting of a river overlook, painted on a theatrical backdrop, and hung among a cluster of trees. This theatrical backdrop features prominently in the film, and at least three “deaths” occur in front of it — that of a red-headed woman, a blonde youth, and the brunette Montezuma as “Maria Malibran,” herself. Perhaps the fact that this “fake” backdrop is highlighted, placed absurdly as it is in an outdoor setting, is what led Vogel to think that this film might be a “debunking” of opera’s “fakeness.” But *tromp l’oeil* has more in common with cinema than with opera. Opera has few pretensions to naturalism, but cinema is the form that “fools” the eye. Like the painted backdrop of nature in a natural setting, cinema-going could be understood as equally absurd: we walk down the street to the movie theater to watch other people onscreen do things like walk down the street to a movie theater. Cinema is an imitation of life in two dimensions, just like the painted backdrop.

The absurdity of cinema is highlighted comically again, after the final “death” of Maria Malibran (there have been several by this point), which is conveyed by a shot of Montezuma in the red dress having fainted away in front of the theatrical backdrop, as blood trickles out of her mouth. On one level, this may be an allusion to the legend around Malibran having “sung” herself to death after the duet with her rival.<sup>50</sup> But the key is what follows this scene: after “Maria” faints dead away, we see a shot of what, at first glance, appears to be a Romantic landscape of a small town by a river at sunset. But as the shot lingers, we see that the landscape is actually somewhat grim and industrial — there is a factory or refinery at the center of the town, not a castle, and the river looks dirty and polluted, the surrounding environment grim. Following the “death” of the heroine, the camera pans across this landscape, and the griminess of the scene alone would be enough to undermine the pathos, but the shot repeats — twice! Just as one may decide to squint and take in the pan of the sunset and accept it as some sort of gesture of

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<sup>49</sup> In “Even More Tears: Historical Time Theory of Melodrama” (in *Melodrama Unbound* 2018), Jane Gaines uses Louis Althusser’s theory of historical time and the idea that the past is the event that can never come again, using this idea of “temporal asymmetry,” or the idea that levels of historical time are “never together” to explain some of the pathos produced by melodrama (336).

<sup>50</sup> In actuality, Malibran died from injuries suffered after falling from a horse (FitzLyon 244).

transcendence, one is rudely interrupted by a jarring cut, and the shot begins all over again! Far from allowing the spectator to yearn nostalgically, Schroeter disrupts any potential feeling of unity or transcendence that the film might allow by frustrating expectations of coherence and continuity editing.

The film calls attention to the construct of editing, just as it calls attention to the construct of the soundtrack, which is not “naturally” matched to the image at all. As Doane writes, “Sound carries with it the potential risk of exposing the material heterogeneity of the medium; attempts to contain that risk surface in the language of the ideology of organic unity” (“Voice in Cinema” 35). The film features strategies that expose this very heterogeneity throughout. Doane cites a sound technician’s manual that makes the aim of conventional sound cinema clear: “one of the basic goals... [is] to make the screen look alive in the eyes of the audience” (Pozner 191).

But in *Audio/Vision*, Chion emphasizes that it is *cinema*, not life, that teaches us to look for an experience of “unity,” particularly at the level of sound and image. When we are disappointed that sound and image “don’t go together” onscreen, he writes, we forget that in concrete experience they often don’t “go together” either, as when we are surprised that certain voices come from certain bodies (97). He continues:

“Basically, this question of the unity of sound and image would have no importance if it didn’t turn out, through numerous theories, to be the very signifier of the question of human unity, cinematic unity, unity itself... It is not I but the cinema, that, via films like *Psycho* and *India Song*, tells us the impossible and desired meeting of sound and image can be an important thing. Strangely, the disjunctive and autonomist impulse that predominates in intellectual discourse on the question arises entirely from the unitary illusion we have described: the false unity this thinking denounces in the current cinema implicitly suggests a true unity existing elsewhere” (97).

I do not think that *The Death of Maria Malibran* is debunking the idea of “unity” overall, although it is certainly denying cinema’s pretensions to that concept. *Maria Malibran* exposes the cinematic apparatus not just for mechanical trickery, but also for trying to manufacture *presence*, and for coming up short. The implicit investment in presence in this film points to the very notion of “human unity” of which Chion would like us to remain suspicious. The multiple/double-femininity of “Maria Malibran” featured throughout the film stands for an unattainable presence to which cinema aspires, but which it fails to realize.

Again, the doubling and multiplicity of the feminine pairings is key. Turning back to those first “diva” performances of 1829, there is a notion of “double voicedness” that recurs. As Davies writes, “One idea tickled the popular fancy in particular: the idea that the twin sopranos sang from the same throat.” (79 Davies). He cites a review of Sontag and Malibran from the cultural review, *Athenaeum*, in June 1829: “... nothing has been heard so finished, so beautiful, or so interesting; in the immediate duet parts, every breath, every aspiration, was given so simultaneously and so perfectly, that the two voices seemed to be actuated by one person only” (79 Davies). Davies identifies a trend in the Sontag-Malibran criticism that confirms this impression of doubled unity: “It was as though this original plus its double made for a sensuous presence that was in effect twice real. Two copies of the same, in other words, were interpreted to be more, not less, real than one” (79).

I understand this “twice real” presence of the diva doubling as a refutation of the fantasies of regression. The Sontag-Malibran duets, after all (some of which are featured in *The Death of Maria Malibran*), were not sung in unison, but in harmony. There is a twinship to this duetting, but a twin is not the same as a singular, undifferentiated body. A harmonic duet, though

done so expertly as to sometimes prevent parsing the different voices, is the result of an organic interaction between different terms. This element of harmony is often forgotten by psychoanalytic critics who wish to emphasize the voice's role in fantasies of regression to a pre-Oedipal state. Guy Rosolato's influential article, "La voix: entre corps et langage," is emblematic of this elision. He writes:

The harmonic and polyphonic unfolding in music can be understood as a succession of tensions and releases, of unifications and divergences between parts which are gradually stacked, opposed in successive chords only to be resolved ultimately into their simplest unity. It is therefore the entire dramatization of separated bodies and their reunion which harmony supports. (82)<sup>51</sup>

But a harmonic chord, even one which provides resolution, is still comprised of different notes. To stress the point, harmony in singing, harmony made with the voice, is only made possible by the presence of more than one body, and is impossible with only one. This is not a relationship of non-differentiation, but a relationship between different entities which operate together to make a kind of sense. This "sense" can certainly be interpreted as a "reunion," but the sense of reunion is more narrative than it is corporeal, the music having followed a certain progression, determined by the rules of classical or popular music to arrive at a certain resolution at the end of a journey.

Rosolato explicitly links his formulation of musical harmony to the female voice when he declares the voice of the mother, "the first model of auditory pleasure and that music finds its roots and its nostalgia" (81). Again, there is something in this formulation of the female voice as meaning only a fantasy of unification with the mother that denies women subjectivity. Doane perceives this problematic relation when she questions the urge of some theorists to posit the feminine voice as an antidote to the patriarchal image, questioning any politics that might be built on an "erotics of the voice," and pointing out the persistent problems for feminists of allying women with the body (50).<sup>52</sup> But lesbian theory might provide a way out of this bind. In most of the psychoanalytic conceptions above, the fantasy of the female voice is the fantasy of regression, a return to a time before subjectivity. But why should we think only of regression when we think of more than one female body? The address of the diva duets, particularly as pictured in *The Death of Maria Malibran* — from woman to woman, facing one another, without explicit reference to a male listener or spectator — seems the key to another way of understanding the liberatory potential of the female voice. As Teresa De Lauretis repeats throughout her book, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (1994), "it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian" (283). This incantation means several things to De Lauretis, but what it means for our understanding is that intrafeminine desire is not non-differentiation, but is, in fact, dependent on differentiation and on passing through the Oedipus complex and, therefore, into culture and subjectivity. De Lauretis is consciously countering what she believes is a common Freudian misunderstanding of lesbian desire as "infantile" or

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<sup>51</sup> Translation by Doane, "The Voice in Cinema" (1980, p. 44n20). Kaja Silverman also cites "La voix..." by Rosolato in *The Acoustic Mirror* in her discussion of the fantasy maternal voice in cinema (1988, 79-85).

<sup>52</sup> Doane writes: "[...] there is a danger in grounding a politics on a conceptualization of the body because the body has always been the site of woman's oppression, posited as the final and undeniable guarantee of a difference and a lack; but, on the other hand, there is a potential gain as well — it is precisely because the body has been a major site of oppression that perhaps it must be the site of the battle to be waged" (50).

regressive. In her analysis of the paper, “On Female Homosexuality,” by psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, De Lauretis writes that,

“Deutsch sees female homosexuality as a regressive object-relation. However, by her own account, ‘genuine inversion’ actually goes beyond the sexual passivity of the feminine position in the positive Oedipus complex in that it is at once both Oedipal and genital, and also able to reactivate the instinctual drives typical of the pregenital relation to the mother, *but redirecting* them toward another female object-choice” (287).

De Lauretis’s point is that, while lesbian sexuality — like all sexuality — is determined by parental fantasies, it is an adult sexuality that does not take the *actual* mother as its object (just as female heterosexuality does not take the actual father as its object), nor is it characterized by the pregenital nature of pre-Oedipal sexuality. On the contrary, Deutsch’s paper on female homosexuality recognizes that her patients have undergone, as De Lauretis summarizes, “the passage through the positive Oedipus complex, which entails the recognition of sexual difference and the function of the father as the symbolic agent of castration,” and without which, “the ‘return’ to the mother would need remain sexually inactive in the adult subject and would be symptomatic of ‘psychic infantilism’” (Deutsch “On Female Sexuality” 509, paraphrased in De Lauretis 287). The point of all this, again, is not that the diva is a lesbian, but that lesbian theory reminds us of the possibility (and necessity!) of understanding intrafeminine desire as an adult relation, and not only as a regression to the womb. To conceive of desire between women only as immaturity (narcissism)<sup>53</sup> or regression (infantilism and maternity) is to repeat Western culture’s inability to imagine women outside of men. I contend that the diva approaches this imaginative frontier (although she may not conquer it, as evidenced by the fact that I am conducting this discussion in psychoanalytic terms, a system organized around the primacy of the phallus), and the potential inherent in the adult, intra-feminine desire for which she stands is the very reason that the diva troubles representation, particularly in cinema.

The “twice real” presence of the diva is so formidable and so troubling for the unity of sound and image cinema because it lies outside the normal concerns of representation. The spectacle of two women facing each other, directing their voices and addressing themselves to one another, and not to a male term, is an unusual formulation and one that is not often represented in culture in general. The tension of the film is created by the undeniable presence of the “women” and their voices, which urgently assert themselves and are deeply felt, but of which no sense can be made. *The Death of Maria Malibran* shows, like so much psychoanalytic theory, that this doubly feminine relation is actually *un-representable*, or at least incoherent, onscreen.

### **“No hay banda”: *Mulholland Drive***

*Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001) has much in common with *The Death of Maria Malibran*: both films center on female<sup>54</sup> performers and both feature female doubling and lesbianism, as well as an asynchronous soundtrack linked to the presence of a diva. But *Mulholland Drive* — located somewhere between a conventional thriller and the avant-garde — expresses its indeterminate status via its relationship to the diva. Though it conveys an undeniably dark take on Hollywood and exposes the “lie” of cinema via the famous “no hay banda” scene where the mismatch between sound and image is highlighted, the film may not have quite as damning a view of technology as *The Death of Maria Malibran*.

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<sup>53</sup> I will argue for a more nuanced understanding of “narcissism,” particularly for women, in Chapter 2.

<sup>54</sup> Or feminine-presenting

Mulholland Drive, like Sunset Boulevard, is the name of a famous street in Los Angeles where many movie stars live, a name that can be used synonymously with “Hollywood” — in other words, “the film industry” itself. And, much like *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), the story of *Mulholland Drive*, is the story of the danger and tragedy of that industry, as embodied and exemplified by the failures and successes of its female performers. This film about films is told through the story of two female performer protagonists who become lovers, and have confused — sometimes overlapping — identities.

The film is obsessed with the idea of female doubling, and figures it as the ultimate expression of the experience of performing and movie-making. Betty (Naomi Watts) is a hopeful young blonde actress from the Midwest who comes to Los Angeles to be a movie star. Rita (Laura Harring) is a brunette mystery woman who becomes her lover. The narrative of the film is not linear, and at one point flips “upside down” or “inside out,” but in both diegetic worlds, both Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla are, at one time or another, movie stars. In the first narrative, Betty performs a successful audition, and wins the leading role in a big budget film by a famous director, and Rita is a glamorous mystery woman who shows up in her apartment after a bout of amnesia, and eventually becomes her lover. In the second narrative, Rita (now Camilla) is the famous film star, and she is having an affair with the famous director, even though Betty (now Diane) pines for her and longs for them to reunite. Because the cast of these two narrative worlds is the same, there is extensive doubling throughout the film. But the doubling of female performers is especially pronounced. For instance, the “Cowboy” character, who is the “enforcer” for the sinister and powerful interests controlling Hollywood, insists that another blonde, referred to simply as “the girl,” be chosen for the role that ultimately goes to Betty. The importance of “the girl” is the main engine of one of the prongs of the multi-pronged plot, and the director’s life is threatened by the Cowboy and his employers who pull the strings in her favor. The “girl”, who is blonde and looks very much like Betty, is, in essence, her double. In *Mulholland Drive*, to be a female star is to be prized, yet interchangeable.

This theme recurs later in the pivotal diva scene at the Club Silencio, but the moments leading up to that scene are equally significant. Rita is traumatized after seeing the dead body of a woman who may or may not be herself, or is perhaps Betty in her second incarnation as “Diane” (it’s virtually impossible to determine “what happens” in *Mulholland Drive*, and this narrative indeterminacy is what gives the film its avant-garde cast). Rita returns with Betty to Betty’s apartment, where she cuts her hair to look less like her dead double. Betty prevents her from cutting it all off, and helps Rita put on a blonde bobbed wig that looks much like Betty’s own hair, and the two women stare into the mirror, pondering their now nearly-identical appearance. That same evening, Betty and Rita share a bed and become lovers.

The love scene is marked by a fascination with the difference between the two female bodies. The characters, for whom this is the first lesbian experience, one blonde and one brunette (Rita has removed her blonde wig), one small-breasted, the other less so, touch each other and convey curiosity and wonder at their similar, yet different bodies. The effect of this can be thought of as the visual equivalent of the fascination produced by the auditory similarity and difference of the first diva duets, harmonies marked by the shimmering convergence and divergence of two voices closely intertwined, though differing in pitch (allowing a stretch, this might be the echo of Sontag and Malibran, also a blonde and a brunette!).

The lovers fall asleep until Rita starts restlessly repeating the word “silencio,” as if waking from a dream. This word is intriguing because, even more than asynchronicity, it is *silence* that is forbidden in mainstream cinema. As Doane writes, “[I]n the dominant narrative

cinema, sound extends from beginning to end of the film — sound is never absent (silence is, at the least, roomtone). In fact, the lack of any sound whatsoever is taboo in the editing of the soundtrack” (“Voice in Cinema” 39). Perhaps it is significant that the invocation of the cinematic taboo of silence follows on the taboo lesbian act, the characters’ intra-feminine desire activating some kind of black hole of representation that will cause the film to turn itself inside out.

Both characters approach the next scene with considerable trepidation. Rita turns to Betty and says, “Go with me somewhere,” and Betty agrees. It’s the middle of the night when they arrive at the Club Silencio, which has a blue-lit entrance. The color blue will come to be significant in this scene and throughout the rest of the film, representing a flip in the narrative world, marking the transition from Rita to Camilla and Betty to Diane. Indeed, something has been turned on its head, and the Club Silencio is the gateway to this wormhole. They enter the interior of the club, which consists of a sparsely-attended theater and a red stage. Rita has put on her blonde wig again, making her “doubling” with Betty here undeniable and explicit.

The Master of Ceremonies comes out onstage and announces, “No hay banda — there is no band. Il n’y a pas d’orchestre. This is all a tape recording. No hay banda, and YET — we hear the band.” The women look frightened, and huddle together. “If we want to hear a clarinet, listen [a clarinet plays],” says the MC. Indeed, we hear music, yet there is no band to be seen onstage or elsewhere within the club. The dialogue and action seem to call out what mainstream cinema seeks to mask: the construction of the cinematic experience out of heterogenous materials, highlighting the fact that there is no “natural marriage” between sound and image (Doane “Voice in Cinema” 35). This moment also emphasizes Chion’s theorization of the soundtrack in film: “Film sound is that which is contained or not contained in an image; there is no place of the sounds, no auditory scene already preexisting in the soundtrack — and therefore, properly speaking, there is no soundtrack” (68). In other words, in film, the meaning of sound is dependent upon its relationship to the image — the soundtrack does not have an independent life because it does not have an independent space, apart from the image.<sup>55</sup> It is not really “there” unless it is anchored to the image somehow. Although the MC’s lines directly refer to the “show” inside the Club Silencio, the statement can be extended to think about the way the film *Mulholland Drive* foregrounds itself and its status as a film with sound, as trickery.

The entirety of the MC’s speech calls attention to the “lie” of synchronization, to the falseness of the impression of unity of sound and image. He summons, “A muted trumpet. . .” and a trumpet plays, its source unseen. But then, a man carrying a trumpet walks onstage and plays into the microphone — the viewer is momentarily relieved that the source of the trumpet sound can be seen, after all! — but then the trumpeter takes the horn away from his lips and raises it away from the microphone, all the while the trumpet sound continues to be heard. Again, the MC warns us, “It’s all recorded. No hay banda. It is all a tape,” even as the trumpet persists. In *Mulholland Drive*, even the sounds that appear to emanate from visible sources are immediately denounced as lies. The message is that this is a film, and the sense of “wholeness” that film usually provides is an illusion.

The MC continues, emphasizing the point: “Il n’y a pas d’orchestre. It is an illusion. Listen,” and an orchestra plays. As he speaks these words, we see for the first time a stately female figure in the background. She is wearing a blue wig that is swept to the side in a fanciful bouffant, and an ornate 18<sup>th</sup> century gown that makes her look as though she is from another

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<sup>55</sup> Doane, conversely, asks us to remember that music does as much to inflect images as images inflect sound: “[I]t is doubtful that any image (in the sound film) is uninflected by sound. In the dominant narrative cinema, sound extends from beginning to end of the, film — sound is never absent.” (“Voice in Cinema” 39).

time, but the historical period is difficult to determine. Is she a performer, too? A “diva,” perhaps? She looks down on the stage proceedings, theatrical and grand. She is seated in a private box behind the MC as he raises his arms in devil-like mastery, apparently causing the earth to quake, the lights to flicker, and Betty to shake with fear, before he disappears in a column of blue smoke. An unearthly blue light flickers and remains. Again, blue signifies a space of conversion in this film, a portal to another dimension. This is the place where the narrative tilts, and the characters become alternate versions of themselves.

But first, we must linger on the fulcrum. This moment that the film has been leading up to is a “diva” moment, and not just because it prominently features a female singer. The “diva-ness” of this scene is diffused throughout several figures and themes, including the double femininity of Betty and Rita in the audience, the asynchronization of female voice and body, and the pathos of the female performer (which I will explore more fully in Chapter 3). Significantly, this moment of peak emotional excitement and catharsis is exposed at every turn to be “fake,” an illusion. It’s the Club *Silencio*, after all, emphasizing that there is *nothing to hear* — “no hay banda.” And perhaps the most famous “sonic image” of the film confirms this.

In the eerie blue light, we see the blue-haired woman again, alone in her box, before another Master of Ceremonies takes the stage, and introduces “La Llorona de Los Angeles, Rebekah Del Rio” in Spanish. The change of language here is important, and becomes the marker, along with the color blue, that the narrative has flipped somehow. The singer Del Rio enters in a clinging burgundy cocktail dress and a black shrug. She begins a soulful a cappella version of Roy Orbison’s “Crying” (“Llorando”) in Spanish in a tremulous mezzo voice. The women in the audience — Rita and Betty — are no longer afraid, but instead begin to watch Del Rio’s performance with wide-eyed sadness. When we finally see Del Rio in close-up, her makeup is unusual and flamboyant, like an exotic bird: she wears yellow and pink eyeshadow swept up to the brow and out to the sides, and wine-colored lipstick. There is one teardrop painted onto her right cheek and emphasized with a small, press-on crystal. The theme of “crying” is central here, and is expressed not only in the lyrics of the song and in Del Rio’s painted teardrop, but in her title, “La Llorona” (“the weeping woman”), which refers to the Mexican folk figure of the ghostly woman who weeps for her lost children by the river and brings misfortune to those who hear her. These overtones of doom inform the shots of Betty and Rita’s tear-stained faces, intercut with Del Rio’s delivery of the song, as they watch and listen to the emotional performance. As Del Rio approaches the climax of the song, Betty and Rita huddle together, weeping, as if they will not be able to stand the intense emotion much longer, as if the song was a re-telling of something tragic that did, or is about to happen to them, personally. As they turn their faces back to look at Del Rio, she falls away from the microphone, and crumples to the ground, yet her voice continues singing, undisturbed. Del Rio appears to be unconscious, or perhaps even dead, as the second MC and another man enter and haul her body off the stage, as her voice continues and finishes the song.

The diva drops dead, but her voice keeps singing. This scene is so overdetermined that it could be either the most reactionary or the most progressive of the film. In the reading of the scene as reactionary, the diva’s “death” could be proof that she must be punished for the power of her voice, or for exposing mainstream cinema — a system of representation tailored to patriarchal desires — as a lie. This seems too reductive and does not take into account the potential critique of “entertainment” initiated by the shock of Del Rio’s demise, as well as the critical potential of the film overall, in its damning depiction of the film industry.

In the reading of the scene as progressive, the diva's asynchronicity could be understood, in Kaja Silverman's words, as an instance that would "disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema relies" (164). In her book, *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), Silverman argues that in "dominant" (conventional, narrative) cinema, to allow a female character to be heard without being seen would "put her beyond the reach of the male gaze (which stands in for the cultural 'camera') and release her voice from the signifying operations which that gaze enforces. It would liberate the female subject from constant interrogation about her place, her time, and her desires, which constantly resecures her. Finally, to disembody the female voice in this way would be to challenge every conception by means of which we have previously known woman within Hollywood film, since it is precisely *as body* that she is constructed there" (164). But to claim that the diva here is completely challenging the gaze would probably be going too far. For one thing, Del Rio's body is curiously foregrounded (I argue elsewhere that divas don't typically wear revealing costumes, particularly during emotional ballads), and her short and clinging dress *does* invite conventional sexual objectification. In this way, Del Rio *is* secured as a body within the diegesis, even though her "story" or any explanation of her presence or her demise remains an enigma (this is her only appearance in the film, and nothing more is said about her after this scene).

It seems more likely that the diva here serves another function — as an emblem of *presence*, a presence that this film — any film — cannot possibly deliver. As Doane writes, "Concomitant with the demand for a life-like representation is the desire for 'presence,' a concept which is not specific to the cinematic soundtrack but which acts as a standard to measure quality in the sound recording industry as a whole. The term 'presence' offers a certain legitimacy to the wish for pure reproduction and becomes a selling point in the construction of sound as a commodity" ("Voice in Cinema" 35). Significantly, Doane gives the example of a Memorex commercial featuring Ella Fitzgerald as a bid for "presence" — the female voice, particularly that of the diva, is more closely allied with "presence" than any other.

*Mulholland Drive*, as a film about films, uses the diva as a way to shock us into caring about the depth of cinema's deceit. By presenting Del Rio, in whom we can invest so readily, who sings such a heart-rendingly beautiful song so expertly (we marvel as she sings this *a capella!*), whose artistry moves Betty and Rita (the protagonists with whom we've been encouraged to identify) so deeply, we are all the more shocked and devastated when the film pulls the proverbial rug out from under her. Even though the MCs have done nothing but remind us repeatedly that this is a film, when Del Rio starts singing, we forget, so enraptured are we by her performance. Likely, we would be shocked if any character fainted away mid-song or mid-speech and their voice continued to be heard, but the fact that it is a diva — who is equated with in the cultural imagination with such urgent presence — amplifies the devastation. Like Betty and Rita, we may be mid-cry when this happens, giving the screen such full spectatorial participation. To have the operation exposed as a delusion is almost too devastating, and the transition between participation in the onscreen world and the knowledge of its fakery — a perfectly normal operation, but one of which mainstream film does not want us to be aware mid-viewing — is almost too much.

At the point that Del Rio faints away and her voice goes on singing, one could argue that she becomes what Chion terms an "acousmatic" character, a class of character with an ambiguous status in relation to the image in a sound film, as "neither inside nor outside the image" (129). Chion describes these characters as "many of the mysterious and talkative characters hidden behind curtains, in rooms or hideouts," and lists the "mother" in Hitchcock's

*Psycho* and the Wizard of Oz before his Kansas-born identity is revealed as examples (130). Typically, these characters are known by the sound of their voices *before* their bodies are revealed, and are commonly “evil, awe-inspiring, or otherwise powerful” (72). Del Rio does not quite fit this description, as these characters tend to be characterized by disembodied *dialogue* (not song), and because Del Rio has no explicit narrative function or role outside of this one appearance. However, the idea of the “acousmatic” voice in cinema is important in thinking about the diva.

Dolar makes the distinct point that *disacousmatization* in general (which, for him, is the ability to *see* the source of a voice, the opposite of the acousmatic) is impossible, because the source of the voice is not exterior. He writes that, “The source of the voice can never be seen, it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, it cannot possibly match what we can see” (81). Of course, this is one of many ways that the voice runs concurrent with female sexuality, an invisible source of *juissance* whose “presence” may be experienced, but never quite “proven” via sight. But even more pointedly related to the rupture activated by Del Rio, Dolar writes that the voice “... appears in the void from which it is supposed to stem but which it does not fit, an effect without a proper cause. In a curious bodily topology, it is like a bodily missile which separates itself from the body and spreads around, but on the other hand it points to a bodily interior, an intimate partition of the body which cannot be disclosed — as if the voice were the very principle of division into interior and exterior” (70). The rending of Del Rio’s voice from her image mid-song dramatizes this insight — her voice is separated from her body in front of our eyes, yet her voice, “like a missile,” has already launched and continues on its trajectory through the song. But the voice as “the very principle of division into interior and exterior” is like spectatorship, itself. Like Edgar Morin’s formulation of the projection-identification of the cinematic spectator, wherein the spectator not only identifies with characters and “reality” on the screen, but also projects “life” into those images via an intense psychic participation,<sup>56</sup> a search for the “source” of the voice, like a search for the specific mechanisms of spectatorship, yields nothing concrete, but vibrates the invisible membrane between “interior” and “exterior” worlds.

Again, the diva is the perfect figure to activate this discourse because her myth depends so heavily on the power of her vocal and corporeal presence. Because she can so easily provoke the affective participation of the viewer, the moment where her image is rent from her voice can be deeply shocking in a way that theater could never be. In theater, a diva is either present or not.<sup>57</sup> But in film, her presence can be conjured by a series of tricks, and not just taken away, but also pulled apart — violently splitting a presumed “interior” (voice) from a presumed “exterior” (body), exposing both as illusion. (A body mismatched to a voice puts both elements in doubt — which is the “real” one? Should we be following the image or the soundtrack to understand the story?)

Significantly, the blue-haired lady from the Café Silencio reappears in the final image of *Mulholland Drive*. During a hallucinatory montage of Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla that plays out over a Los Angeles skyline, after which both protagonists have endured much exploitation and suffering, the blue-haired woman appears. Her image fills the frame as she raises a finger to her lips and whispers, “Silencio.” This is another indication that the “diva” here is emblematic of “entertainment” itself. The diva encompasses all the paradoxes of cinema’s promise of presence

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<sup>56</sup> See Morin, *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man* ((1970), 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Even if she is singing from off-stage, she is still present in the space of the theater.

by delivering it and extravagantly taking it away in acts of asynchronization, that leave us aching for unity. But what does her declaration of “Silencio” mean? That there is nothing to hear, “no hay banda”? That, in cinema, as on Mulholland Drive, there is no “presence?” The reason that *Mulholland Drive* stops short of the full-throttle mocking of cinema in which *The Death of Maria Malibran* indulges, is because, although cinema and the industry that supports it have been exposed as liars and cheats, and although we have dwelt in its gutter for much of the film, the Hollywood skyline still asserts itself. The protagonists, though tragic and beleaguered, are still remarkably good-looking, and the blue-haired diva reigns supreme. The lure of cinema is not so much debunked as exposed, but the burlesque never strips the art form totally bare. In all its gloss and its beauty, *Mulholland Drive* still intends to seduce. No matter how many starlets fall prey to the dark forces of Hollywood, the film insinuates — in its obsession with doubling, mirroring, and prophetic dreams, and in its return to the “beginning” in the images that comprise the skyline montage — that this will all happen again. A new starlet will disembark at LAX, and the dark thing behind the dumpster will be waiting for her. Although the whole enterprise is based on nothing but musician-less bands and illusions, our desire to be led into this fake world is so great that we will even follow a diva advocating silence.

### **There Was a Voice: Callas Forever:**

“Am I selling my soul to Satan?”

“This is 1977, Satan is redundant. Anyway, in theory, he can make you live forever.”

“Vampires live forever.”

*Callas Forever* (Zeffirelli 2002) presents a fictional scenario about the last years of the life of opera diva Maria Callas. In *Callas Forever*, the 53 year-old soprano is asked by a group of impresarios and producers to consider appearing in film versions of her great operatic roles, using the audio recordings from earlier in her career, when her voice was still strong. In the film, as in Callas’s real life, her voice deserted her in her 40s, after a period of jet-setting with her lover Aristotle Onassis, during which she neglected her music. The film is set in the late 1970s when Callas is living in Paris, broken-hearted after Onassis has left her for Jacqueline Kennedy.

Both *The Death of Maria Malibran* and *Mulholland Drive* are films that use the diva’s asynchronous voice as a way to expose the lies of cinematic unity. But *Callas Forever*, though, from the title, would appear to exalt the diva, uses asynchronicity — or, rather, a very self-conscious synchronicity — to betray her. The real Callas famously felt that it was wrong to capture the live performances of her operatic roles on film.<sup>58</sup> *Callas Forever* explores the presumptions about voice, performance, and cinema at the heart of this conviction. The theme of cinema as a “Faustian” bargain, an act of selling one’s soul to the devil for the sake of everlasting “life” via technological reproduction, recurs throughout.

Significantly, Callas did not object to audio recording and made many records throughout her career, but the marriage of sound and image bothered her, particularly the drive to “capture” a live performance, which she believed to be the essence of opera, and, therefore, a *present* thing which should only be experienced in the moment and not reproduced. Certainly, this is a bid to preserve “aura,” the idea of distance between a work of art (or a performance) and the spectator, according to Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical

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<sup>58</sup> Although several short concerts were recorded for broadcast on television, the only professional film footage that survives of Callas onstage in an operatic role is Act II of *Tosca* at Covent Garden in 1964 (see the DVD *Maria Callas at Covent Garden, 1962 and 1964*, 2002).

Reproduction.” But the opera diva has a complex relationship to Benjamin’s notions of art and its reproducibility. In a famous passage, Benjamin writes: “[the] contemporary decay of the aura. . . rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (“Work of Art” 15).

At first, this idea seems to have particular currency around the opera diva, particularly because her type of fame relies so heavily on the concept of “aura” — a “divine” being (Callas was known as “La Divina Assoluta”), the opera diva is exalted and admired from afar. Furthermore, one must travel to hear her. This is unlike the film star, whose aura is “false” (according to Benjamin) because her art has no “original,” because her performance is made up of parts assembled together after-the-fact to make a whole, and who creates a “false” aura via offscreen discourse about her “personality” (“Work of Art” 24-25). It should be noted that the opera diva is also defined by this “offstage” discourse about her personality, but the difference is that, unlike the film star, the opera diva’s art is thought best experienced “live.” The fictional French film *Diva* (1981) stages this desire to overcome the distance responsible for the aura by depicting an obsessed fan who surreptitiously tapes a live concert of his favorite opera diva, a diva who — like Callas, but more extreme — refuses to be recorded at all. Enacting the Benjaminian desire to “bring things ‘closer,’” the fan not only records the diva’s voice, but also steals her dress. There are scenes of the fan listening to his recording and fondling the dress, and another scene of the fan hiring a prostitute and asking her to wear it. These actions are certainly compensatory strategies for not being able to “have” the diva. For, even if he did, the body of the diva is not enough — he cannot have her voice. As Dolar writes, the voice is of the body, but not confined to it (72-73). The fan’s desire to possess the voice of the diva is the desire for an impossible thing, and this impossibility of grasping the voice as an object might explain the elaborate compensatory discourse of *presence* surrounding it.

If the voice cannot be possessed, then to whom does it belong? If it cannot be rent from the body that produces it, cannot be stolen by another, then surely it must belong to the one who produces it. *Callas Forever* challenges this assumption in an early scene. Callas’s (Fanny Ardant) impresario friend, Larry (Jeremy Irons), takes her to a small screening room in order to convince her to participate in the project of using her old audio recordings to create new films of her famous operatic roles. To prove how convincingly the technicians can join her old sound to her current image, they show her a video of a recent “comeback” performance she has given in Japan, a concert where she sang poorly. At first, she reacts violently, not wanting to witness her own humiliation onscreen. But then she hears her voice — only, it is not the voice that she used in Japan — it is one of her old recordings. The technicians have wed her “old” voice to contemporary film footage of her comeback concert. She is impressed, but also wary:

Callas: What have you done? What kind of trick is this?

Larry: All we’ve done is we’ve married the sound to the picture. It’s simple.

Callas: But it’s dishonest.

Larry: Why?

Callas: It’s not me singing.

Larry: Then who is it? Renata Tebaldi? No, Maria, it’s your image, your voice, it has to be you.

Callas is not put off by recording, per se, but she recognizes that there is something “dishonest” about marrying a voice to a body which can no longer produce it. Although all sound is independent of the image in cinema (hence, sound can be out of synch with the image), it is vital that the voice and image appear to “match.” This is echoed in technical writing on sound in the 1930s, cited by Doane, where the writer states that, “the industry does not condone a mismatching of voices and bodies” (“Voice in Cinema” 36), assuaging fears of the artificiality of post-synchronization. But, from the example that the film has shown us of footage of the Japan concert married to the sound of the younger, stronger voice, only Maria Callas, herself, would probably know that the two didn’t “go together,” so convincing and “natural”-seeming is the match. So, what is the problem? Does the voice of the young Callas not “belong” to the older diva? Here, age and vocal wear add little-discussed elements of subjectivity. Implicit in Callas’s revulsion to the “deception” at work in synchronizing her young voice with her current (middle-aged) body is the idea that these two entities belong to different subjects. The younger and older Callas are two different people, so one cannot sing for or represent the other. But this line of thinking begs the question, “Just when does one outgrow a voice?” Or, “How long is too long between the pre-recording of the audio (particularly of musical numbers, as they are the most often prerecorded) and the photography in cinema?” Can a person wait one year, two years, or five for the voice to still be considered a reasonable “match” with the body? Or, if Callas could still hit the notes onstage, would she be more open to letting her younger, equally agile voice be attached to her image? Would it be less “dishonest” to let this strong voice sing for her if her current voice was still strong?

The film eventually answers these questions, but not before it has a moment of trying to justify the “dishonest” process of not just the synching of her younger voice with her current image, but of post-synchronization altogether. The justification revolves around the idea that to lip-synch well, one must, in a sense, sing. In the scene that elaborates this idea, Callas has agreed to do a film of *Carmen* (Bizet, 1875) using her old voice, which she justifies by explaining that she only sang the role on film and never onstage, thus preserving her notion that her operatic performances were only to be experienced in-person. Since *Carmen* never existed onstage, there was no harm in putting her onscreen. This scene shows Callas working with technicians, and one holds up a mirror as she mouths the words to one of her old recordings. They need to see where she breathes during the aria so that they may edit the film accordingly, perhaps choosing a long shot or a cut when they approach a difficult moment, instead of a close-up. And yet, this sequence is shot mainly in close-up, and even though we know that the character of Callas is lipsynching to a recording, we are also watching and marveling at Ardant, playing Callas, and lipsynching very convincingly to the diva’s recording. It looks like she is really singing! In this moment, it as though our strong desire to see the body and the voice in synch overcomes everything we very consciously know to be an illusion, an illusion which even the narrative has called to our attention. “Yes! It works!,” says Larry, the impresario, and indeed, this film, though explicitly about the dishonesty of filmmaking, nonetheless tends to reinforce its “deception.”

Ardant-as-Callas, too, seems to buy into it, for a moment. “Actually, this is really difficult,” she says, excitedly. “I can’t just move my lips, I have to really sing along to the tape, isn’t that right? ... So really everything — the vocal cords, the muscles of the neck, the diaphragm — everything is singing.” This revelation leads her to declare that they must cast a singer — even if his voice will not be heard — as the Don Jose to her *Carmen*, which seems to validate the “authenticity” of operatic performance on film. If the singers are “real,” and they are

“really singing,” then film of *Carmen* is, in a sense, faithfully representing the operatic experience.

Nearly everything may be singing, but there is still no voice. All the mechanisms that go into creating a vocal performance are at work, except for the flow of air through the larynx, and this is the central drama of the film, the central loss. In a later scene, after Callas denounces her film of *Carmen* as a “fraud,” and expresses her wish to make a film of *Tosca* using her current voice and all of her considerable powers as a performer to compensate for its shortcomings, the music company executives are uninterested, and the following exchange occurs:

American record executive: Her voice is unusable, it’s sad but true.

Larry: But the voice doesn’t matter! It’s the *performance* that matters! We should film Maria as Tosca as she is today, with the voice she has today.

French record executive: But the voice *does* matter, Larry. There was a voice. The audience expects to hear it. It’s opera, opera is voice. Opera is music.”

Larry: But there’s other kinds of music, there’s the music in the head, there’s the music in the heart, there’s unnamable music.

[stony silence]

Larry: You’re all deaf.

Yet, Ardant-as-Callas, herself, agrees. “There *was* a voice,” and, for all of the tricks at technology’s disposal, it cannot bring that voice back, not in a way that would restore its absolute presence. This is dramatized in a scene in the heart of the film where we see Ardant-as-Callas, alone in her Paris apartment, trying to sing along to her old recording of “Un bel di vedremo” from *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini, 1904). The scene begins with a close-up of her old record on the record-player, foregrounding her confrontation with technology. It is late at night and we see her wash some pills down with liquor. Perhaps she is trying to enter an alternate state so that she might come closer to the music, somehow, and be better able to reproduce it. She begins by singing along in a noncommittal way, an octave lower, but as the music progresses and she gets more invested and the aria reaches its climax, she tries and fails to produce the high note, and sinks the floor in despair. In this instance, technology is the diva’s downfall, but it is also a failure on its own terms. For all the Faustian rhetoric, the record has not restored Maria’s voice and we can plainly see that nothing can. Thus, voice is again coded as living, as presence, and this scene suggests that it is perverse and possibly harmful to pin a dead voice to a living body.

Among the many paradoxical meanings of this film are those produced by the ending. After throwing a tantrum at the first screening of *Carmen*, which the audience has deemed a great success, Callas proclaims to a friend,

Callas: “It is like *Faust*, isn’t it? You know Faust, he won back his youth, so did I, the sound of my youth.”

Friend: “Oh come on, Maria, you only know Faust because he’s a character in an opera. He’s fiction, not real.”

Callas: “It was a fraud. *Carmen* was a fraud.”

Friend: “Alright, yes. But only in the way all performance art is a fraud. I mean, when you were give all those great performances before, weren’t you standing in front of painted scenery?”

Callas: “Yes, but...”

Friend: “And when you played Medea, when you were deciding whether to kill your children, weren’t you also staring at a man holding a stick conducting an orchestra? I mean, what’s real about that? It’s all a fake, but you gave it its own truth, Maria, that is the same thing with *Carmen*.”

In this exchange, Callas cannot quite articulate why she disagrees with her friend, but in the end, finally, she is able. At the end of the film, she asks Larry to destroy *Carmen*.

Larry: *Carmen*? You’ve got no right! *Carmen* is beautiful! *Carmen* is some of the best work you’ve ever done. In a hundred years’ time it will be there, people will say: ‘There! There was Callas!’

Callas: But it’s not honest. It’s a fake. A magnificent fake, but still a fake. And maybe no one watching it will realize, but I’ll know. I understand that technology can create the most extraordinary illusions. But what I had was never an illusion. If it was nothing else, it was honest. Even on a bad night, on a really awful night when you wanted to close your ears and hide your eyes, it was honest.

Finally, Callas is able to articulate what delineates live performance from cinema: contingency. The fact that one risks a bad performance (or an inspired performance) is what gives live opera its excitement. Every performance is unique, hence its auratic lure, and every performance is contingent on the conditions of the present moment. In Chapter 3, I will explain how films about female performers (not just opera divas, but pop divas, too) go to great lengths to create the impression of liveness to authenticate the cinematic reproduction of the diva and to compensate for the fact that cinema can never be live. But *Callas Forever* is not one of those films. The diva narratives that I will analyze in Chapter 3, all firmly entrenched within the melodramatic mode, actually *do* trouble the “match” between voice and body in their high diva moments, not via an asynchronous soundtrack, but through a trope where the diva’s body is largely obscured during moments of virtuosic singing (a common way of doing this is to costume the diva in a black dress against a black background). Therefore, these melodramas retain the diva’s element of “escape” from traditional (patriarchal) specular regimes, at least when she is singing. *Callas Forever* features neither the avant-garde asynchronicity of *The Death of Maria Malibran* or *Mulholland Drive*, nor a moment where the diva’s body is obscured during her vocal performance, as in the films addressed in Chapter 3.

*Callas Forever*’s concern with asynchronicity remains at the level of plot and dialogue, not form. I think this is because at no point during this film is Maria Callas supposed to actually be singing. The one time when we do hear “her” voice, it is actually the voice of Ardant singing along to *Madama Butterfly*, and the alibi for her non-virtuosic voice is that the older Callas cannot hit the notes. But we know so well that we are not hearing Callas, and the theme of the scene is the diva’s failure to sing, so the virtuosity of the female voice that so troubles representation is no threat whatsoever.

Furthermore, there is no real element of diva “doubling” here, unless we count Callas’s older voice as a “double” to her younger voice. Again, this pairing does not trouble any part of conventional representation because the “older” voice cannot really sing. And yet, this seems somehow fitting, that a film about the most famous diva of all time should fail to deliver many of the expected elements of the diva onscreen. We’ve seen how for the diva to be represented at all is a troubling thing for cinema. In life, Callas appeared in one feature film, in the title role of

Pasolini's *Medea* (1969). Overdubbed, as was the custom for much of Italian cinema at the time, her voice was never heard. It is almost as if Callas — in body *and* voice — must be kept very far from cinema.

But that has not stopped cinema from trying to compensate for her absence. *Callas Forever* is surely the most obvious example of this awkward compensation. The director, Franco Zeffirelli, who also directed and designed many operas, and directed Callas in several, was never able to make a film with her. But through *Callas Forever*, he was able to create sets for his dream version of *Carmen*, and dress up Fanny Ardant as Maria Callas, and we are all able to fantasize along with him about what might have been. And even though Ardant-as-Callas declares that Larry must scrap *Carmen*, we, the viewers of *Callas Forever*, have, of course seen the *Carmen*! And if we buy *Callas Forever* on DVD or Blu-ray, we can see it again and again, giving us “Callas Forever!” Thus, the film itself does everything it can to undermine the express wishes of the diva. But Callas-lovers might stop short of condemning it, because although *Callas Forever* does not provide an enduring record of Maria Callas, it does not fall entirely short of its “Faustian” promise to give everlasting life to the diva. The 2002 film was distributed widely throughout the world, undeniably exposing new, potential fans to the artistic legacy of the real Maria Callas.

Cinema has done much to record, codify, elaborate, and disseminate the diva as a cultural type. Sometimes this cinematic representation limits her power, or at least imposes punishment for it, as in the melodramatic diva narratives in Chapter 3. But, as I hope I have shown here, there are also moments where the diva seems to vanquish cinema. Yes, the diva can be filmed, and cinema can re-present her voice and image, but the diva often prevents this captivity from becoming total: the audio skips, or the image darkens, bent by the force of the diva's will to forge a space of subjectivity, a vast expanse where identification and desire echo between women beyond the frame, and outside the city walls.

## Arias for an Untold Want: Rethinking the Diva's Narcissistic Desire

In the previous chapter I explained that at the time of her naming, the diva — that most singular of figures — was not solo, but *double*. I argue that “diva” is a cultural type defined by this early moment, and in permutations since, as the elaboration and performance of feminine desire that is not dependent upon heterosexual reciprocation. On the contrary, I claim that the diva’s desire addresses itself to a “double,” another version of itself in another feminine presence, which can take the form of a professional rival, a mentor or a mentee, or a female lover. The diva’s association with feminine desire of an unsanctioned aim (woman-facing, but not heterosexual) is the reason, I argue, that the diva has been declared a narcissist.

The alleged “narcissism” of this powerful figure is also responsible, in my view, for the development of “diva” as a cultural type that has broadened beyond the prima donna, and has come to represent virtually any flamboyant woman who is perceived to be a “public success,” but a “private failure.” The diva’s reputation for “private failure” has everything to do with the idea that heterosexuality and conventional family life are not among the diva’s primary motivations, even though the conflict between public and private life is often at the heart of films featuring a diva protagonist. In this chapter, I will explain how the diva’s reputation for narcissism furnishes a space of reverie that defines the way the diva protagonist appears onscreen.

The diva’s woman-facing desire and failed heterosexuality, as elaborated in Chapter 1, are not necessarily explicitly homosexual, but they are certainly queer, and queer theory is a useful lens through which to understand the diva’s particular brand of narcissism because it allows for a definition of narcissism that goes beyond the connotation of mere “vanity.” Much has been made of divas and queerness, but in a very specific way, so that the word “diva” inevitably brings up associations of flamboyant women and the gay men who love them. This relationship has been reinforced over decades of queer scholarship, including Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” in 1964, work by Esther Newton<sup>59</sup>, Jack Babuscio<sup>60</sup>, and Richard Dyer in the 1970s<sup>61</sup>, Dyer’s study, “Judy Garland and Gay Men” from 1986, to a flourishing of writing on the topic in the 1990s, including Koestenbaum’s *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* in 1993 and Thomas Waugh’s analysis of the “diva syndrome” in *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (1996), as well as by two special issues of *Camera Obscura* in 2007 and 2008<sup>62</sup>, and the volume *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them*, edited by Michael Montlack in 2009. There is even a subgenre of studies regarding divas and their lesbian fans<sup>63</sup>,

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<sup>59</sup> See Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*.

<sup>60</sup> See Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility.”

<sup>61</sup> See especially Dyer “It’s Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going (1976),” and “In Defence of Disco (1979),” which isn’t directly concerned with divas per se, but defends the politics of the type of popular culture in which the diva thrives (materialist, Romantic, etc.).

<sup>62</sup> It should be noted that the *Camera Obscura* issues did not deal solely with gay men and their love of female divas. The issues included lesbian, trans, and other queer appreciations, and even broadened the category of “diva” to include men, but the scholarship was still focused on queer reception of the diva, not on a definition of the type.

<sup>63</sup> See Terry Castle (“In Praise of Birgitte Fassbender”), Elizabeth Wood (“Sapphonic”), and Ann Pellegrini (“Unnatural Affinities”). Literary examples of divas and their lesbian fans include Willa Cather’s *Song of the Lark* (1915), which was inspired by opera diva Olive Fremstad, a singer who also moved Marcia Davenport to write *Of*

mostly in the field of musicology, by the likes of Terry Castle, Ann Pellegrini, and Elizabeth Wood. This scholarship on the diva has mainly worked to illuminate the reception of the diva by the queer spectator or listener. This chapter seeks to do something different: I hope to define the diva as a specific cultural type, and to define her as queer, not based upon the demographics of the publics who most enthusiastically receive her art, but by outlining the specific structure of desire that she represents, and explaining how that structure of desire manifests narratively and formally when a diva protagonist is presented onscreen.

As a cultural type, the diva is often confused with the femme fatale. This confusion is understandable because both the diva and the femme fatale were born of the same churning processes of modernity in Europe and the United States, such as the rise of the modern city, its attendant opportunities for (and anxiety about) women outside the home, and the expansion of leisure time. Both types share a space in a broad cultural imagining of the "New Woman" in that they both possessed a certain mobility in the world and a glamour that is dependent upon their divergence from traditional female roles tied to hearth and home. However, there are important differences between these two modern female types, particularly as presented in cinema. In Chapter 1, I followed the arguments of influential feminist scholars who understand the femme fatale as "in league with the machine," the ultimate expression of the controlling, objectifying male gaze of conventional cinema. I explained how the diva, on the other hand, often troubles the machine by exposing its "tricks" via asynchronicity or other strategies, highlighting its failure to deliver *presence*.

But another important distinction between the femme fatale and the diva is the elaboration of a psychic space of fantasy allotted to the diva protagonist, as opposed to a more closed and opaque, even "non-space" afforded the femme fatale, who often has no depth beyond her alluring surface, making her no more than a mirage constituted by male anxiety. If, as Mary Ann Doane claims, the femme fatale is a "symptom of male fears about feminism" (*Femmes Fatales* 3), a character from a male scene of fantasy (fear of castration, fetishism, control), then the diva differentiates herself from the femme fatale in that the representation of diva allows, and is, in fact, defined by, her occupation of a space where a feminine fantasy and the staging of feminine desire flourish.

Yet, "diva" is not simply interchangeable with any "strong" female character who is accorded more psychic space than the femme fatale. Diva narratives are defined by the psychic and cinematic space of a certain type of featured female character, one who is usually financially independent of a man, circulates "in the world" due to her career or social status (making her a "public success"), is somehow a "failure" in her romantic or familial relationships ("domestic diva" is a contradiction in terms), and, importantly, has her suffering spectacularized by the film in some way. For example, given this definition, *All About Eve* (1950) could be characterized as a diva film because the character is a "public success" (a famous actress), but a "private failure" (on the verge of alienating the good man who loves her, due to her insecurities and jealousy, throughout the majority of the film), and because of the cinematic space given to her fantasy, particularly in scenes like the one at the party where Davis-as-Margo-Channing's drunkenness is a means of clearing the way and signaling to the audience that she is permitted to act out her suffering — extravagantly and protractedly. Her drunkenness sets the stage for the enactment of her fantasy. But another Davis film, *All This, and Heaven Too* (1940), would not be characterized as a diva film because, although her character can be described as "strong" and

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*Lena Geyer* (1936) (Wood "Sapponics," 33), a novel which features a close relationship between a famous diva and her female secretary that has queer undertones.

even "independent," there is no moment where the character's fantasy takes up space or is lavishly elaborated. Furthermore, her character in this film is actually a conventional romantic "success," entering into marriage with a man who is, if not the passionate love of her life, at least a kind and comfortable mate with whom she can live without conflict. So, while Davis in *All This, and Heaven Too* would hardly be classified as a femme fatale, and, in many ways, can be seen as a "strong," interesting female character, she is not a diva. Although most diva films are reliant on a heterosexual romance plot (most of these are conventional narrative films starring female protagonists, after all), the depiction of the romance is minimized (usually featuring only one or two scenes — if any — of the couple in love) in favor of an elaborate staging of the female character's desire. The male partners become incidental in these narratives, and the films feature a diminished space for the couple in favor of an expanded space for the fantasy of the female lead. So, the diva protagonist is defined by a narrative conflict between her public success and her private failure, and occupies an elaborate space for the spectacularization of her conflicting desires.

Koestenbaum's definition of "diva" from *The Queen's Throat* is one of the most useful for thinking about the diva as a cultural type:

Diva is a specific female role (a woman opera singer of great fame and brilliance), but it is also a pliant social institution, a framework for emotion, a kind of conduct, expectation, or desire, that can move through a body that has nothing to do with opera, that can flush the cheeks of a nonsinging, nonperforming body, a body called 'private' because it does not depend on being seen or heard. (111)

Although the second half of his definition is centered upon the fan or spectator (which is the focus of Koestenbaum's book), he understands not only that diva is a role, and not a person, but also that "diva" is a "framework for emotion." It is this diva "framework for emotion," defined by a particular — and particularly queer — constellation of feminine desire that I hope to elucidate by examining the diva protagonist onscreen.

I will analyze scenes from three films that feature what I consider "diva protagonists," all of which have widely varying statuses in terms of queer film historiography. The first is *Rhapsodia Satanica* (1917), an example of the Italian *diva* genre of silent film. The Italian diva film exists in its own context and has been written about as its own distinct national cinema genre, but I want to view it alongside other films featuring diva protagonists from the United States to demonstrate the transnational consistency of the diva type. To my knowledge, the Italian silent diva films have not been considered in a queer context, but they are characterized by a *fin-de-siecle* Decadent aesthetic and are defined by the flamboyant acting styles of their female stars, which appeals to a certain queer sensibility. Next I will consider *Funny Girl* (1968), the American musical starring Barbra Streisand. *Funny Girl* was Streisand's first film, and her star-making role, but although Streisand is a well-known gay icon, she remains an underexplored figure in queer studies. A closer look at this under-theorized film may not necessarily illuminate all the reasons for Streisand's queer appeal, but it will explain its foundation in the diva constellation of desire. Lastly, I want to look at a film that has a legendary status in queer historiography: *Queen Christina* (1933), a non-singing diva film of the Hollywood studio era, starring Greta Garbo. With its daringly visibly queer protagonist, a cross-dressing lesbian queen played by Garbo who shares an infamous onscreen kiss with her maidservant, *Queen Christina* has been lauded by scholars from Susan Sontag to Andrea Weiss to Patricia White as one of the last gasps of the depiction of multivalent sexuality before the Production Code was strictly enforced and erased all but the faintest traces of queer sexuality from Hollywood films for

decades to come. I will consider Queen Christina's queerness in a different light, specifically via the meaning conferred on her by her preference for living in her fantasies, in her head, and not necessarily for her lesbian legibility.

Comparing a seemingly disparate group of films transnationally and across time seems arbitrary and rife with pitfalls, but what I hope this motley crew of examples can generate is an outline of the consistency with which these tropes have elaborated the diva over the years, from silent cinema to studio-era drama to post studio-era musicals. Furthermore, each of these films features a very different manifestation of what I contend is a hallmark of the diva protagonist: a scene in which the diva's private reverie receives an elaborate staging, marked by a spectacularization of female desire, often in the context of heterosexual romantic "failure," following the very different styles of the lead performers. By comparing an Italian silent film star and stage-trained turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century tragedienne (Lyda Borelli in *Rapsodia Satanica*) to a Broadway musical star (Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*) to a non-singing Golden Age movie star (Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*), I hope to show a consistency in the diva type amidst different permutations of performance style, and different modes of filmmaking, from silent drama to talkies to big budget musicals.

This spectrum of films also demonstrates two important formal tropes concerning the diva-defining scenes featuring the spectacularization of the longing and desire of the diva protagonist. All of the films examined in this chapter (and countless more of those featuring diva protagonists) are distinguished by a visual "doubling," or "self-multiplication" of the protagonist prior to the spectacular scene of longing. Furthermore, all of the films in question feature a scene that exhibits a visual style — achieved by costume, lighting, setting, or any other aspect of mise-en-scene — that obscures the outline of the protagonist's body, creating a seemingly "unbounded" presence, spread throughout the frame. This chapter will explore the connections between narcissism, the diva's queer "doubling" or multiplication, and her abstracted body in scenes that define the diva protagonist.

Although I expand the diva type beyond opera singers, I want to emphasize that the cultural type — singer or not — inherits the freedoms, limitations, and paradoxes of ideas about the female voice, which stem from the diva's operatic beginnings. The importance of the idea of the voice to the diva also allows for a reconsideration of "narcissism," a concept which may allow the diva some resistance to representational control. In Chapter 1, I explained how the Sontag-Malibran duets could challenge the persistent notion of feminine harmony as a desire to return to a pre-Oedipal union with the mother which is dismissed as regressive or "narcissistic" in a pejorative sense, a view which mimics dominant culture's long history of conceiving of queer desire as narcissistic and inward-turning (Brennan 9). Here I will argue *for* narcissism, but not in the conventional sense of the term which equates narcissism with mere vanity. Instead, I will focus on the crucial confluence of identification and desire — a relation which defines the diva onscreen — and the way this relation informs a queer narcissism which affords women some resistance to patriarchal oppressions, providing a crucial space for thinking and self-reflection.

But Waugh's choice of term — diva *syndrome* (his idea that the gay male affinity for divas stems from their allegedly shared male object choice [109], an idea with which I take issue in Chapter 1) — with its pathologizing cast, is useful for its canny symmetry with early psychoanalytic ideas shared by Freud and Havelock Ellis regarding the "pathology" of narcissism, which they believed was particularly shared by homosexual men and heterosexual women (Bruhm, 2-4). The erasure of lesbians from the pantheon of narcissists can be credited to

Freud's typical inability to conceive of desire that does not include a phallic (or pseudo-phallic) term.<sup>64</sup> What Freud's and Waugh's conceptions have in common is that, according to them, both heterosexual female and gay male narcissists are still addressing their desire to a presumably male "audience" — they may be primarily concerned with their own image, but a man is the imaginary vantage point from which they are seeing this ideal and alluring vision of themselves. But I see the diva differently, and argue that in her most crucial, defining moments, she is not addressing a man (or if she is, he is the flimsiest of props). Instead, she is self-facing and self-addressing, locked in a confrontation with herself that is unresolvable, but grand.

Here the pathologizing psychoanalytic lens of narcissism is useful because it posits certain desires as *impossible*. As Steven Bruhm notes in *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (2001), the queer narcissist's desire is "constructed on the aporia of the other he sees/wants, the other who is himself" (16). It is the idea of the *aporia* that is central to the diva, who struggles extravagantly, but *impossibly* in ostentatious onscreen arias of unfulfillment. The impossibility of her desire is, of course, predicated on the idea that her desires are not really for a man, but for some impossible-to-realize version of herself, and this intra-feminine desire is unthinkable and unrepresentable in the culture at large. Writers such as Earl Jackson,<sup>65</sup> Ellis Hanson<sup>66</sup>, and Michael Warner<sup>67</sup> have embraced the idea of queer narcissism to varying extents by embracing the "pathology" of the term in a gesture of transgressive reclamation. And even though, on one hand, I see the diva's narcissism as a way of expressing the impossibility of her desire, like Jackson, Warner, and Hanson, I also see potential liberation in this narcissism, and in feminine narcissism in general.

My reappraisal of narcissism relies on Kaja Silverman's reassessment of the Negative Oedipus complex in *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), her book on psychoanalysis and the voice of women in conventional narrative cinema. The Negative Oedipus Complex is, in short, a time in a child's development (for our purposes here, a girl's), when she identifies with and also desires her mother, a phase which occurs, crucially, after the child has a sense of herself as separate from her mother. Citing Freud's essays on "Femininity" and "Female Sexuality," Silverman draws out the Negative Oedipus Complex because it corrects a tendency to understand desire only in terms of a relation to the phallus (following Luce Irigaray's critique of Freud's tendency toward "sexual 'indifference'" — an understanding of women that casts them only as not-men [Silverman 150]). In her quest to restore the importance of "the crucial role that the mother plays in the early history of subjectivity" of the female subject (150), Silverman begins by emphasizing the role of the female voice:

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<sup>64</sup> See Luce Irigaray's critique of Freud's "sexual indifference" in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). There are also exceptions to this. Significantly, Silverman begins her reassessment of the Negative Oedipus complex by citing "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" where Freud assesses his homosexual patients "in whom feminine identification did not give rise to the usual masculine object-choice, or in whom a masculine identification failed to dictate the expected feminine object-choice, but in whom desire and identification might be said to converge around either 'femininity' and 'masculinity,'" (Silverman 151) which not only allowed Freud to understand that there was a moment of identification and desire of the daughter for the mother after pre-Oedipality, but also allows Silverman to explain the importance of this narcissistic operation for the adult female subject, regardless of her sexual orientation.

<sup>65</sup> See Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*.

<sup>66</sup> See Hanson, "Narcissism and Critique."

<sup>67</sup> See Warner, "Homo-Narcissism; Or, Heterosexuality."

Not only is her face the visual mirror in which the child first sees itself, but her voice is the acoustic mirror in which it first hears itself. The child gropes its way toward identity by incorporating the mother's facial expressions, sounds, and movements, not just before that mythical moment at which it first catches sight of its own reflection, but afterwards, as it begins to assimilate the system of language. [...] It is, at any rate, this conjunction of identification and eroticism which I would describe as the 'censored, repressed element of the feminine,' and which I believe to have a vital relation to feminism. (150-1)

Crucially for Silverman, "femininity" is not equated with passivity, and she believes that a close reading of Freud yields the insight that the girl's identification with the mother "would seem to coincide in a very exact way with what Freud mistakenly, in my view, describes as the phallic phase, and indeed to be responsible for the girl's aspiration toward activity" (152). This activity, writes Freud in "Female Sexuality," takes the form of mimicking the mother, including mothering and playing with dolls. Silverman takes this to mean that, "Identification with the mother during the negative Oedipus complex is at least in part an identification with activity. The equation of femininity and passivity is a consequence only of the positive Oedipus complex, and the cultural discourses and institutions which support it" (153).

Again, the influence of and desire for an active femininity in the development of the female subject is enabled by a confluence of identification with and desire for the mother. Silverman writes:

In effect, the girl aspires both to possess and be possessed by the mother, or, to state it in more classically Oedipal terms, both to seduce the mother and to be seduced by her. Of course, what is *not* classically Oedipal about this situation is that the girl's aspiration to occupy the place of the mother does not imply the latter's exclusion from her erotic economy, but the endless reversibility of their relative positions. Moreover, although there is a third term, and it is — as usual — the father, he figures as the object neither of desire nor of identification. He is 'only a troublesome rival,' as Freud insists in both 'Female Sexuality' and 'Femininity.' (153)

Already, this assessment of the role of the father in the powerful intra-feminine configuration of desire between mother and daughter mimics the structure of the diva film, with the poor, prop-like male love interest occupying the periphery. But what is even more significant is Silverman's explanation of the ways that this relation of identification and desire resembles narcissism:

This convergence of object-choice and identification speaks to nothing so much as narcissistic love, as does the reversibility implicit within the wish both to possess and to be the mother. It seems to me, indeed, that Freud's essay on narcissism can be read as a virtual gloss upon the female version of the negative Oedipus complex. In that text, he remarks on the close coincidence of narcissism in infantile life, and elaborates upon certain later forms of object-choice which are predicated in some way upon identification. (153)

This female narcissism, argues Silverman, "may represent a form of resistance to the positive Oedipus complex, with its inheritance of self-contempt and loathing" (154). Indeed, Mladen Dolar in *A Voice and Nothing More*, offers the same connection between the voice and its role in forming a crucial bedrock of narcissism. He writes that, "To hear oneself speak — or simply, just to hear oneself [note the admission of the importance of the voice beyond logos!] — can be seen as an elementary formula of narcissism that is needed to produce the minimal form of the self" (39).

Yet, at the same time, Silverman acknowledges that, for women, this “minimal form of the self” is often eclipsed by cultural pressure to diminish oneself. Silverman answers her own question, “What happens to the girls’ narcissism?” as she enters into adulthood and culture (via the Positive Oedipus complex) with the answer: melancholia. She writes that Freud’s essay on “Mourning and Melancholia,” “provides a chillingly accurate account of a condition which may be pathological for the male subject, but which represents the norm for the female subject — that condition of melancholia which blights her relations with both herself and her culture” (155). Significantly, the same can be said of narcissism in the classic psychoanalytic view: “pathological for the male subject, but which represents the norm for the female subject.” Melancholia is the other side of narcissism for the female subject, and either side of the coin is a damning verdict.

By pacing through all this psychoanalytic theory, there are two things I want to stress: the first is that, what might be read in men as healthy self-regard, reads as “narcissism” when the subject is a woman. Such is the misogynistic dismissal of the inspiration afforded to one woman by another, by her like, and this idea has shaped the diva. Yet “narcissism,” for women, as Silverman explains, is a necessary bulwark against “melancholia,” against the feeling of irremediable loss brought about by the position of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Therefore, “narcissism” — *especially* for women — can be a tool, a layer of fat against the long, patriarchal winter.<sup>68</sup> Still, as a woman, melancholia is also probably her fate and the diva protagonist, I will show, does not disprove this.

But the second and most important point to take from the Silverman’s explanation of the importance of the Negative Oedipus complex is the powerful convergence of female identification and desire, the structure at the heart of the diva’s doubling. This is the space of potential resistance and Silverman locates it, crucially, in the female voice. I would even argue that it is the investment in the female voice, rather than the image, that allows Silverman to boldly value this “repressed element of the feminine,” which she claims has a “vital relation to feminism” (151). It is worth noting that “the feminine” is equated with “femininity” for Silverman, as evidenced in her assertion that, “The equation of femininity and passivity is a consequence only of the positive Oedipus complex, and the cultural discourses and institutions which support it” (153). The concept of “femininity” was a vital battleground for feminist film studies, particular at the time that Silverman was writing. *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) was written just one year after *The Desire to Desire*, Mary Ann Doane’s influential feminist reading of the Hollywood “Woman’s Film” of the 1940s. Regarding the notion of “femininity,” Doane writes, “‘femininity’ as a category is not the possession of women — it is not necessarily something we should strive to reclaim. The feminine position has come to exemplify the roles of consumer and spectator in their embodiment of a curiously passive desiring subjectivity” (32), elaborating, famously, “The cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access to the other. The mirror/window takes on then the aspect of a trap whereby her subjectivity becomes synonymous with her objectification” (33). For Doane, the *image* is the danger for women, a “trap” wherein women can only understand themselves as reflected in the fantasies of men, allowing them only a “passively desiring subjectivity.” Silverman does not disagree with Doane, especially regarding Hollywood cinema. Indeed, *The Acoustic Mirror* is dedicated to explaining how the female voice is most often anchored to the female body in a way that inscribes it in all the oppressive operations which Doane explains. The

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<sup>68</sup> Fat is also a fabled (and not completely mythical) trait often marked as desirable for the sustained career of a voice (Koestenbaum *Queen’s Throat*, 101-2).

difference, for Silverman, lies in the way that she sees a way out of this bind: through the acoustic mirror of the female voice<sup>69</sup>, through the simultaneous operation of identification and desire between women, which undergirds the structure of desire represented by the diva, and which can, for Silverman, open a way to redeem femininity itself.

In Chapter 1, I cited Stanley Cavell's use of the female operatic voice as a means to understanding a crisis of meaning in Western culture (coincident with a broad definition of "modernity"), an ability to "express ... the inexpressible" (144) in his book, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1995). Intriguingly, Cavell's description of the role of women in opera repeats, in a different register, some of the ideas inherent in Silverman's revaluation of female narcissism. He describes the "made state" of the prima donna during an aria, which necessitates "abandoning oneself" in the act of "transcendence of operatic singing" (144-5). Significantly, he describes this transcendent singing as "an irrupting of a new perspective of the self to the itself [...] an ecstatic response whose self-reflectiveness suggests the structure of narcissism" (145). Cavell also stresses the importance of the prima donna's gender during this narcissistic operation, explaining what the culture risks by such displays. He writes that, "it exposes her as thinking, so exposes her to the power of those who do not want her to think, do not, that is to say, want autonomous proof of her existence" (145-146). For Cavell, the prima donna's "narcissism" is not attributable to her offstage vanity, but to her singing, which he defines as a self-reflective operation of thinking.

What is narcissism, then, but "self-regard?" The diva's narcissism is, a pun, a play on the conventional societal demand that women attend to their appearance by "regarding" their reflections, which, for the diva, becomes much, much more. The diva's "self-regard" furnishes a space to desire, to fantasize, and therefore to *think*, and imagine oneself *otherwise*; to conceive of a world where one is valued and esteemed. This space of "self-regard" characterizes the diva film.

### **Rapsodia Satanica (1917)**

*Rapsodia Satanica* (1917), a quintessential example of the Italian silent diva genre, culminates in one such spectacularly visualized scene of desire and self-regard. Starring the great Italian actress Lyda Borelli, the film centers upon a noblewoman, Alba d'Oltrevita (Borelli), who makes a Faustian bargain with Mephistopheles: he promises to restore her youth and beauty, as long as she renounces love. She accepts the terms, and becomes young and lovely once again. Already, we are presented with two important characteristics of the diva. First, there is a female protagonist who exists outside of a bourgeois domestic female role. As an unmarried noblewoman without a father or brother in the picture, Alba already has a degree of freedom over and above that of the average Italian woman (or a woman of just about any nationality) in 1917. Second, focused as she is on her own qualities, her own "youth and beauty," she could easily be charged with "narcissism." Significantly, this focus on her looks is *not* for the sake of the love of a man (in fact, she *renounces* love!), which would be the normative and sanctioned aim of such yearnings. Alba's preoccupation with her looks purely for her own sake emphasizes the queerness of her narcissism, and her association with Mephistopheles underscores its "sinister" cast.

The plot of the film has the feeling of a dark fairytale: Alba inspires the attentions of a pair of brothers, Sergio and Tristano. Faced with Alba's indifference to his affections, Sergio actually dies of love for her. Meanwhile, Alba favors Tristano, but it is not until they both watch

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<sup>69</sup> Silverman explains how the female voice unanchored to a visible female body onscreen can challenge "patriarchal regimes of looking," and turns to avant-garde film to support her point (165-186).

Sergio expire that a deep pity stirs in Alba and the intertitle reads: "[...] her heart is caught by love."<sup>70</sup>

Although frequent use is made of the idea of love throughout the diva genre, any object of desire, be it a male lover or a child, outside of the diva's relation with herself or with her like, is only the frailest of plot devices. The male figures in a diva film are relatively inconsequential and, oftentimes, interchangeable. They are mere springboards for the diva's fantasies, which are not love duets, but solo numbers. This is certainly the case with Alba's quintessential diva moment at the end of *Rapsodia Satanica*.

Alba does not run to Tristano after realizing her love. Instead, she wanders the grounds and interiors of her "Castle of Illusions" (both the literal and poetic title of her residence). Mephistopheles materializes during one point in Alba's reverie, and works to turn the situation to his advantage. He gestures towards a window through which we can see the outline of a man on horseback in the distance, whom Mephistopheles claims is Tristano, Alba's new beloved. She is filled with optimism and overcome by emotion, and begins gathering flowers and strewing them about her rooms.

Mephistopheles disappears for the moment and Alba is left alone, seated at her window in a diaphanous nightgown, tinted lavender.<sup>71</sup> She looks out the window towards the man on horseback in the distance, but, as we will see, he is only a mirage. In a memorably disorienting sequence, Alba moves to the mirror in her bedroom, and it seems as if many "Albas" walk by in an unending succession until her figure comes to rest and we see just two "Albas" — one in the left of the frame, and the other as her reflection in the mirror (Fig. 1). Then the effect is repeated as Alba backs away from the mirror and the image of multiple Albas is repeated as we see Alba-after-Alba pass in front of us in a dizzying parade. This is a trope of the diva on film: before the big "aria," which need not be musical, but is marked by sustained and elaborate reverie, the diva confronts herself and multiplies. This creative "generation" — a confrontation with a double, with an image that is both self and other — marks the beginning of the diva's ritual of desire.



(Fig. 1) More than one Alba.

An extended sequence follows where Alba walks out of her room and into the night alone as her veils and scarves billow behind her lavender nightgown. She is drawn purposefully through a forest as if led by some unnamable force, with chin lifted, chest held high, and arms

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<sup>70</sup> The translations of *Rapsodia Satanica*'s original Italian intertitles are my own. Special thanks to Cineteca Bologna for the opportunity to view this film.

<sup>71</sup> The film features hand-tinted color frames throughout.

open wide, yearning for something, looking as if she wanted to burst open and float apart on the wind. Her desire is unfocused but pervasive; eroticism permeates every object, garment, and breeze. Alba's scarves, fluttering nightgown, windswept hair, and the blustery forest at twilight are the stuff of this vision of desire. There is no superimposed image of Tristano, no kiss, no clinched coupling to be found. In other words, this is the big love scene, and it concerns only Alba and the elements of her turbulently picturesque surroundings.

Alba's wafting veils make it seem at times as if she has actually taken flight, and her whole body speaks of yearning for openness, for simultaneous fusion with all that surrounds her and diffusion of herself, for relief (Fig. 2-3). And while the staging of this scene is unquestionably erotic, built as it is around Borelli's languid postures, its eroticism is not centered upon the objectification of the female form in the sense in which Laura Mulvey described the fetishistic framing of women's bodies in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In fact, Borelli's figure is quite obscured by the heft of her garments, the length of her scarves, and the dramatic winds all around her. This depiction of the diva's body is characteristic of the scene of reverie in the diva film: although these female protagonists are most certainly on display, and although the scenes are erotically charged, the charge is not based on crude objectification. On the contrary, the figure of the diva is almost always obscured or nearly invisible during these key scenes. This, I believe, is due to the diva's origins in opera and ideas about the unbounded female voice: the most stratospheric and most celebrated voice of the art form. One might expect that female expressiveness of this order — whether literally musical, as for the singer, or figuratively musical as in this sequence from *Rapsodia Satanica* (a title that connotes its silent musicality) — would be so threatening, so overwhelming that conventional representation would seek to bind it by anchoring it to a body, to a fetishizable — and, therefore, controllable — form. But it doesn't. It is as if these two ways of experiencing women are incompatible: there cannot be a greatly expressive "voice" and a fetishizable body at the same time. A great diva cannot "sing" an aria nude.



(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)

As Ann Carson describes in "The Gender of Sound," in Western antiquity, the sound of women's voices, especially those lamentations made outside language, such as the ululations of mourning, were deemed dangerous and potentially subversive to the social order. Similarly, the

operatic female voice has been noted for the way its expressiveness is *beyond words*.<sup>72</sup> It follows that the diva shares this exile from culture and, therefore, from representation, but it is also an escape: expressing the inexpressible, she howls outside the city walls of signification, evading its death-grip. She is somehow unbound, an affect emphasized by her billowing outline.

But the diva's escape is temporary, and, narratively, she *will* be contained. This is a conventional film, after all, and still operates according to conventional (patriarchal) logic. But in the case of *Rhapsodia Satanica*, that containment requires supernatural intervention. At the end of her walk into the woods, Alba meets the cloaked figure of a man, but it is not her lover Tristano who waits for her, it is Mephistopheles. The man on horseback, whom we presumed was Tristano, was a mirage created by Mephistopheles, himself. Alba goes to Mephistopheles, as if in a trance, and he welcomes her into his cloak. When she emerges, she is an old woman again. The now-haggard Alba staggers toward the stream with the evil Mephistopheles by her side, and we see her expire near the water. For Alba, the "song of marriage" heard on the wind is actually a song of death. Divas do not end up coupled happily ever after. But death is not the point of the diva film. Fantasy and longing are the point — the operations of desire — not death.

Significantly, the final shot of the film is not of the dead Alba nor of the gloating Mephistopheles, but of a grove of cypress trees and sky reflected in the water of the stream, the very setting of the Narcissus legend. This reflection of a world underscores the idea that the film is a self-conscious elaboration of a fantasy, Alba's fantasy, and that *diva* is characterized by the staging of female desire and its creative investments in overdetermined scenes. Again, this diva "aria" need not be literally musical, but the origins of the diva are located in the legacy of awe and fear of the female voice, of its ambivalent place outside language, and in the threat that it might loosen the stays of patriarchal control. The very shape of the diva's unbounded body, struggling like a winged creature within the frame, is the shape of this expression struggling against containment, struggling to transcend.

### **Funny Girl (1968)**

While the diva's attempts at escape are often thwarted and punished, they are also predicated on a certain optimism. *Funny Girl* (1968), starring Barbra Streisand, is one such example of the diva's optimism, intriguingly illustrated in a final scene, a diva number sung by Streisand, gloriously mistitled, "My Man." As argued above, the staging of the diva fantasy itself does not typically include lingering representations of a masculine object of desire, but the narratives in which divas appear almost always rely upon heterosexual romance plots, no matter how unsuccessfully they may bear the crushing weight of the diva's overwhelmingly self-referential desire. In fact, it is her "unluckiness" in love that is essential to our idea of the diva.<sup>73</sup>

Created 50 years after *Rhapsodia Satanica*, the musical *Funny Girl* establishes the parameters of "diva" in much the same way as the film from 1917, namely with extensive scenes of female fantasy. Like Alba's wish in *Rhapsodia Satanica* for youth and beauty, Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* does nothing but voice her desires throughout the entire film. Fanny wants two things: fame ("I'm the Greatest Star") and the dashing gambler,

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<sup>72</sup> See discussion of the female voice as "beyond logos" in Chapter 1. See also Mladen Dolar *A Voice And Nothing More* (p 40-50), Roland Barthes "The Grain of the Voice" (505), Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (138-45), and Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice* (118-22).

<sup>73</sup> Many of the following ideas about desire were inspired by Lauren Berlant's *Desire/Love* (2012), and rest implicitly on her formulation of psychoanalytic concepts in this book.

Nicky Arnstein, whose name she sings in internal monologues throughout the film. "Nicky Arnstein Nicky Arnstein" is more than a name, it's a mantra, the name Fanny gives to her impossible object of desire. At some point, Fanny does seem to "possess" her Nicky Arnstein, and the two are married, but it doesn't last long. Inevitably, Nick feels overwhelmed and emasculated by his financial failure and his wife's professional success, as Fanny fulfills her other (truer) desire and becomes a great star.

The final parting of Nick and Fanny directly precedes the scene in *Funny Girl* that is, in many ways, the formal equivalent of Alba's walk into the woods in *Rapsodia Satanica*, namely the scene where Streisand-as-Fanny performs the song "My Man" at the Ziegfeld Follies. Prior to "My Man," we see Fanny seated at her dressing room mirror. Fanny, like Alba, is wearing a diaphanous lavender nightgown, and, like Alba, we see Fanny's reflection in the mirror as the camera pans, and she powders her face at her dressing table. Suddenly, another reflection joins hers: Nick enters in the background, tall and dark (is he Tristano or Mephistopheles?). This is supposed to be a moment of decision for the couple: Nick has just gotten out of jail for embezzlement after 18 months, and Nick and Fanny must decide if they will stay married or part ways. The dialogue of the first part of the scene is totally at odds with Fanny's appearance. Her words are bashful and girlish. She tells Nick, "I feel like a kid on a blind date," yet she looks regal, rising grandly from her seat in her gown and holding her chin up. This is just one minor example among many in this film that suggests the romance plot is the flimsiest of narrative excuses for the staging of the diva's scene, pretending to force her to occupy the role of lovestruck girl when everyone can see that she is a self-sufficient queen.

One of the most compelling things about *Funny Girl* is its exploitation of this idea. Seemingly conscious of its reliance upon an unconvincing convention, *Funny Girl* dramatizes Nick's prop-like nature in a memorable dialogue exchange. When it becomes clear that the couple will not be getting back together, Nick hints that the trouble between him and Fanny has everything to do with the fact that he feels useless to her. "What did I ever do for you, darling? What did I ever give you that you couldn't have gotten for yourself?" he asks. Fanny is at a loss for an answer. Finally, her eyes settle on a gift from Nick on her dresser: "A blue marble egg," she says. "No one but you would have gotten me that. And you'd made me feel sort of... beautiful, you know, for a very long time." "You are beautiful," Nick replies.

But Nick himself is nothing more than a blue marble egg, a knick-knack, a prop. As Fanny's object of desire, his only function was to enable her to see herself as beautiful, to let her finally embody her own fantasy of herself. "Nicky Arnstein! Nicky Arnstein!" was Fanny's cry, not for a man, but for a more complete vision of herself. Like Tristano in *Rapsodia Satanica*, Nicky Arnstein is a shadowy mirage, an imaginary vantage point from which the diva can see a version of an ideal self.

This imaginary vantage point is key to *Funny Girl*. At the end of the dressing room scene in *Funny Girl*, directly before the performance of "My Man," Fanny watches in the mirror as Nick leaves. One might expect to see an image of Fanny alone, emphasizing the fact that her man has left, that she will be lonely, with only an empty dressing room to call "home." However, although she is technically "alone" at this point, what we get is a shot of *three* Fannys – two reflections of her face in the mirror to the left and the center, and an image of the back of her head to the right. Like the many reflections of Alba in the mirror that acted as a prelude to her silent aria of desire in the woods in *Rapsodia Satanica*, Fanny, too, has

multiplied! Remember, we saw her single reflection as Nick Arnstein entered the scene, and now that he is gone it is as if Fanny has replicated, not just to fill the "gap" left by his absence, but to fulfill the promise of her desire for him, which amounts to a spectacular proliferation of *herself*. When Nick was interacting with Fanny, the film showed her as singular and mundane, bound by the rules of physics and a disappointing, limiting relation to an "other," so long as he was present. But the moment Nick leaves, the film shows Fanny blossoming into multiple actors in her own fantasy.

Like Alba, Fanny plays all the parts in her imaginary drama of desire, but the enumeration of her roles reaches beyond mere doubleness: it fills an entire audience. The framing of "My Man" eloquently sets up this notion of diva as both spectator and participant in her own fantasy. The scene begins with an establishing shot of the interior of a theater. We can vaguely make out the heads of individual audience and orchestra members. From afar, we see Fanny enter center stage. We are in the role of spectator. However, as the song begins, we get a view of Fanny in medium close-up that would hardly be possible if one was an actual audience member seated in an actual theater. What space are we occupying at this moment?

As the song begins, Streisand-as-Fanny appears tentative and tearful. She is only barely able to get the first verse out ("Oh my man I love him so/ He'll never know/ All my life is just despair/ But I don't care/ When he takes me in his arms/ The world is right/ Alright"), over a gentle string accompaniment. Tears are running down her face, and her vocal tone is uneven and choked with emotion. As the second verse begins ("What's the difference if I say/ I'll go away/ When I know I'll come back/ On my knees someday/ For whatever my man is/ I am his/ Forever more"), the angle shifts and the camera moves in closer. Fanny is de-centered and positioned on the right side of the frame, two rows of colored stage lights on the left. Dressed all in black, she blends in completely with the dark background, except for her face and hair. She continues to fight against her emotion to get through the second verse, but as the orchestra kicks in for the reprise, she seems to slowly rid herself of all the specific memories of "Nick," which is merely the name given to the concern she must have had as she struggled to get through the first part of the song. With help from the percussion section, Fanny seems to both come out of herself and into herself at the same time. She seems to abandon the sad inner monologue that was keeping her from performing the song to the best of her ability. Suddenly, she adopts a tone of defiance, of absorption, and belts the remainder of the song at full tilt. She closes her eyes and lets her head fall back as she gives in to the music and the pleasure of the power of her own voice.

The second half of the song, the belted portion, is identical to the first part: it is a simple repetition of the first two verses, just with a fuller, brassier orchestral accompaniment. The simplicity of the lyrics remains the same, as does the irony. Whether the irony is bitter or sublime is for the beholder to determine, but the fact is that Fanny does not have "her man" at the end of this film. Nick is gone, and Fanny is not his "forever more," and we doubt very much that she will come back to him "on her knees" someday. After all, she is not serenading *him* with this tune in a private space meant just for them, as characters sometimes do in musicals. Nor did she chase after him when he left her dressing room. She is performing this onstage as part of her own act.

"My Man" is "Nicky Arnstein" is a "blue marble egg," and of course, *the song remains exactly the same* because it doesn't matter what the prop is named, Fanny's object of desire is Fanny. Certainly here, in the final moments of "My Man," Fanny is the greatest star. Witness

to and star of her own scene of desire, we are drawn fully into Fanny's fantasy. Once again occupying a point of view that would be impossible as an audience member in a theater, the film gives us a view of Streisand-as-Fanny in medium shot, but now she is completely encased in darkness, save for her face, neck, and hands. Gone are the stage lights of the earlier scene. Gone too, is the audience. We seem to be removed from even the fantastical space and time of the theater setting, existing fully in darkness, with only Fanny's face, neck, and hands left to perform the drama.<sup>74</sup>

But what is this place? Surely this is the opposite of Alba's lushly decorative Pre-Raphaelite woods, Fanny's indistinguishable black gown the antithesis of Alba's flowing lavender nightdress and billowing shawls. How can the "scene of desire" be eroticized if there is barely an identifiable scenic element in which to invest? Well, there is Fanny, and in a way, the viewer does have an erotic investment in her, even though, again, her image is almost the inverse of a Laura Mulvey-style conception of a fetish object, which is all besequined form and clinging gowns, à la Marlene Dietrich. We cannot make out the contours of Fanny's body, but we are invited to fixate on her face, neck, and hands. Yet, what the viewer is ultimately most invited to invest in is Fanny's performance of her own desire. This final moment is the purest representation of the scene of fantasy, an admission by the film that we are existing in Fanny's imagination. The credits come in immediately after the song ends, and we hear nothing from the audience. There is no applause, no indication that there are even others present, except for that initial establishing shot that places the action in the theater. In this way, the final blackness of "My Man" is exactly the same place as Alba's enchanted forest – a space of reverie.

The comparison deepens even further when we note Streisand-as-Fanny's body language in the final moments: arms spread wide, chest open, chin up high – this pose is identical to Alba's throughout her last scene (Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7). In fact, this pose, as long as it is imbued with a certain amount of passion and defiance, may define "diva" as much as the other elements in the staging of desire. It may communicate a show of strength, protest, or glory, but above all, it communicates longing.

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<sup>74</sup> This trope can be seen throughout numerous musical diva films, especially those of mid-20th-century Hollywood, many of which I will analyze more closely in Chapter 3 in terms of the idea of the "comeback." Examples include: the last half of Judy Garland's performance of "The Man That Got Away" in *A Star Is Born* (1954), where her dark dress and dark lighting obscure almost everything but her face; Garland's rendition of "By Myself" from *I Could Go On Singing* (1963), where she wears a red dress against a red curtained background, which performs a similar body-erasing function; Liza Minnelli's performance of "But The World Goes 'Round" in *New York, New York* (1977), where the lights during a recording studio session inexplicably darken until the shot illuminates only Minnelli's face, which seems to float in some other realm as she finishes the song; and Marion Cotillard's performance as Edith Piaf singing "Je Ne Regrette Rien" at the end of the biopic, *La Vie En Rose* (2007).



Fig. 4 (*Rhapsodia Satanica*)



Fig. 5 (*Funny Girl*)

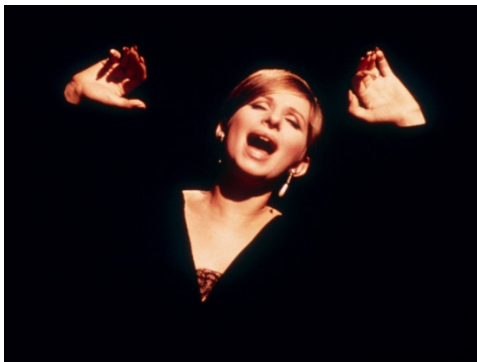


Fig. 6 (*Funny Girl*)

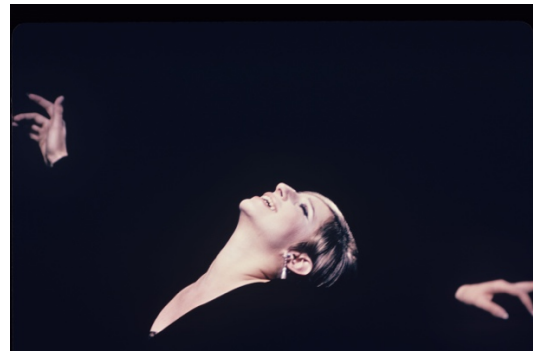


Fig. 7 (*Funny Girl*)

In the end, "longing" is the thread of consistency that runs through *Rhapsodia Satanica* and *Funny Girl*, and throughout scores of works (or performances, or even poses) that can be characterized as *diva*. Crucially, this longing must be given room to flourish in its own setting, which is always the interior world of the diva seeking to be made legible in exterior terms.

### *Queen Christina* (1933)

The interior world seeking to be made legible in exterior terms is made intriguingly explicit in *Queen Christina*. In one of several scenes that constitute the setting of desire in this film, Garbo, as the 17th century Swedish queen, is indulging in a romantic liaison with a Spanish nobleman, Antonio (John Gilbert) whom she has met while they are both snowed in at a country inn. Their relationship begins under false pretenses, with Garbo passing as a young aristocratic *man* traveling the countryside with male companions. The Spaniard and the transvestite queen strike up a friendly conversation, and thanks to a convenient plot maneuver, must spend the night in the same bed. It becomes apparent that the queen is not a young man<sup>75</sup> and the friendly enthusiasm the two shared earlier in the night soon turns to sexual passion. The lovers spend three blissful days and nights together ensconced in their room while a blustery snowstorm provides them with an alibi for their inseparability. The snow is key to the setting of this fantasy, and I will return to discuss it in greater detail.

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<sup>75</sup> Yet, the two are so flirtatious when Garbo is passing as a man, and the importance of the queen's "gender reveal" so minimal, that this situation constitutes its own in-joke, and adds another layer of queerness to a film already saturated in fairly explicit lesbianism.

Meanwhile, in true diva fashion, the most memorable "love scene" between Garbo and Antonio centers mainly in Garbo's reverie. The scene in question takes place during the first night of their love affair. They have spent the day in bed, sheltered by the storm. It is now nighttime, and as the snow continues to fall, we see them in a medium shot, as Antonio watches Garbo suggestively eat grapes in front of the fire. The camera settles on Garbo and follows her as she rises from her reclining position and wanders about the room. We watch, for what seems like an eternity, while Garbo moves from object to object, fondling a bureau, then a mirror, looking lovingly at each as if she had never seen such things before.

Significantly, Garbo pauses at the mirror. Just as in *Rapsodia Satanica* and *Funny Girl*, the mirror multiplies the diva's image and announces that her fantasy has begun, and that she will now be occupying multiple places as spectator and participant in her scene of desire. The first shot at the mirror shows us two Garbos: the fleshly Garbo, existing in the world of the film, and her reflection. However, she is not looking at herself, but seems to be looking for something or someone else.

That someone else is revealed to be Antonio, whom we then see only as a reflection in the mirror, indicating that, at this point, he exists only as part of her fantasy. As per his role as object of desire, he may be the one who is sought after, but his only function is to serve as a prop for the diva's spectacular self-proliferation and self-fulfillment, an idea that is confirmed by the film's return to a shot of a double-Garbo, showing both the diva and her reflection, looking longingly off-camera, desiring.

Intriguingly, Garbo's character is consciously aware of the importance of fantasy. She goes from bureau to spinning wheel to bed to pillow to bedpost to tapestry, rather bizarrely touching and pondering each object during this three-minute sequence. The camera follows only Garbo throughout, showing us frequent close-ups of her face. Antonio watches her, but she seems oblivious to him, indicating that she is lost in her reverie. There is no dialogue until he finally addresses her: "What are you doing?" "I have been memorizing this room," she says. "In the future, I shall live a great deal in this room." In other words, Garbo-as-Christina is fully aware that this will be the setting of her fantasy, not only at the present moment, but also in the years to come.

While we may rather easily establish *Queen Christina* as a film that carves out a space for female fantasy, it may be more difficult for some viewers to understand the classification of this film as a diva film. For instance, where is the flamboyant body language we've come to associate with the diva of performance? Borelli has her languid art nouveau posturing, and Streisand has her passionate singing style and dramatic hand gestures to communicate the unfulfilled longing of the diva. Garbo could seem muted in comparison, prohibited from indulging in silent film-style gesticulations or musical expression in this fairly "realist" sound drama. Yet, upon closer examination, I think a case can be made for the way the film frames the *face* of Garbo as an instrument of *divismo* in *Queen Christina*.

To understand Garbo's face in this film, we must begin with "snow." Early on, it is established that "snow" will signal the landscape of fantasy, "a world for [Christina's] desire to live in." Like Alba of *Rapsodia Satanica*, a noblewoman, and Fanny Brice of *Funny Girl*, a famous performer, as a queen, Christina also has a measure of independence, but because of her status is also more strictly bound to societal expectation than the other characters. In one of the early scenes in the film where the trusted Chancellor Oxenstierna (Lewis Stone) is

advising Christina about the need for her to marry and produce an heir, she is resistant to his entreaties. As he lectures her, she looks out the window and says the line, "Snow again, eternal snow...", giving the viewer the first glimpse into her inner world. The Chancellor continues, reminding her of her duties as Sweden's queen and her father's daughter. For the first time in the film we see a close-up of Garbo's face (Fig. 6) as she looks dreamily away and questions, "Must we live for the dead?" At this point, she seems to be in conversation with the Chancellor, who answers, "For the great dead, yes, your majesty." He is, of course, asking her to abandon her personal desire (to "die a bachelor," as she famously says), for the sake of her royal duties. However, the next line, spoken by Garbo in extreme close-up, is not so clearly part of her conversation with the Chancellor. Here she seems to turn inward as she says, "Snow is like a wise sea. One could go out and be lost in it, and forget the world and oneself." By the end of this line, her eyelids are closed, and she seems to be fully indulging in her dream of escaping her duties and forgetting the world. "Snow" is therefore quite explicitly set up as the condition under which Christina allows herself to fantasize. In fact, we are not even sure if this moment has been experienced by the Chancellor at all. After Christina speaks her line about "forgetting the world," we are back to a medium shot in which the Chancellor goes on discussing the queen's plans for marriage. For all we know, the line about the snow has occurred entirely in Christina's imagination, a soliloquy heard only by the audience of the film. In this instance, the close-up is the cue that this is a closed world, a formal device that signals the territory of Christina's fantasy, separate from the space and time of the diegesis, an island unmoved by the narrative stream which flows around it.



“Snow again, eternal snow...” (Fig. 8)

It is crucial that we keep these close-ups in mind as we seek to establish the way *Queen Christina* envisions the diva because what we *see* when Garbo speaks "snow," (her name for a place in which to lose oneself and forget the world) is not a depiction of wintry weather, but a close-up of her *face*. With its vast, abstracted expanse of white, Garbo's face in close-up figuratively embodies the "snow" of which she speaks. This association of Garbo's face with snow is made in Roland Barthes' famous essay, "The Face of Garbo":

It is indeed an admirable face-object. In *Queen Christina*, [...] the make-up has the **snowy** thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. Amid all this **snow** at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone, black like strange soft flesh, but not in the least expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds. (56)

One cannot help but hypothesize that perhaps Barthes was inspired by *Queen Christina's* many equations of Garbo's face and snow. Interestingly, "snow" for Barthes is also tied to

Garbo's "solitary" status: "she is always herself, and carries without pretence, under her crown or her wide-brimmed hats, the same **snowy solitary face**" (56-7). Here we have the key to Garbo's face as instrument of *divismo*. For Barthes, and for *Queen Christina*, the snowy dreamscape that is Garbo's face has everything to do with the fact that she ends up alone, and the narrative force that that "loneliness" exhorts is the key to our understanding of Garbo's famously blank visage as *diva*.

When first trying to square Borelli's dramatic walk in the woods and Streisand's explosive musical performance with Garbo's face, Garbo's face comes up short. After all, she is not grimacing nor crying nor *spectacularly* embodying any other legible emotion, and compared to the other performers' demonstrably desirous motions and sounds, the famously unreadable Garbo can seem a different animal altogether. Yet, I contend it is not so much what Garbo the performer *does*, as it is the way the film frames her that marks this particular performance as a diva performance. This can be best understood by examining the final scene of the film.

The renowned final scene of *Queen Christina* consists mainly of a close-up of Christina as she sets out for foreign shores, gazing from the prow of a boat at the unknown future ahead. The scene occurs immediately after her lover, Antonio, dies from wounds sustained in a duel. Christina has just given up the throne in order to leave Sweden and live with him in Spain. An advisor asks her if she still wishes to set sail in light of the tragic circumstances. She answers yes, she will sail. "The wind is with us," she says. The final shot of the film (Fig. 9) is of Christina's face. The camera tracks in closer until all we can see is eyes, nose and mouth, and it holds this position (in a live shot, not a freeze frame) for over 17 seconds. There is a famous anecdote that the director, Rouben Mamoulian, instructed Garbo to "think of nothing" during this sequence, so that the audience would have a "blank sheet of paper" upon which to project their fantasies (Kobal 28). If the fame of this sequence is any indication, Mamoulian's strategy was extremely effective, but not only are viewers potentially dwelling in their own fantasies at this point in the film, this is also where the film asks us to engage in *Christina's* fantasy. The queen ends up on this boat alone, her kingdom behind her, her plans completely upset, her future entirely unknown. Earlier in the film, at the inn with Antonio, she knew that her desires would go unfulfilled. She sought to memorize the room where she felt "happiness" for just a little while, realizing that her feeling of fulfillment was temporary and would soon be passing. So, while the space of desire was signaled earlier in the film by the contents of the room, and bolstered by the falling snow which recurs throughout as a cue that reverie is at hand, this final close-up seals once and for all the equivalency of face and snow. The shot allows the snowy blankness of Garbo's face to signal the possibility of fantasy, and the face itself becomes a world for both the character, Christina, and the viewer to live in.



The final scene of *Queen Christina*. (Fig. 9)

The face of Garbo is the *form* that the landscape of fantasy takes in this film. In turn, the face of Garbo signals the interior world of Christina. The narrative tells us that she has lost Antonio, the object of her desire. But she had expected this loss. Now she can go back to the room at the inn, putting her previous memorization to good use. She will be living there, in her mind, in her memory, in the interior that has already been signaled by this face-as-landscape for quite some time. It is here that Garbo's face achieves its *divismo*. The face is the instrument used to convey desire and longing, but unlike Borelli's twisting gestures or Streisand's soaring voice, the instrument is at once the thing used to communicate desire, as well as its setting. It is almost as if Garbo's narcissism, her moments of "self-regard," turn so fully inward, that the whole operation turns inside-out, and the exterior surface of her face becomes instead the very landscape of the film, a stand-in for her interior world.

Through these films we have seen that, contrary to Waugh's emphasis on the diva's male object of desire in his definition of the "diva syndrome," it is actually a self-referential desire that defines the diva. Whether it takes the form of Lyda Borelli's reflection proliferating in front of the mirror in *Rapsodia Satanica*, Streisand's "blue marble egg" as alibi for the most ironically self-reliant rendition of "My Man" of all time, or Garbo's great love monologue/pantomime addressed entirely to herself even though Jon Gilbert is present in the room with her in *Queen Christina*, I see this narcissistic desire as profoundly *generative* of creative energy and inspiration. The diva regards herself and multiplies, her diva-ness manifest in her ability to auto-generate manifold versions of herself at her highest moments of performance and reverie. Her performance *is* self-generation in her self-regard. This curious productivity, a queer reproduction if ever there was one, generating versions, even future generations of oneself, is, I argue, one reason that the doubly feminine structure is so often portrayed through the "nonsensical" aporia of narcissism, and cast as sinister. (Think of the ending of *All About Eve* where we see infinite versions of Anne Baxter's young fan as she stands in the mirror mimicking her idol, who has, in turn, made her fame by standing in for Bette Davis.) As Terry Castle queries in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, what could be more threatening than women without men (5)? To de-center the heterosexual relationship, as the diva narrative and structure of desire does, is to shun female sexuality's only sanctioned aim: reproduction. The diva is profoundly inept at conventional "reproductivity." She is forever failing as a wife and mother, successful only onstage, but not off-, spurred on by some inspiring bond with some version of herself.

The passionate failures that the diva performs are intrinsic to her value as a cultural type. The diva never manages to "have it all." She fails repeatedly at marriage, motherhood, and love. The diva appears because things are not good, because certain desires are not allowed to flourish. The diva film, therefore, can be nothing short of a critique of a society that requires the stifling of such magnificently expressive beings. In this way, the diva's presence is a *protest* against the dominant order, although not a solution to it.

In the diva film, feminine desire is forced to double and multiply under the weight of its own overdetermined representation. The paradox of the diva film is that although many of its tropes signal the *unrepresentability* of these narcissistic women, they proliferate nonetheless. But although the diva's desire is thwarted — immobilized — it struggles on under this weight, busying itself to set the scene. And although it is unable to be focused enough to meaningfully signify any *one* thing, its thrill and its value lies in the way that it expresses —

grandly. It is *the expression of something* that happens here, the moving and incoherent song sung, acted, or figured in the lavishly decorated set of her own confinement, that marks the diva. I see the diva form as a demonstration of longing and desire for unnamable things. Her failure to name them is part of her definition, and her allure. The diva performance is nothing more — and nothing less — than a testimony, a demonstration, an aria for an "untold want."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Reference to *Now, Voyager* (Rapper, 1942) intended. See also Walt Whitman's poem, "The Untold Want."

### 3

#### Every Diva Is a Has-Been: Melodrama, Time, and the Grammatical Moods of the Comeback Narrative

“I can’t even go... to the power room without making a ‘comeback!’”  
— Judy Garland on *The Dick Cavett Show*, 1960s<sup>77</sup>

To say to someone, “Don’t be such a diva!” is virtually the same as to say to them, “Stop being so melodramatic!” To invoke “diva” pejoratively is to invoke pejorative views of melodrama, too. Both the diva and melodrama are dismissed as “over-the-top,” “hysterical,” “excessive,” “unreasonable,” even. To hurl “diva” as an insult is also to suggest that the person is behaving as though they think of themselves as worth more than they actually merit. Divas, after all, are not “goddesses” (despite the Latin origins of the name), nor do they have any institutional power, yet they behave like queens. Something similar can be said of melodrama. In the most derisive view, the form is disparaged for not being “realistic,” and, in many ways, melodrama’s reputation for “excess” can be interpreted as being too big for its britches, screaming and yelling when it should sit still and speak quietly. “Don’t be such a drama queen!” one could easily say to Sirk or Griffith. What is implied by such dismissal is that it is much more sensible to adhere to some indefinable, yet oft-invoked sense of “realism,” a much more respectable “imitation of life,” as if melodrama were blowing all representation out of proportion (never mind that life more often resembles Belasco than Ibsen). Melodrama and the diva, they’re embarrassing.

This sense of shame around the form of melodrama and the figure of the diva is related to the perception that there is something “out-of-date” about them — both express an emotional style that is thought of as old-fashioned and overwrought, no longer acceptable in a post-post-modern world of ironic detachment. But it should be remembered that even in the perceived heyday of both melodrama and the diva, some mid-19<sup>th</sup> century moment, so the supposition goes, critics then, too, were also suspicious of all these women and their emotions suddenly hogging theatrical and operatic narratives. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, in his *Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre in Geneva* (1758), laments the “decadence” of the modern theatre and writes that classical tragedy has been exchanged for “love stories” (read: melodramas), and that “Love is the realm of women” (47), before continuing to explain how this womanly cast of the theatre would undoubtedly prove “enervating” and “enfeebling” to the society at large (57). This demonstrates the foundation of Linda Williams’ assertion in “Melodrama Revised” (1995), that “The two related strikes against melodrama were . . . the related ‘excess’ of emotional manipulateness and association with femininity” (44). This quotation derives from an article in which Williams is explicitly explaining the reputation of melodrama in Film Studies. She describes how melodrama was largely neglected as Film Studies was coming of age, until it was “rediscovered” as a genre by theorists, who associated it mainly with the woman’s film and family melodrama. These critics found redemption in the form only when it was so outsized as to cease to operate as melodrama at all — and by “melodrama” I mean a structure that seeks to elicit pathos and the recognition of virtue — and was so “over-the-top” as to allow a critical, near-satirical distance from the characters and story that supposedly led the audience to a self-

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<sup>77</sup> The transcription of this interview is reprinted in Randy Schmidt’s *Judy Garland on Judy Garland* (2008, 411).

conscious critique of social mores. Thomas Elsaesser (and many others) made this argument for the films of Douglas Sirk, for example.<sup>78</sup>

Meanwhile, melodrama in earnest has made a “comeback” of sorts in Film Studies. Like Judy Garland’s diva “comebacks” in the above quotation, the irony is that melodrama never left. Deeply influenced by literary scholar Peter Brooks’ 1976 work, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, film scholars such as Christine Gledhill and Williams have expanded on Brooks’ work and used it to challenge the prevailing notion in 1970s-1980s Film Studies that “melodrama” was a genre of films about women and the family. They have redeemed melodrama as much more than just a “low” form of entertainment, and have made a case for it as a predominant mode of modern storytelling since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This view is now widely accepted in Film Studies and beyond. As Gledhill and Williams write in the Introduction to their recent volume, *Melodrama Unbound* (2018):

Never itself a singular genre, melodrama as a pervasive mode has functioned historically as a genre-generating machine. Moreover, to the development of Hollywood’s genre, theatrical melodrama contributed not only a series of generic types but an organization of theatrical production that prefigured the studio system. Constituting an expressive mode of aesthetic articulation that shapes the operation of generic worlds, melodrama does not determine the specificity of locale, character type, décor, or situation that characterizes specific film genres. In a concept we retain from Peter Brooks, the most central function of the mode of melodrama lies in its recognition of the personalized virtues and vices of characters whose actions have consequences for others. The contest between them is not played out according to fixed moral values; rather, it enacts a struggle for a felt sense of justice that operates differently within different generic worlds. The point is that although conflict between perpetrator and victim is shared across genres, any *body* can fill these positions, and conflicts can be played out in innumerable ways. (5)

Melodrama is certainly the “genre-generating machine” behind the narrative and documentary films that tell the lives of female singers whom can be categorized as divas. In Chapter 2, I argue that a diva is a cultural type, a woman who is a public success but a private “failure,” and I show that this type has a much broader representation in cinema beyond narratives of female singers. But in this chapter I will re-narrow my focus and concentrate on films that specifically portray the lives of female performers because, as singers who possess an overtly certain theatrical style, they are the most obvious inheritors of the diva mantle in cinema, and because examining their melodramatic narratives tells us something about the diva type’s unique relationship to time. This relationship works in tandem with the ideas about the way the female voice troubles representation — and the cinematic machine — which I explore at length in Chapter 1.

I will be playing fast and loose with traditional concepts of genre and mode, analyzing documentaries about individual divas alongside Hollywood biopics of famous female singers, as well as docu-dramas, and thinly-veiled “pseudo-biopics,” as I call them. These “pseudo-biopics” are films like *I Could Go On Singing* (1963), *Funny Girl* (1968), and *New York, New York* (1977), where famous female singers are cast in roles that closely resemble the public’s perception of their own star images, and much of the pleasure is derived from the supposed emotional authenticity that this closeness of role and image allows. What all of these modes and genres have in common is that they purport to represent the lives of female singers and that they do so in a highly regular way, codifying certain moments in the telling of these lives via a

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<sup>78</sup> See Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury* (1972).

melodramatic structure of meaning. In other words, although the genres may differ, the essentially melodramatic structure of the narrative remains the same.

In the most basic sense, the melodrama is the diva's native earth. The Greek origins of the term — “melos” (music) + “drama” (drama) — emphasize its musical roots. Indeed, the 14<sup>th</sup> century collective of Florentine noblemen known as the Camerata were seeking to recreate the music of Greek drama, believing, as they did, that the words of classical tragedies and comedies were sung, when their efforts gave birth to what we know today as opera (Balthazar 133). In Italy, the operatic art form is still referred to sometimes simply as “melodramma,” acknowledging its status as the apotheosis of music-drama. It stands to reason, then, that the diva, as an invention of the discourse around female opera singers, would be understood, primarily, in melodramatic terms.

In general, I will be considering cinematic diva narratives from the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the present in this chapter. Since the 1980s, the genre of televisual and cinematic documentaries about famous people has flourished,<sup>79</sup> and the diva has been one of the primary subjects of this genre. But Hollywood musicals of the 1960s and 1970s (and, to a lesser extent, the 1950s) also have a special pull in this chapter because of the efflorescence of the female singer narrative during this time. It was an odd era for female stars. Although these decades are known for the flourishing of European art cinema and the Film School Generation of American filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Sam Peckinpah, this was, by and large, a dismal era for women. Gone were the complicated, forceful leads played by Davis, Crawford, and Garbo. Instead, the female stars of the era were often consigned to playing typical love interests, or were confined to the role of femme fatale in neo-noirs (see the careers of Faye Dunaway and Jessica Lange, for example), and their characters often met brutal, misogynistic ends. It is almost as if the studio system, in a last-ditch effort to assert the magic and importance of the movies, coughed up the diva musical — a type that was, intriguingly, absent from the Golden Age of Hollywood musicals<sup>80</sup> — to recapture something of the splendor of the traditional star system. But it could no longer pretend to do so with a clear conscience, so the industry learned to exploit even its sins.

The diva films of the 1960s and 1970s were made during an era where the public were highly cognizant of the abuses of the star system, and where the romance of every revival house and television re-run of old films was undergirded by an equally burgeoning upsurge in narratives about the darker side of Hollywood.<sup>81</sup> These include, for example, Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* (1965), and the films of pop artists like Andy Warhol or Jack Smith, who reveled in the gone-to-hell glamor of stardom, plus the muck-raking work of the paparazzi phenomenon that changed the face of celebrity publicity in the early 1960s.<sup>82</sup> The diva film of

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<sup>79</sup> “As B. Ruby Rich points out, the rise of character-driven documentaries since the 1980s runs parallel to the ever-increasing prevalence of celebrity-focused media since the founding of *People Magazine* in 1974.” (54)

<sup>80</sup> It should be noted that many stars of Golden Age musicals played diva roles later in their careers, or had their lives told as diva narratives at a later date, in biographical profiles or documentaries. Examples of Golden Age Hollywood musical stars whose lives are often told as diva narratives include Judy Garland and Lena Horne. But the actual musicals of the Golden Age hardly ever star characters whom I would define as “divas.” Women who were a “public success,” but “private failure” seldom take center stage in the musicals of the 1930s and 1940s, although they sometimes appear as supporting characters.

<sup>81</sup> To give this yet another dimension, in “Cinema or the Uses of Disenchantment” (2005), Thomas Elsaesser writes about not only the cinephilia of the 1960s-1970s, but of the *disenchantment* with cinema during that time. That disenchantment, he argues, produced not only highly influential film theory, but *pleasure* in the feeling of disenchantment itself (32-36).

<sup>82</sup> See Massimo Di Forti, “Flash Warning: The Paparazzi Are Coming!” (1993).

the era revels in the tawdriness of these “exposés,” and takes as its starting point the exploitation of the pathos produced by an inherent nostalgia for the memory of a happier time that — even though the culture knew better, even though it knew that the Golden Age of Hollywood was a time of hushed up affairs and drug overdoses and studio-mandated abortions — could never come again. Even the younger stars of the diva musicals of the 1960s and 1970s — Streisand, Minnelli, Midler — were all quite “retro” and known for singing music of the 1920s and 1930s, seemingly born after their time. This contributes to the sense of the diva as a “has-been,” and her melodramatic relationship to time, which is the focus of this chapter.

A diva is often thought of as a type of star. Yet, as I’ve argued in previous chapters, I think it is more productive to understand the diva as a *cultural type* that originated in the discourse around female opera singers, grew to encompass women who were perceived as “public successes” but “private failures,” and was refined by novelistic and cinematic narratives about these types of women. But it is true that the diva is different from other cultural types, such as the femme fatale, in that performers who most frequently perform diva roles or work within the diva “framework for emotion” are labeled divas, themselves, in a way that is not necessarily, or as often, repeated with other types. This complexity is due to the fact that the diva type originates in myths about *performers* (as opposed to women in general), individuals whose work already blurs the boundaries between public and private, using the “private” body to perform “public” (representational, artistic) acts. “Diva” attached itself to certain prima donnas who were famous for singing certain two-soprano duets that produced a self-referential eroticism, and this meaning soon extended to encompass the dread and awe of a *monstre sacre*, a “narcissistic” and brilliant woman who flaunted convention, who lived and died for art.

Stardom is an intertextual phenomenon<sup>83</sup> to begin with, but stardom is real — one can measure it by an individual’s renown — whereas “diva” is the name of a particular myth that has a particular style and takes a particular narrative form. Again, this gets confusing, because while many performers tend to play “divas” in fictional narratives, so, too, their lives are diva-ized by the press and told melodramatically. The result is that the popular use of the term seldom distinguishes between the person and the myth. So, while a certain “intertextuality” is at the heart of the diva phenomenon because of its history in *what was said* about the public performances and the “private” lives of famous female singers in the press and in literature, we can most usefully think of the diva, not as a type of star or a certain kind of person, but as a cultural type — a woman who is a public success, and a private failure — that is dependent on the phenomenon of stardom for its meaning (i.e. stardom is a type of public success), though not synonymous with it.

Because of this confusion around the diva, because the type has depended on the intertextual relationship between performers, their roles and performances, and the media that represents and reports on them, this chapter will take up not only the melodramatic structure of the films (biopics, pseudo-biopics, and documentaries) that narrate the lives of female performers who work within the diva style, it will also consider the discourse in the press around the *live* appearances of these performers on the operatic and concert stages. This discourse, I will show, is also melodramatic in its structure. The press’s view of these live performances is central to an

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<sup>83</sup> As Richard Dyer writes, “The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star’s image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverages in the press of the star’s doings and ‘private’ life. Further, a star’s image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators...” (*Heavenly Bodies 2*).

understanding of the films not only because divas are inventions of intertextuality, but because *the stage* is the ultimate proving ground and setting for the comeback, the quintessential melodramatic moment of nearly every female performer narrative as imagined by cinema. Therefore, the media's view of a diva's live performances — i.e. the discourse of *the stage* — informs their cinematic representations and vice versa.

The discourse of the stage also informs the idea of the “comeback,” which is vital to the melodramatic meaning of the diva, and will be the focus of this chapter. The comeback can be featured as an entire scene, a fragment of a performance, or just an image, but I argue this moment is central for appreciating how cinema has organized and solidified the meaning of the diva cultural type. In the inevitable comeback scene, that ambiguous, spot-lit no-man's-land where present, past, and fates converge, the diva negotiates — via a ritualized display of suffering — her meaning, her fate, and her possible futures. The comeback scene functions as the final word on the diva — a powerful, if ultimately inarticulate, bid for meaning, seeking a ruling on her place in the world.

The comeback also exemplifies the diva's odd relation to time, bound up in her anomalous “place in the world.” So much of melodrama scholarship has focused on women as innocent virgins, femme fatales, or suffering mothers (or some combination thereof) but the diva does not fit any of these molds. As “something else besides a mother,”<sup>84</sup> the diva is a woman who is successful on the world stage, and whose primary relationship is with her public. In a society that still expects women to master the domestic realm as wives (or at least doting partners) and (possibly) mothers, the outward focus of the diva's energies is already a pathos-producing force, creating an instant failure of fulfillment of her predetermined social role as ruler of the private sphere, and films about female performers assure us at every turn that the price of a woman's public success is her private happiness. But what is also important to understand is how the diva's unique position “outside” the traditional virgin/mother/whore grooves allow her a certain power to turn back, trouble, or traverse time. This makes for an interesting cinematic creature, indeed.

### **Past-Participle: That Has-Been**

Every diva is a has-been. “Diva” itself conjures an age of gods and goddesses, a bygone era. The diva's pathos is dependent upon a nostalgia for an unreachable past. Present tense (“every diva is”) + past participle (“she has been”) characterizes just one grammatical mood of the diva's melodramatic relationship to time. Strictly speaking, the grammatical concept of *tense* indicates a temporal location. A grammatical *mood*,<sup>85</sup> on the other hand, indicates a state of being. But tense and mood are related, just as one's state of being has everything to do with where one finds oneself in time, and we will need both concepts to understand how the diva's meaning depends upon her particular relationship to past, present, and future.

It may be that stars are born with success, but divas are born with failure. The diva's status as “public success,” but “private failure” takes on even more specific valences when the protagonist is a female performer, as the melodramatic form of the diva narrative demands that authentic suffering (i.e. some sort of “failure”) inform the diva's art, the source of her public

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<sup>84</sup> Hat tip to Linda Williams, “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama” (1984).

<sup>85</sup> Intriguingly, the terms “mood” and “mode” share a common Germanic origin, meaning many things, including, “heart, frame of mind, spirit, courage, arrogance, pride, power, and violence” (“Mood,” etymonline.com).

success. The audience must have the sense that a star has overcome something — some suffering or misfortune — in order for her to be received as a diva. Sometimes the suffering happens *a priori*, as in the case with certain racial or ethnic groups. For instance, one could argue that any black diva is always-already authenticated simply due to her blackness because to be black in Western society means, implicitly, to have suffered.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, Whitney Houston, Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin — all have already “overcome” in order to be where they are, famous and adored. The same could be said for divas of whose lower-class origins we are aware, like Loretta Lynn, Edith Piaf, or Barbra Streisand (whose unconventional and legibly Jewish appearance also lends credence to her divadom, without need for further proof of authenticity). Again, authenticity here is implicitly linked to suffering: to be legibly Jewish and Brooklynite in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America, to be a starving *gamin*, or a coal miner’s daughter — these are positions that imply hardship and shame — all necessary elements that form the bedrock pathos of the diva.

Then, there are other stars who must “fall” in order to rise as divas. Judy Garland is perhaps one of these figures, having risen to fame as an obviously gifted young performer. The pathos of Garland is polyphonic, produced either by one’s knowledge of her humiliation at MGM (forced into mandatory weight loss and non-stop work), or — perhaps truer to the experience of a public who grew up with her and were not cognizant of her abuse by the studio — not really resonant until she was fired from MGM in 1950 and made a well-publicized suicide attempt. In other words, not until she returns to the stage at the London Palladium, fat, but in better voice than ever, does she really become a diva. Her daughter, Liza Minnelli, on the other hand, might have earned her divadom simply by being Judy Garland’s daughter.<sup>87</sup> Yes, her inheritance includes singing and dancing talent, but — more importantly — it also includes the humiliation of her mother’s failures and tragedies. One major cord of pathos surrounding Liza will always resonate simply because of her resemblance to her mother — Liza looks like her mother, often sounds like her mother, and like her mother, has very publicly suffered the pain, humiliation, and failures of stardom. Even at the height of Liza’s success as a performer, she was an “archaeological site”<sup>88</sup> of meaning, never ever simply an exciting singer and dancer, but always carrying the tragic valence of the memory of her mother’s demise, a built-in pathos-producing force.

The diva’s status as a “has-been” creates not only a unique relationship to time, but also to aging, among female cultural types. For instance, *femmes fatales* have a short shelf life: such cyphers of unsanctioned and uncontrolled female sexuality must die early and at the height of their dark powers, ultimately proving to have been most “fatale” to themselves. Wives and mothers who fall within the sanctioned realm of convention are allowed to live and age, but in a limited way which fulfills very specific cultural expectations, so that their aging (and its attendant wisdom and power) is controlled and channeled into caring for the family unit.

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<sup>86</sup> See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card* (2001) for her arguments about the ways “melodramas of black and white” have played out in an American context, in particular.

<sup>87</sup> It should be said that a certain amount of fame and distinction is also necessary to carry the diva mantle. For instance, Liza’s half-sister, Lorna Luft, though also Judy Garland’s daughter, could not be considered “diva” because she has not attained a high level of professional success as a performer.

<sup>88</sup> This notion of Liza as an “archaeological site” was borrowed from Koestenbaum’s discussion of her in *Humiliation* (2011). Koestenbaum, in turn, borrowed from the concept from Margo Jefferson’s discussion of Michael Jackson in her book, *On Michael Jackson* (2007, 53).

In many ways, thinking about film genre and female representation still revolves around the twin poles of the mother and the femme fatale. Take, for example, Christine Gledhill's "Introduction" to 2012's *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*:

Genres, then, not only constitute an imaginary horizon within which protagonists' life stories are made, but contribute to remaking a feminist imaginary. In particular, the impossible binaries confronted by second-wave feminism [...] give way: *femme fatale* and mother, female sexuality and maternity, can be imagined in triumphal alignment; staking a claim in the masculine world of contact sports or on intellectual life need no longer proscribe romance or fashion. And if the violence now appropriated by women filmmakers lends a dystopic dimension to the feminist imaginary, recovery of intimate femininity, earlier rejected in its association with patriarchal domesticity, challenges the gendered division between subjectivity and publicness, returning sensuous experience and affectivity to conceptions of the public sphere. (6)

This passage demonstrates how feminist thinking about genre is still preoccupied with reconciling sexuality and maternity, professional life with femininity. If we take diva narratives, whether fictional or documentary, to be a sort of genre, it might seem at first that divas could be considered triumphal figures of a feminist imaginary, exemplifying in their performance style the very "sensuous experience and affectivity" that inflects the "public sphere" in which they present themselves. After all, divas have always been working women with style, unconcerned with second-wave feminist fretting about the impossibility of reconciling professional respect with femininity, and verily embodying what female subjectivity looks like in the public sphere. Where diva narratives enter a complex relationship with feminism is when they remind us that the neoliberal "feminist" fantasy that women can "have it all" is a lie. Cinematic narratives of the lives of female performers teach us that women can have professional success and a highly feminine style of presentation and self-expression, but that these things cannot coexist with a peaceful and fulfilling family and private life, at least not in our current social configurations. As Garland's character laments in *I Could Go on Singing* (1963), "Nothing I knitted ever fitted." Divas are disastrous at domesticity. If *femme fatales* must die, and mothers are allowed to grow old, but only for and within their families, then divas are defined by survival — but with a price. Just as Gledhill's Introduction admits, and as the contemporary women filmmakers towards which she gestures indicate to us, the price of female subjectivity — of a woman's life lived in the public sphere — is violence.

Unlike the respectable women of cinema — the mothers and doyennes played by the likes of Glenn Close and Meryl Streep — the diva's is a scarred and protracted aging process that is not at all straightforward, and hinges upon her relationship to the public sphere as a woman whose success is independent of physical beauty, but whose style and subjectivity are distinctly feminine. These unconventional women survive and age and succeed in spite of their typical defiance of conventional standards of beauty: Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall, Edith Piaf at the Olympia, Aretha Franklin at Obama's inauguration — these are not sex symbols. But they are also not calm and quiet and wise. Nor are they emblematic of "sophrosyne" virtues. Despite a diminished sex appeal, they have not "become men." On the contrary, the aging diva remains besequinned, over-the-top, and "melodramatic" — feminized qualities, all. Divas are among the few women in our society who are allowed to age and continue to be admired for a function outside the domestic sphere, but they are unique in that they remain associated with an outrageous, performative femininity. Their talent earns them some clemency — after all, they survive. But they must suffer for it.

### Flirting with Time: Contingency as “Threat and Lure”

As a has-been, the diva depends for her meaning on a “looking back,” a nostalgia that demands the audience occupy more than one time at once. The pathos produced by viewing late-period Garland or Edith Piaf in her final performance at the Olympia depends upon one’s knowledge of the diva before her “fall,” a nostalgia for either her vocal heyday or a time before she was so obviously trod upon by life. For instance, the final scene of *I Could Go on Singing* exploits the audience’s nostalgia for young Garland as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) by featuring a song called “Hello, Bluebird,” an upbeat number about bluebirds sung by middle-aged Garland, which recalls images from Dorothy’s iconic anthem, “Over the Rainbow”<sup>89</sup> (“If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow...”). The lightweight number is given power by the allusion to *The Wizard of Oz*, and the obvious incongruence between the teenager who played Dorothy and the mature, somewhat tired-looking Garland who is belting the song in front of our eyes. Our nostalgia for a more innocent Garland in a more (supposedly) innocent time produces pathos and longing.

Invoking the ideas of Ben Singer, Jane Gaines writes in her essay, “Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama” (2018), “The mode, it could be argued, exhibits a high ‘tolerance’ level for the irreconcilability of past, present, and future (Singer 2001, 46). Melodrama tolerates irreconcilability, all the while taking irreconcilability as a dramatic point of departure, the underlying structure upon which to peg so much anguish as well as so many thrills” (Gaines “Even More Tears” 338). The fact that the Garland of *I Could Go on Singing* can never again be the Garland of *The Wizard of Oz* is the source of the audience’s longing. In this case, the audience is stirred not only by the impossibility of turning back time, but also by the personal suffering we know that Garland has endured between Dorothy and *I Could Go on Singing*. Time and suffering are etched on the diva simultaneously as one and the same.

But the comeback onscreen negotiates something very particular, namely the paradox between cinema’s ability to represent presence and the diva’s actual absence. In her book, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane explains that,

“The last half of the nineteenth century witnesses the growth of the perception of contingency as both threat and lure. And both could be said to be linked to its tenuous and unstable relation to meaning. The cinema emerges in this context as a technology that appears to be capable of *representing* the contingent, of providing the ephemeral with a durable record. This capability is the source of both fascination and anxiety. For the idea of representation without meaning involves the forfeiture of limits, and hence of semiotic control.” (169)

Already, it is clear how the diva’s fabricated “presence” onscreen depends upon the “threat and lure” of contingency — the excitement of a performance depends upon liveness, on the idea that “anything can happen.” Beyond even the concept of contingency and cinema’s ability to capture it is the diva’s performance *style* which risks much in its ecstatic reach, approaching the limits of meaning, a hurtling of the voice *in extremis*, bringing with it all the attendant associations of the female voice in Western culture as outside *logos*, outside representation, and expressing the inexpressible, as detailed in Chapter 1. For all these reasons, the diva’s presence onscreen seems a significant danger, threatening to overwhelm the spectator in unbounded experience, in sight and sound so immediate that it evades the limits necessary for the creation of meaning.

Doane goes on to write,

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<sup>89</sup> “Hello, Bluebird” is written by Harold Arlen, who also composed “Over the Rainbow.” See *I Could Go On Singing* (1963).

The cinematic image's privileged relation to the contingent renders it unstable. . . This temporal instability is dealt with historically in two ways. The first can be traced in the movement from the actuality...to narrative as a tightly structured web of manufactured temporalities. [It] ... is the event which comes to bear the weight of meaning — the event, where time coagulates and where the contingent can be readily imbued with meaning through its very framing *as* event.

[...] The second attempt to deal with the temporal instability of the image involves not the taming of the contingent, but its denial. Like the event, spectacle effects a coagulation of time, but, in its effort to evoke an 'abstract and indeterminate beauty,' it courts the outcome feared by Baudelaire — that of tumbling into the 'abyss' of femininity. The event bears a relation to time, spectacle does not. Spectacle is, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, fundamentally atemporal, associated with stasis and the antilinear. [...] Spectacle functions to localize desire, fantasy, and longing in a timeless time, outside contingency. (169-170)

At first, the comeback seems most obviously allied with spectacle. For one thing, it tends to feature a song. As long theorized by film scholars such as Mulvey and Feuer, both musical numbers and female bodies tend to bring filmic narratives to a halt, creating a space for contemplation (at best) and voyeurism (at worst).<sup>90</sup> The comeback number in the diva film features both a musical number and a female body. But the diva's body is seldom on display, especially during these sorts of songs. If the epitome of the diva's vocal artistry is highlighted, as it is in these crucial moments, then she will be dressed simply, almost invisibly, usually sporting basic black against the black backdrop of the stage, so that her body becomes nearly invisible: think of Garland in *A Star Is Born* (1954) (navy dress on dark background in "The Man That Got Away"), *I Could Go On Singing* (black dress on black curtain for the title song, red dress on red curtain for "By Myself"), Streisand in *Funny Girl* (1968) (only face and hands visible against a black backdrop for "My Man"), Minnelli in *New York, New York* (1977) (a floating head in a dark recording studio for "But the World Goes 'Round"), Marion Cotillard as Piaf in basic black and white, mask-like makeup on a dark stage for "Non, je ne regrette rien" at the end of *La Vie En Rose* (2007). It is true that these films treat us to the spectacle of the diva's face, usually in close-up, and this is not without its erotic gratifications. For minutes at a time we have no choice but to linger on eyes, cheeks, lips. These may have their fetishistic pleasures, but the body of the diva *in toto* is not available for voyeuristic possession by the viewer, complicating the traditional understanding of spectacle. The body of the diva in comeback certainly does not lend itself to the glittering objectification envisioned by Mulvey, for instance.

But then, the sense of spectacle is bolstered again when we consider the form of the song. Depending upon the lyrics, a song is not really an agent of narrative. It doesn't move the plot forward. Most songs in comeback scenarios linger on one sentiment that tends to represent the diva's central drama or concern ("I could go on singing," "Oh my man I love him so," "But the world goes 'round,'" "What's love got to do with it?" "I lived for art," "I regret nothing,"), and extend a moment of contemplation on the topic. In all these ways, we could consider the comeback a spectacle, functioning to "localize desire, fantasy, and longing in a timeless time" (170), the time of the song, with its circular incantation of repeated themes, and the unbounded darkness of the stage, a setting seemingly without border or limit.

But what of the event? Doane writes:

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<sup>90</sup> See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1974) and Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical" (1995).

The event is a deictic marker of time, a ‘this is happening, this is taking place.’ As such, it is pure indication, deprived of meaning. In Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma is the consequence of nonassimilation of an event that has its psychical impact years later, after the fact. But the event somehow persists, in a semiotic limbo, as a kernel of the real that awaits only a second event whose collision with the first generates readability. In a sense, any event is by its nature that which is unassimilable, that which resists meaning, that which, like the index, serves primarily as an assurance of the real — ‘something is happening.’ (140-1)

This seems a keen description of the comeback, which can also be thought of as an event, as dependent upon history, upon *what came before* for its meaning. The comeback, too, is dependent upon a trauma that cannot be read or “assimilated” as part of a story that makes sense until the comeback performance is complete. After all, the diva must have something to “come back” from. The original “fall” (be it a bad performance, public intoxication, a painfully public divorce, etc.) is given meaning by the comeback. The relative success or failure of the comeback performance will determine whether the fall was the beginning of the end, or a nadir from which a phoenix will rise. For instance, in the narratives of Garland’s life, her famous comeback concert at Carnegie Hall in 1961 gives her prior hospitalization for Hepatitis and liver failure<sup>91</sup> a purpose as grist for the artistic mill — near-death experiences allow the diva an encounter with the limits of life and death. But if Garland’s performance at Carnegie Hall had been sub-par, the hospitalization would provide an alibi for artistic failure, not success, and her illness would be readable as restricting her capacity for artistic expression, not expanding it. Similarly, the events of Garland’s life will be given meaning by the life and career of her daughter, Liza Minnelli. If Minnelli succeeds professionally, despite her many “falls,” then Garland’s legacy will be positive, and her bequest will be the gift of great talent. But if Minnelli fails professionally, we shake our heads with regret that she has fallen prey to her mother’s demons, and Garland’s legacy becomes negative, consisting of insurmountable addiction and trauma. The second event, which is the comeback, gives meaning to the first event, which is the fall.

How to think of the comeback in light of this? Is it spectacle or event? In truth, it is both. The drama of the comeback is dependent upon its status as event: the comeback event will determine the meaning of the diva’s narrative. The drama is heightened by the myth of the comeback’s liveness, by the lure of contingency inherent in the “live” musical performance captured onscreen. The exploitation of this mythical liveness is a spectacle where the female voice (instead of the female body) works as the agent of female sexuality that threatens to plunge the spectator into the “abyss of femininity,” i.e. the abyss of overwhelming sensuality and meaninglessness. The diva film uses the sense of liveness created by the theatrical setting, the diva’s performance style, her frequently unbeautiful physical presentation, and the seeming “authenticity” lent to this performance by imperfect vocal technique, wear, or the threat of vocal crisis, to exploit the sense of contingency that will ultimately be contained and cordoned into meaning making by the mechanisms of melodrama.

Another way of saying this — and another mark of the importance of the idea of *the stage* — is that the comeback obsession is a strategy that mediates between technological reproduction, the necessary (but impossible) presence of the performer, and the fact of her absence. The emotional impact of the diva story relies upon an evocation of what it must have been like to have seen so-and-so perform live. The trailer of *Whitney* (2018), for instance, features a voiceover proclaiming, “You miss something if you don’t see her live!” as if this

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<sup>91</sup> See Gerold Frank, *Judy* (1975, 449-450).

documentary about a deceased singer will offer that experience! The advertisement wants the spectator to forget that, regardless of whether or not Whitney Houston is alive or dead, this liveness is impossible in cinema. Part of the yearning produced by the diva film is the play between the diva's presence (created by cinema's ability to re-present the world, as well as the emotional immediacy of the diva's performance style), and the reality of her absence. Cinema gives her to us so vividly, but, in fact, she is not there.

The Tina Turner biopic, *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (1993), negotiates the diva's absence in a startling way. Up until the very last scene, the film is a traditional biopic, and Angela Bassett plays the role of Tina Turner. Based on Turner's memoir, *I, Tina* (1986), the film is not told in "first person," but, true to its source material, it proceeds more or less from Turner's point of view. Mostly concerned with Turner's rise to fame and her personal and professional partnership with Ike Turner, the film charts the relationship between the combative couple, and Tina must endure repeated instances of domestic violence and threats to her life by Ike before she ultimately leaves him and begins a solo career. The final scene concerns Turner's reemergence in the entertainment world, post-Ike, as Bassett-as-Turner takes the stage for a performance of her big comeback number, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" The song, it should be noted, was the biggest hit of Turner's career — far more successful than anything she recorded with Ike — and is recognizable to most audiences as indicative of her triumphant return as a solo artist. The content of the lyrics also suggests a "moving on" from matters of the heart, which for Tina means leaving Ike behind, but ambiguously: "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" Surely, a pop song does not mean for us to dismiss love, but to pity the woman who guards her heart so staunchly. This is par for the course in the diva film which frequently features a love affair at its core, one that must be discarded if the diva is to survive in her higher calling, which is stardom.

But what is most significant about this final scene is the way that the film reasserts the "real" of the diva's presence. First, we have Bassett's ostensibly "live" performance of "What's Love Got to Do with It?" (in which the actress lip-synchs to Turner's recorded voice, as she does throughout the film), which takes place in a small club. Again, the comeback number must be mythically "live" in order to exploit the threat of contingency — the threat of another fall — to maximum effect. But *What's Love Got to Do with It?* takes this mythical liveness a step further. In the middle of Bassett's performance, the film cuts to "live" concert footage of the *real* Tina Turner singing the same song. The real Turner, dressed in simple white, takes over the second half of the song from Bassett, who is wearing black, and the film ends with the image of the real diva singing her solo number to a sold-out stadium crowd.

The presence of the real Tina Turner onscreen serves to authenticate the comeback sequence, to assure us that the events of the film "really" happened, that they are a true representation of her life, and that we have access to her through the film. Obviously, the real Turner would not be so perverse as to reenact her own traumatic marriage to Ike, would not be made up to look bruised and bloodied or re-stage the epic fights she had with her ex-husband for the camera. Angela Bassett can do that for her, but should the by-proxy nature of the onscreen suffering cause the audience to doubt the authenticity of Turner's pain, the sudden appearance of the body of the real diva serves to validate it. The ending of the film seems to beg us to search Tina Turner's body for signs of this suffering. Though she is undoubtedly triumphant at the end, as she sings the final refrains of her song, the scene invites us to look for dents and flaws and cover-up, for proof of Ike's torture.

The diva genre hinges upon grueling displays of emotional authenticity as yet another way to exploit — and contain — contingency. The audience demands proof of authentic suffering, of lived experience. This proof of authenticity can take the form of a crack in the voice, fading looks, weight gain or loss, or virtually any physical transformation, so long as it is not beautifying. Beauty, everyone knows, is a Hollywood trick. The canner artist will showcase her scars. Scars are indexical evidence, a mark left by suffering, verification of authentic feeling, of life really lived.

### **Vocal Crisis and Drinking: I Have Sung/ I Have Drunk**

“In the name of art, Greek tragedians slashed the backs of their throats to promote vocal projection” (161), writes Wayne Koestenbaum in *The Queen’s Throat* (1993). In 1950, Judy Garland slit her throat (lightly) with a broken glass after being fired from MGM (Frank 280-281). She survived, and over the course of the next year recovered, gained weight, and gave a performance at the London Palladium where she debuted a matured voice and repertoire, marking the advent of a concert career where she came to be perceived as a “serious” artist of great genius (Frank 317). Did Judy Garland have to slash her throat for art?

The “vocal crisis” is a slightly less literal manifestation of the scars self-inflicted by the “true artist,” and a frequent trope of the diva comeback. In *La Vie En Rose*, the suspense of the final scene at the Olympia is created by the audience’s fear that a deathly ill Piaf will not be able to pull it off, will be too ill, *will not have the voice* to sing. The same goes for many diva documentaries, such as *Amy* (2015), about the life and career of Amy Winehouse, and *Whitney* (2018), who are shown struggling through disastrous live performances where they are barely able to hit the notes.

The “vocal crisis” is yet another marker of authenticity for the diva, and is one possible source of drama in the overarching melodramatic structure of the comeback. The air is charged with wondering if the diva will be able to perform the next concert, the next act, the next song, the next note. In her article, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” (1990), Doane writes that the term *crisis* comes from the Greek word for “decision.” She says, “The crisis [...] names an event of some duration which is startling and momentous precisely because it demands resolution within a limited period of time. The crisis compresses time and makes its limitations acutely felt.” A decision must be made based upon the performance that follows: will this be the end of the diva’s reign, or will it simply mark a period of transition before she emerges anew and more powerful than ever? The vocal crisis, therefore, requires the action of melodrama. Something must happen — the comeback performance must unfurl — in order to give meaning to the malady.

In *I Could Go on Singing*, Judy Garland visits Dirk Bogarde’s character, David, her former lover, under the pretense that her voice is failing her and she needs a good ear, nose, and throat doctor, which is his profession. In the course of this early scene, Garland mentions “Tebaldi and Callas,” both famous opera singers, invoking her kinship with them, and igniting a chain of loaded signifiers. Maria Callas’s legend, in particular, hinges upon the drama of vocal crisis. The legend goes like this: An operatic phenomenon since her late teens, the work-obsessed and occasionally obese Callas decides to lose weight in her mid-30s. She does so, and transforms herself into a chic and desirable woman, divorcing her husband of a decade, and beginning an affair with Aristotle Onassis, gaining her entrance to jet set society, and, ultimately, breaking her heart. Significantly, as Callas gains beauty, she begins to lose her voice. She suffers illnesses and breakdowns, throws tantrums, causes scandals, and gets fired by the world’s finest opera houses.

From the late 1950s onward, Callas's career, though still artistically rich, is forever after marked by the specter of vocal crisis, forcing her to retire early from singing. Though the factual timeline is undeniable, the legend of Callas frames the loss of her voice as both a Faustian bargain with fame *and* as proof of her artistic superiority.<sup>92</sup>

There is an implicit notion of artistic capital in the idea of the diva's vocal crisis linked to the following paradox: for a singer, "great art" demands that the body be in perfect condition, while exacting the price of bodily decay. In *The Queen's Throat*, Wayne Koestenbaum echoes this point by quoting the words of soprano Florence Easton: "'you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs' and you cannot make grand opera without 'breaking voices'" (161). Perhaps a perfect performance, then, is one in which these forces of expenditure and decay are held in perfect tension, excitement generated precisely by the knowledge that the eggs could possibly break because they have broken before. This is a quite Romantic notion of the artist that she has a certain amount of vocal capital and that the best artists spend theirs with abandon, apparently subscribing to the belief that "you get what you pay for," and that greatness can only be achieved at a hefty price. We are told of Callas's practice of always singing full voice in rehearsal, an extravagant gesture at the expense of her voice, but all for the benefit of her audience and her art.<sup>93</sup> Her vocal wounds, then, are proof that she has loved us.

In "Melodrama Revised," Williams writes that, "[...] the basic vernacular of American moving pictures consists of a story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim that leads to a climax that permits the audience, and usually other characters, to recognize the character's moral value. This climax revealing the moral good of the victim can tend in one of two directions: either it can consist of a paroxysm of pathos (as in the woman's film and family melodrama variants) or it can take that paroxysm and channel it into the more virile and action-centered variants of rescue, chase, and fight (as in the western and all the action genres)" (53). The comeback is the melodramatic climax that is both "paroxysm of pathos" and fight scene. Her battles with her vocal crisis — proof of her victimhood and suffering — affirm her moral good and prove her worth.

Like bleeding fingers or broken guitar strings, the diva's ragged voice is indexical proof of her willingness to go to the furthest reaches for her art, and, by extension, for her audience. This is her supremely redemptive quality, the sign of her sense of duty to her public, and to her place in the world — in other words, she knows that she is here to sing for *us*, for her audience, or she would not have risked an artistic practice that costs her so dearly. The diva's artistic expenditures, manifest in her damaged voice, communicate to her public that she values them and understands her obligation to the society at large.

The vocal crisis also cements the diva's status as victim, especially when it is linked to alcohol and drug addiction, as is common in diva narratives. Scores of diva documentaries and biopics of figures like Garland, Piaf, Callas, Minnelli, Houston, Winehouse, Stevie Nicks, Billie Holiday, and Janis Joplin chart this trope. For the diva, substance abuse is not to be derided (at least not totally), but pitied. A weakness for drugs or alcohol is an indication of the diva's artistic credibility, a melodramatic symbol that she is too sensitive for this harsh world. But the reasons given for the diva's substance abuse are also confused. Explanations for her drinking and drugging are sometimes attributed to psychic trauma (Houston's childhood abuse, Garland's gay

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<sup>92</sup> This "legend" is advanced in many books and films about Maria Callas. See, for instance, Ariana Stassinopoulous' [now Huffington] *Maria Callas: The Woman Behind the Legend* (1981) and *Maria Callas: Living and Dying for Art and Love* (Dir. Steve Cole, 2004).

<sup>93</sup> See *Maria Callas: The Callas Conversations* (1968).

dad, Callas's desertion by Onassis — many documentaries and biopics take this psychoanalytic approach). But in the same film, cultural forces will also be blamed (racism, misogyny), as well as economic forces made manifest in the exploitation by the entertainment industry. Citing Martha Vicinus, Williams writes in "Melodrama Revised," "One of the key feature of melodrama is its compulsion to 'reconcile the irreconcilable' — that is, its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return" (75). The confused explanations for the diva's drug use and self-destruction seem to proceed from this same compulsion. Although a diva melodrama will often linger on the suffering and victimization of the diva at the hands of the entertainment industry, the same film will never explicitly question capitalism. Instead, the diva's suffering will be reconciled as the price for great art, a necessary flaw (and inspiration) of Romantic genius, and the economic system that perpetuates human suffering (forcing women who are seriously ill to continue to perform), will seldom be directly critiqued. This is reminiscent of Jane Feuer's vital assertion about the "myth of the self-reflexive musical": no mainstream film, no matter how self-reflexive, is going to seriously challenge the entertainment industry because it is *of* the entertainment industry. As Feuer claims about the MGM musical, it "uses reflexivity to perpetuate rather than to deconstruct the codes of the genre. Self-reflective musicals are conservative texts in every sense" (454). Feuer also cites Thomas Elsaesser's idea that "The world of the musical becomes a kind of ideal of the [film] medium itself" (13). In the case of the diva narratives, the "genius of the system" ensures that even the abuses of the system will be recouped as part of the self-mythicization of the movies. The diva narratives that surged into prominence as the sun set on the studio system use the very abuses of the system as content for their plots. In these plots, the injustices of the studio (or the record company or the impresarios) become just another barrier that only true talent can overcome. Whether the talent is inhibited by a mean-spirited banker who wants to prevent Judy and Mickey from playing *The Palace*, or the performance is in danger because Dr. Feelgood pumped the star full of Benzendrine after a bender, it makes no difference — the true star will overcome because *the show must go on*, and the show, not the performer's health or humanity, is what counts.

Even if the diva narrative in question is not a Hollywood musical, if it is told through a conventional, melodramatic lens (as most documentaries are, but as avant-garde works such as *The Death of Maria Malibran* or *Mulholland Drive* are *not*), then the melodramatic force of the diva's final performance — usually the "comeback" number — will serve to smooth over and reconcile all the suffering and violence that she has endured, and to give it meaning and purpose without challenging the ideologies that uphold the systems under which she suffers. We tend to remember Tosca's cry of "Vissi d'arte," but the end of the aria when she asks, "Why, God, do you reward me thus?" ("Perché, perché Signore? Perché me ne remunererai così?") is less famous.

Substance abuse also has something in common with the has-been and the vocal crisis. Drinking and drug addiction not only further authenticate the diva's suffering and, therefore, her virtue, but they replicate the parallel time-spaces occupied by the audience witnessing the diva in vocal crisis. In Gilles Deleuze's essay, "Twenty-Second Series – Porcelain and Volcano," he describes how one of the desirable aspects of drunkenness is the way that "One lives in two times, at two moments at once [...] In drunkenness, the alcoholic puts together an imaginary past, as if the softness of the past participle came to be combined with the hardness of the present auxiliary: I have-loved, I have-done, I have-seen. The conjunction of the two moments is expressed here, as much as the manner in which the alcoholic experiences one in the other, as one enjoys a manic omnipotence" (158). "Manic omnipotence" seems as fitting a description as

any for the nostalgia produced by the diva's vocal crisis where the audience can soar over multiple "time zones" at once, living in the now of the diva's presence, but also in the memory of her formerly glorious voice. (Deleuze even proclaims: "Everything culminates in a 'has been'" [159]). To experience a diva in vocal crisis, especially as the result of drinking or drug addiction, is to experience "I have-sung."

Sounding surprisingly like a Romantic philosopher or Timothy Leary, Deleuze extols drunkenness as an expedient method of widening and exploiting a psychic "crack" through which a person can venture to the limits of experience. This "crack" is a space where one can experience the nearly unfathomable "impersonality" of death through the highly "personal" act of performing a slow sort of "suicide" (which one presumes is alcoholism, as opposed to mere drunkenness). But a willingness to venture through a crack one's identity is a far cry from being dead. Indeed, such risk-taking is traditionally one way to encounter transcendent truths.

Deleuze admits that drinking is not necessarily the only way to achieve this experience, and that certain types of performance can mimic this sacred state. He writes, "...to be the *mime* [my emphasis] of what effectively occurs, to double the actualization with a counter-actualization, the identification with a distance, like the *true actor or dancer* [my emphasis], is to give to the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with its inevitable actualization. It is to give to the crack the chance of flying over its own incorporeal surface area, without stopping at the bursting within each body; it is, finally, to give us the chance to go farther than we would have believed possible" (161). When Deleuze indicates "the true actor or dancer" (to which I think we can add "singer") who gives us these truths produced by the "crack" without "actualizing" bodily disaster, he signals the performer's ability to replicate this journey *in extremis*. For the purposes of melodrama, it is not the diva's actual drunkenness or sobriety that allows the audience to inhabit the multiple time-spaces of the nostalgic performance of the diva in vocal crisis, but it is imperative that the audience know her actual familiarity with the "crack," and believe that she has in some way at some time risked her body to the void.

Melodrama conceives of the artist's comeback from drinking and drug addiction, like her vocal crisis, in spiritual terms. Stephen Holden wrote of one late Liza Minnelli concert, "Ms. Minnelli's force of will became a triumph of spirit over flesh. As she insisted on doing what she can no longer do, her audacity was inspiring: her message was you do the best you can, and if you have to, fake it" (*The New York Times*, December 5 2008). It is Minnelli's willingness to go where her voice no longer takes her that earns her status as a victim-hero, and allows her to perform transcendence in spite of — and because of — her reckless expenditure of her artistic gifts. In the same breath that knowing fans or the press snicker that Minnelli can no longer sing because has snorted too much coke or drunk too much booze, they also grow quietly reverent that she always gave her "all" in performance, refusing to spare her voice for the sake of the show, acknowledging that inevitable burnout is the price of such incandescence. At the end of the day, and as the passage from Deleuze supports, substance abuse and vocal crisis gain meaning from the same melodramatic root — they are evidence of simultaneous virtue and suffering, and the diva's specialness is manifest in her willingness to spend her riches — health, voice — in order to gain artistic insight. Deleuze himself, backtracking and recognizing the wishful nature of his assertion that the actor or dancer can achieve the spiritual transcendence of drunkenness-without-alcohol via mimesis, finally concludes that, "The eternal truth of the event is grasped only if the event is also inscribed in the flesh" (161). It would seem then, that Garland, like the Greek tragedians before her, had, indeed, to slit her throat for art.

The comeback performance is, in many ways, a canny exploitation of the diva's scars, which are proof of her devotion to her art, as well as a souvenir of her journey to the brink. Deleuze writes, "If one asks why health does not suffice, why the crack is desirable, it is perhaps because only by means of the crack and at its edges thought occurs, that anything that is good and great in humanity enters and exits through it, in people ready to destroy themselves — better death than the health which we are given. Is there some other health, like a body surviving as long as possible its scar...?" (160). For Deleuze, *survival* is the moral good, not health. He values the living body that carries a scar, that carries within it a *knowledge of death*. The ritual of the diva is dependent upon this knowledge: her torn voice is her scar, the mark of her profundity, as well as her devotion to her public.

### **Trial by Audience, or The Third Generation of Foot-Bound Star**

Summarizing Carol Clover's arguments on the melodrama of the courtroom, Williams writes, "Audiences of melodrama are positioned like juries of common law trials. Guilt or innocence is determined by orchestrated recognitions of truth that are inextricably tied to how audiences, who are essentially juries of peers, feel toward the accused" ("Melodrama Revised" 81). In the case of the diva film, it is not only audiences *of* the film who are juries, but audiences *within* the film, too.<sup>94</sup> The comeback is staged like a trial. Each comeback number begins with an establishing shot of the audience,<sup>95</sup> because each comeback performance must be mythically "live." As the curtain raises at the Olympia or Carnegie Hall or in a dingy Berlin cabaret, the public surrounds the diva and prepares to judge her. The beginning of *Funny Girl* is set on the eve of the "comeback" performance of Streisand-as-Fanny-Brice at the Ziegfeld Follies. This is the same night that Fanny's ne'er-do-well husband will be released from jail — he got caught up in an embezzlement scheme because, as his character tells us, he was tired of trying to keep up with his famous wife. (Again, the diva can never reconcile her professional success with her private life.) This night will decide the fate of their relationship, and the fate of Brice's career. In this opening sequence, Streisand-as-Brice sits alone in the theater, and when her maid discovers her and asks what she is doing, she answers, "It's the one place in the theater I've never sat. Maybe things look different from here." By sitting in the place of the audience, she is trying to get perspective on her life by thinking about how she got to this point, and by imagining how she will be judged by her public. As I hope to show, the filming of the comeback scene puts the spectator in both positions, too: we are judge and jury, but our ruling will not be impartial because diva films also manufacture a close identification with the protagonist.

In the television biopic *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001), the narrator (an actor performing the voice of Lorna Luft, Garland's second daughter) says of her mother's most famous "comeback" concert in 1961, "The highpoint was to be a concert in New York at Carnegie Hall. For mama, it was as if every triumph and every tragedy in her life and career was riding on that night. Fearing an adverse reaction from her medication, she kept herself awake for 36 hours. Everyone in show business was there. For mama, it was either now or never again." Garland's performance at the comeback determines the meaning of all that came before it ("every triumph and every tragedy in her life and career"), and all that will follow ("now or

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<sup>94</sup> As Feuer writes, "The use of theatrical audiences in the films provides a point of identification for audiences *of* the film" ("The Myth of the Self-Reflexive Musical" 467).

<sup>95</sup> Even if the number takes place in a recording both on a soundstage, there must be others there to witness it, such as the handful of producers in *New York, New York* (1977), or the "boys in the band" in *A Star Is Born* (1954).

never again”). In preparation for her trial by a jury of her peers (“everyone in show business”), and in order to prove her worth, Garland needed to pass a test of physical endurance.

In an analysis of D.W. Griffith’s *Way Down East* (1920), Williams writes, The audience’s ability to adjudicate between guilt and innocence rests ultimately, in action melodrama, upon just such forms of physical ordeal and trial as suffered by Anna in the blizzard and on the ice.

Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* that classical torture offers the ‘regulated mechanism of an ordeal: a physical challenge that must define the truth.’ In the search for innocence or guilt, investigation and punishment are now mixed. The location of the proof of innocence in the survival of a ritual ordeal partakes of an archaic system of physical test and trial. Yet we have seen also that melodrama partakes of the more democratic trial by a jury of peers. It may be just such a paradoxical mix of the archaic and the democratic, the old-fashioned and the new, the humane and the brutal, that constitutes the key element of melodrama. (“Melodrama Revised” 81)

Williams’ analysis of the “archaic and democratic” means by which audiences of melodrama judge their heroes is perfectly descriptive of the trials and verdicts of the diva narrative. The archaic means by which the audience will judge the diva in comeback include the physical trials of Garland’s marathon waking and drug-taking (or, in her case, abstention), and similar tests of physical endurance that are intimated in the centrality of vocal crisis to the diva narrative, as well as the exploitation of vocal and physical scars of drug addiction, alcoholism, and other traumas. Cinematic examples include Cotillard-as-Piaf rising from her deathbed to sing “Non, je ne regrette rien” at the Olympia at the end of *La Vie En Rose*, Minnelli recovering in bed from an abortion before the comeback (and title) song in *Cabaret* (1972), or being deserted by her husband (played by Robert DeNiro) soon after giving birth to their son in *New York, New York*, Garland-as-Jenny Bowman coming straight from the ER with a sprained ankle to sing the title number in *I Could Go on Singing*, Turner healing from Ike’s physical abuse in *What’s Love Got To Do With It?*, and all the documentaries that use the implicit physical trials of drug and alcohol rehab as the nadir from which the diva rises and returns in a triumphant comeback performance. Plus, there is the sheer grit required to sing the diva’s repertoire, especially when operatic or concert performance is implied (the operatic or concert format takes place over a long duration, implying endurance), thought of as an almost super-human feat, only achievable by a select few. These are the “archaic” physical trials that the diva endures and overcomes as she negotiates her fate with her audience.

But these brutal trials are not suffered without a fight. As willing as she is to go to the “furthest reaches” for her art, the diva’s relationship to her audience — as a stand-in for society as a whole — is highly ambivalent, and she often resents their sadism and control. Divas frequently express anger at their torturers, even though they also “live” for them. In the same film, Streisand-as-Brice will claim, “That’s where I live, onstage,” but will also walk out onto that same stage, turn towards the (empty) house, and pretend to machine-gun the audience.

Garland expresses a similar rage in a famously improvised scene from *I Could Go on Singing*. The sequence begins in the Emergency Room where Garland-as-Bowman is suffering from a sprained ankle after a drinking binge, and argues with her old flame, David (Dirk Bogarde), as he tries to get her to the theater to do a show:

Jenny: Have you come to take me home?

David: No, I’ve come to take you to the theater.

Jenny: Oh no you haven't, I'm not going back there, I'm not going back there ever, ever again.

David: Listen, they are waiting.

Jenny: I don't care if they're fasting, you just give them their money back and tell them to come back next Fall.

David: Jenny, it's a sell-out.

Jenny: I'm ALWAYS a sell-out.

David: You promised, they're waiting. There's George and Ida...

Jenny: ... and two-hundred thousand..., I know, just let them wait, to hell with them! I can't be spread so thin. I'm just one person. I don't want to be rolled out like a pastry so everybody can get a nice big bite of me. I'm just me. I belong to myself! I can do whatever I damn well please with myself and nobody can ask any questions.

David: Now you know that is not true, don't you?

Jenny: Well, I'm not gonna do it anymore. And that's final! It's just not worth all the deaths that I have to die...

David: You have a show tonight, you are going to do it, and I am going to see that you do.

Jenny: You think you can make me sing? Do you think you can — do you think George can make me sing? Or Ida? You can get me there, sure, but can you make me sing? I sing for myself. I sing when I want to, whenever I want to, just for me. I sing for my own pleasure. Whenever I want — do you understand that?

It is almost always a man who intercepts the rebellious diva and tries to muscle her back into performing. As an emissary of the patriarchy, a representative of mainstream culture and its expectations, the male figure always invokes shame and an appeal to duty, citing the diva's debt to society (i.e. the audience) in his effort to make her sing. Moments later in *I Could Go On Singing*, Bogarde gets Garland to the Palladium (when an appeal to duty didn't work, he resorted to more deceitful means and pretended to be in love with her again). There she encounters her manager, George (Jack Klugman), in the wings. George proceeds to lecture her:

“No, no I've had it. It's an hour past curtain, you'll be 45 minutes getting dressed, do you think they're gonna wait for you? There are 2500 people out there who paid money to see Jenny Bowman. But you're going to let them down. Now, that may not mean anything to you anymore, but I still have a certain reverence for audiences — they mean a great deal to me. And if they still do mean something to you, I'm going to find it very difficult to forgive you. And if they don't mean anything to you anymore, then I am genuinely and profoundly sorry for you, Jenny.”

George, a defender of the status quo, still has a “certain reverence for audiences,” a reverence that Garland-as-Bowman fails to demonstrate when she protests her punishment, when she asserts that her audience is not worth “all the deaths that [she has] to die.” George invokes the language of reverence, forgiveness, and pity — the language of the sacred. George is chiding her for seeming to forsake her sacred obligation, for forgetting her place in the Order of Things, an amnesia which would cause him to feel “genuinely and profoundly sorry” for her if she was really to be so reckless as to set herself adrift as a diva without an audience. Similarly, Bogarde counters Garland's proclamation that she “belongs to [her]self,” with, “Now you know that is not true, don't you?”, reminding her that, as a diva, she has sacrificed a good measure of autonomy to her obligation to the public at large.

The same thing happens at the end of *A Star Is Born* (1954) where Garland, mourning the death of her husband, movie star Norman Maine (James Mason), is chided by her bandleader friend, Danny (Tommy Noonan), for threatening to fail to appear at a gala benefit. Sitting in a darkened room, she rebels and yells at Danny that she will continue to sit at home and stare into the fire and cry “tonight and tomorrow night and for as long as I like!” Danny gives a speech denying her sympathy and designed to shame her into appearing at the gala. He strikes the final blow with an appeal to her obligation to society in the form of her husband, the patriarchy itself: “You’re a great monument to Norman Maine!,” he hurls, sarcastically. “His love for you and your success, that was the one thing in his life that wasn’t a waste, and he knew it! [...] You’re tossing aside the one thing he had left, you’re tossing it right back into the ocean after him! You’re the only thing that remains of him now, and if you just kick it away, it’s like he never existed, like there never was a Norman Maine at all.” The husband’s investment in the diva’s success produces an obligation, so she must perform. Garland capitulates and her last line of *A Star Is Born* is the famous, “This is Mrs. Norman Maine,” a phrase that denies her own star-y identity (in the film she starts out as the un-famous Esther Blodgett and rises to stardom as the studio-creation, Vicki Lester), and raises the specter of the James Mason character, who is not really the subject of the film (Garland is), but to whom the film ultimately appeals because Mason, who represents the patriarchy, also represents the interests of the audience. In this instance, they are one and the same.

But in the documentary, *Amy* (2015), Winehouse does not go as quietly. She thrillingly makes good on Garland’s threat from *I Could Go On Singing*: forced out of recovery and onto an international tour that she does not want to do by her father (again, The Father) and others, Winehouse is put on a plane and led onto a stage at a big music festival in Serbia. But in an act of rebellion, she turns her back to the audience and refuses to perform. (“Do you think you can make me sing? You can get me there, sure, but can you make me sing?”) Singing is the diva’s ultimate expression of subjectivity (“I sing for myself!”), but it is a subjectivity that is paradoxically both private (“voice” as the ultimate expression of a particular, personal artistic talent), and public — her status as diva pits her in a relationship of obligation to her audience, her “voice” belongs to all.

Meanwhile, Garland’s reaction to George’s “certain reverence for audiences” speech in *I Could Go On Singing* is less direct, but not without its own gesture of dissent. As he lectures her, she stares back, poker-faced, and when he finishes, she gives him a somewhat sarcastic kiss on the cheek. The sarcasm is one last protest as she strides directly onto the stage (she does not, as he expects, take 45 minutes to get dressed). She accepts her fate and the necessity of the crucible of the comeback, but not without resistance.

By now we have established the “archaic” trials of physical torture by which the diva will be judged, but what of the democratic means that Williams describes? Juries are, after all, are a sign and function of majority rule, and melodrama is an expression of the ambiguities and agonies of the search for a contested moral legibility that is only possible in a democracy (Brooks 14-15). As Williams writes in *Playing the Race Card* (2001), melodrama’s ability to evoke empathy is the key to its democratic potential, as well as its ability to engender social change.<sup>96</sup> The form of the comeback onscreen implicates the spectator in a particular way that forces this empathy through identification: namely, the close-up.

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<sup>96</sup> See Williams on melodrama and ideas of citizenship, as well as the legacy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *Playing the Race Card* (2001, 42-57).

Typically, the comeback scene is filmed in a manner that maximizes the audience's confrontation with the diva in an almost vertiginous way. Inevitably set in a darkened theater, the film establishes the place of the diva in relation to her audience (usually surrounded by or facing them, as one would a jury), and the comeback song proceeds in a series of tight close-ups of the diva's face. The close-up, argues Doane, "supports the cinema's aspiration to be the vehicle of presence" ("The Close-Up" 93). The diva film gives us the close-up as recompense for the absence of the diva's body. In some ways, it is better — at least, it provides a closer view — than even front row seats could offer a spectator in a theater.<sup>97</sup> Not only is this element of film form one more bid for the impression of "liveness" in the diva film, it also a technique that engenders empathy. Doane writes, "It is barely possible to see a close-up of a face without asking: what is he/she thinking, feeling, suffering? What is happening beyond what I can see?" ("The Close-Up" 96). This drive toward understanding, toward decoding the psychology of the diva, has ethical and moral implications.

Amanda Doxtater writes of the extreme close-ups in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Jeanne d'Arc*, that they, "press [ ] upon film to overcome its inevitable ontological absences, making it an experience along the lines of what Erica Fischer-Lichte (2008) calls a performative event. Performance, in Fischer-Lichte's theorization is predicated on the phenomenological feedback loop between performer and spectator. Live performances, whether between individuals or on the scale of mass religious ritual, avant-garde performance art, or circus sideshow, has the potential to transform its participants. It is this unmediated transformative power of performance that Dreyer tries to elicit via Jeanne's galvanized chaos of microperceptions" (194). Once again, the close-up mitigates the absence of the body of the performer, and strives to replicate the "phenomenological feedback loop" between performer and spectator that occurs in live performance. Dreyer's film, which strives to illustrate the authentic suffering of a female saint, has much in common with the profane (but covertly sacred) diva narratives, particularly in their spectacularization of female suffering. In his book, *Humiliation* (2011), Koestenbaum asks a more pointed version of that question when he writes of the specific iteration of the "feedback loop" between humiliated performers (such as divas) and their audiences: "Seeing your abasement, I overflow with love. Big question: whose side am I on?" (41). Reviewing Maria Callas's final concert in Boston in 1973 — a somewhat unsuccessful comeback where the soprano was plagued by insurmountable vocal crises — *Boston Globe* critic Richard Dyer<sup>98</sup> wrote: "Callas has long commanded our attention, our respect, our gratitude, our awe. Now in her struggle and in her exhaustion, she asks and earns, at cost to herself and to us, what she had never before seemed to need, our love" (Lowe 110). Dyer acknowledges, as does Koestenbaum, the cost to the diva of our devotion. Success earns her respect and awe, but only her suffering and humiliation earns her our love.

But the diva's humiliation is much deeper than her vocal crisis. In his book on the concept of humiliation, Koestenbaum muses about the figurative relationship between Judy Garland and Liza Minnelli, and the potential consequences of consuming the pathos inherent in the performances of this multigenerational diva dynasty. Using Adrienne Rich's explanation of the humiliation inherent within the mother-daughter bond ("A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to

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<sup>97</sup> In "The Self-Reflexive Musical," Feuer writes, "Musical numbers can be shot from the point of view of a front-row theatrical spectator and then move into filmic space — combining the immediacy and contact of the theater with the mobility of perspective of the camera" (450).

<sup>98</sup> In this case, Richard Dyer is the classical music critic of the *Boston Globe*, not the film scholar.

be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction,” [117]), Koestenbaum allows himself this flight:

Please forgive the audacity of this comparison: if we consider Judy Garland the foot-bound woman, who passes on to her daughter this message of what it means to be a woman, then imagine Liza’s ‘mutilation’ at being Judy’s daughter, and imagine our humiliation, as we watch Liza and imagine ourselves to be the third generation of foot-bound star. As we watch her sing, ‘New York, New York’ again and again (even as we cheer, even as we shiver with uncanny pleasure), Liza passes on to us the bodily message of what it means to be a star. It might mean grandeur and money and luxury and ease, but it might also mean showing your buttocks to the Santa Barbara County sheriff and then going on TV to tell the world about the experience. It might mean a mansion in Bel Air, but it might also mean imprisonment by the L.A. Police Department for forty-five minutes in a bathroom smeared with doo-doo. It might mean private planes and Harry Winston jewels, but it also might mean delirium tremens at the Betty Ford Center, and garish caricatures of yourself in the minds of others. (118)

Not all comeback sequences are about multiple generations of performers, but all potentially cast the spectator as the second or third generation of “foot-bound star,” because all diva narratives are about the humiliation of being a woman in a public sphere that offers her only the most narrow and proscribed ways of being, ways into which she fails to fit. So, the potential identification provoked by the empathy-generating operation of the close-up produces humiliation, yes, but also opens up spaces for resistance and transcendence. The close-up, which offers up an abstracted face, usually against a darkened background, can also be understood as an attempt to seek an “unmediated” (or less mediated) relationship with the voice. In reality, any close-up is highly mediated, of course, and is often the very hallmark of cinematic specificity (Doane “Close-Up” 91). But it is also true that filming the comeback song in close-up is another strategy by which the diva film might encourage a close encounter with the voice, and the diva’s voice is what will redeem her.

A transgressor of gender norms and expectations, in this moment of the comeback, the diva must convince the society of her virtue, which has been compromised up until this point. She is surrounded by her audience, her fellow citizens, essentially “a jury of her peers.” But the diva’s talent in singing is peerless, and this is what will save her. In his book, *Bio/pics*, George Custen analyzes the melodramatically structured genre of the biopic, citing the trope in which the heroes and heroines of biopics address a mob or crowd and alter their opinions through the “rhetoric of performance” (186). Whether biopic, documentary, or drama, the diva must persuade using this same “rhetoric of performance.” In other words, the jury’s ruling will depend upon how well — or, rather, how *authentically* — she sings.

The word “virtuoso” has the same Latin root as the word “virtuous.”<sup>99</sup> The diva’s musical brilliance will prove her worth to the public. This comeback scene of acceptance (back) into the fold via song has much in common with melodrama’s “Texts of Muteness,” theorized by Peter Brooks. In his discussion of the typicality of a stage direction from Cammille Saint-Aubin’s 18<sup>th</sup> century stage melodrama *La Fille de l’hospice*, Brooks quotes the playwright: “At the end of each act, one must take care to bring all the characters together in a group, and to place each of them in the attitude that corresponds to the situation of his soul. For example: pain will place a hand on its forehead [etc.] [...] One can sense how agreeable it is for the spectator to take in a at

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<sup>99</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary* <[www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)>

a glance the psychological and moral condition of each character” (61). Brooks analyzes the importance of this idea of the melodramatic tableau:

The last sentence [of Saint-Abin’s stage direction] comes close to suggesting the motive of tableau: it gives the spectator the opportunity to see meanings represented, emotions and moral states rendered in clear visible signs.

The text of muteness is, then, pervasive in melodrama and central to the representation of its most important meanings. Gesture in all forms is a necessary complement and supplement to the word, tableau is a repeated device in the summary of meanings acted out, and the mute role is the virtuoso emblem of the possibilities of meaning engendered in the absence of the word. (62)

The diva is certainly no mute — quite the opposite, she has supreme command of her voice. But, as discussed in Chapter 1, her voice is repeatedly imagined as “outside logos,” outside of conventional representation, and in this way, the virtuosic female voice has much in common with the “virtuoso emblem” of muteness. Furthermore, the diva, like melodrama, is an invention of Romanticism, and shares its overarching concern with, as Brooks puts it, the “effort to recover for meaning what appeared to be in danger of being lost to meaning” (78). Brooks writes that, “Gesture, a ‘return’ to the language of presence, became a way to make present and available new, or revived, indications of meaning, emotional conditions, and spiritual experience. In the silence created by the ‘gapping’ of the traditional language code, mute gesture appears as a new sign making visible the absent and ineffable” (79). The same could be said of music, of course, which also seeks to create a “language of presence.” Brooks admits as much when he writes that Romantic drama and melodrama, “tend toward a full realization in opera, where music is charged with the burden of ineffable expression” (75). Opera, of course, gave birth to the diva, and the virtuosic singing voice is certainly one way to realize the presence and immediacy of meaning in a culture where words no longer seem adequate to expression. The diva’s command of music makes immediate a great, inarticulate feeling that approaches a spiritual state. Doane, too, intimates the link between muteness and the comeback close-up when she writes how theories of the close-up tend to “produce nostalgia for the silent cinema, since it is the face that speaks there, and speaks to us (rather than to other characters) so much more eloquently when mute” (“Close-Up” 97). In many ways, the comeback song is similar to the silent soliloquy of the close-up: both allow for contemplation, neither “advance the plot” as straightforwardly as dialogue, and both encourage envelopment in the abstract spaces of face and music.

I addressed the mantra-like qualities of the lyrics of the comeback song (“I regret nothing,” “I could go on singing,” “But the world goes ‘round,” etc.) above, but what of the music itself? There is a circular quality to the typical 20<sup>th</sup> century comeback number that has an implicit link to melodrama. The comeback song often features two identical or near-identical verses. (“Non, je ne regrette rien,” “My Man,” “I Could Go on Singing,” and “But the World Goes ‘Round,” are all examples of this.) The trope is as follows: the diva begins the first verse tentatively, unsure of the power of her own voice. Perhaps she is upset by some recent traumatic event, perhaps she fears a relapse into vocal crisis, or perhaps she is simply intimidated by the stakes of the comeback performance. The first verse is sung in a subdued manner, but the audience is with her. Appreciating this imperfect and, therefore, emotionally authentic performance, the audience sometimes shows their appreciation by clapping, or sometimes the orchestration itself clues us in to the diva’s impending success. For the second verse — often featuring the exact same lyrics as the first — the brass kicks in, along with the percussion, upping the ante, and forcing the diva to rise to the occasion. By now she has gathered strength

from her public, and their implicit encouragement and embrace gives her the boldness to sing the verse again, this time using every ounce of her virtuosity and power. Inevitably, she finishes the second verse at full-tilt, awing both the diegetic and non-diegetic audience with her brilliance. The lyrics, too, take on new meaning. What began as a rueful rumination of potential regret in the first verse becomes a declaration of optimism by the second, bright hope renewed.

Consider, for example, Minnelli's performance of the ultimate paean to low expectations after her character's nadir in *New York, New York*: "But the world goes 'round," she shrugs as she finishes the first verse to a simple piano accompaniment. But by the end of the song, at which time, we gather, she has somehow come to understand her purpose and gain a clear vision for her future, she repeats the same lyric, but this time she sings it with joy and passion and defiance, as if it were the meaning of life itself, as the piano thunders and is joined by percussion. The same happens with other comeback numbers ("My Man," "I Could Go on Singing"), and, in each case, it is not the lyrics that alert us to this change in the diva's outlook — they remain exactly or virtually the same in each verse — it is the music. The changes in orchestration, as well as the changes in the dynamics of the accompaniment, and the diva's modulations in the delivery of the song, communicate that she has been redeemed.

In "Melodrama Revised," Williams writes:

This teasing delay of the forward moving march of time has not been sufficiently appreciated as key to the melodramatic effect. Nor has it been appreciated as an effect that cinema realized more powerfully than stage or literary melodrama. It needs to be linked with melodrama's larger impulse to reverse time, to return to the time of origins and the space of innocence that can musically be felt in terms of patterns of anticipation and return. The original patterns — whether of melody, key, rhythm, or of physical space and time — thus take on a visceral sort of ethics. They are felt as good. The 'main thrust' of melodramatic narrative, for all its flurry of apparent linear action, is to get back to the beginning. (74)

Williams is talking here of the rhythm of editing, shot type, script-writing, orchestral scoring, and other elements of form which construct the patterns of melodramatic force as expressed by cinema. But she is also highlighting the "visceral sort of ethics" inherent in music itself, particularly in recognizable forms such as the popular song or the classical aria, which set up conflict and resolution as chords and patterns are established, repeated, and resolved in predictable, but satisfying ways. The comeback song establishes conflict (at both the level of music and lyrics), repeats it (returns to the central concern), and resolves it, often by music alone. At the beginning of "But the World Goes 'Round," Minnelli is a former big band singer and single mother with an uncertain future, but by the end of the song, she is a diva on the edge of renewed stardom and success. Sometimes the comeback performance is validated by applause, but often it is not. Intriguingly, diegetic applause is as often absent from the ending of the comeback number as it is present, demonstrating that the music is proof enough of the diva's redemption. The musical resolution and the triumph of the diva's virtuosic performance are enough to create the *feeling* of the public's recognition of her virtue. As Williams writes, "What is truly modern about melodrama is its reliance on personality — and on the revelation of personality — through body and gesture — as the key to both emotional and moral truth" ("MD Revised" 78). To "body and gesture," I would add "voice" as revelatory of the diva's "true" personality, an unveiled interior which melodrama seeks to display. It is the constant goal of melodrama to reveal the moral occult through acts and gestures that are felt by audiences as the emotional truths of personality. The diva's performance of the comeback number is an extension

of her personality, an exhibition of and investment in her “true self.” Because she sings well and authentically, we know that she is good, and deserves to be redeemed.

### **“If I Could Turn Back Time”: The Daemon in the Machine**

What is your favorite memory?  
Every time the curtain goes up.

--- “Edith Piaf” in *La Vie En Rose* (2007)

If the trial is endured and the comeback is a success, it can be understood as a victory over time. In *La Vie En Rose*, a reporter asks Cotillard-as-Piaf, “What is your favorite memory,” and she replies, “Every time the curtain goes up.” This chronologically impossible reply intimates the complex power of the comeback to turn back time and influence possible futures. Historical time, Gaines tell us, is “exemplified by the event that, once over, cannot come again later” (“Even More Tears” 329), but the comeback flies in the face of this formulation. The comeback is able not only to turn back the clock to a time of the diva’s former glory (all that pathos-producing nostalgia can be somewhat purged if the performance goes well), it also allows for future performances — future “comebacks,” even — to take place. Again, there are those lines about the Carnegie Hall concert from *Life with Judy Garland*: “Fearing an adverse reaction from her medication, she kept herself awake for 36 hours. Everyone in show business was there. For mama, it was either now or never again.” There is something poetic about Garland’s attempt to slow time prior to her Carnegie Hall appearance. She couldn’t stop the earth from going around the sun, but she could refuse participation in the biorhythms that typically accompany that journey (namely, sleep) until she willed her future into being: “it was either now or never again.” The comeback is not about one performance, it is about all performances, past and future. “Every time the curtain goes up,” implies recurrent and future action, but it is also a “favorite memory.” Similarly, if one does not triumph at Carnegie Hall, then one will never triumph again. This is not historical time, but the multiple “time-zones” evoked by the diva in comeback can be uniquely evoked by cinematic time.

In “Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama,” Gaines writes that “Melodrama borrows the totally irreconcilable difference between past and future modes, relying on the temporal asymmetry of ‘never together’ for its own dramatic ends” (336). We’ve already outlined how the pathos of the has-been and the comeback rest on this premise. However, cinema can cheat when it comes to time in a way that other art forms cannot. Though not necessarily “reconcilable” in a narrative (i.e. linear) sense, cinema can suggest the near-simultaneous coexistence of the multiple time-spaces conjured by the comeback moment.

The comeback sequence at the end of *La Vie En Rose* exemplifies the way that cinema can illustrate the “manic omnipotence” of the diva in these moments to startling effect. Piaf’s comeback performance of “Non, je ne regrette rien” at the Olympia is overlaid with voiceover and interspersed with flashbacks, flash-forwards, and a recurring image that might be considered an imagined “space of innocence.” The sequence begins on Piaf’s death bed: the film tells us that the date is October 10, 1963, “her last night.” As she lays dying, Piaf murmurs, “I can’t go back. I can’t.” Then the curtain opens at the Olympia. We know from earlier that Piaf has risen from her sick bed to perform at the Olympia, so it is confusing, at first to see this flash-forward to her death bed (*how much later can it get?*, we wonder). We expect to see Piaf backstage at the

Olympia, but instead we see her on her last night on earth. Yet, it is perfectly fitting that this scene is told in flashback starting from the last possible moment that comes just before death. The diva's dearest wish (and melodrama's) is to go back ("What is your favorite memory? Every time the curtain goes up."), which is actually a going forward (able to go on singing) and, in cinema, *she can go on singing*, essentially giving lie to the melodramatic problem of "too late."

As the scene unfurls, Cotillard-as-Piaf at the Olympia repeats the same actions that she has throughout the film: she approaches a darkened stage, she is made up and dressed in black, she steps into the spotlight. There is potential for repeated trauma. We have seen her do this many times before. She has stepped into spotlights that earn her fame and success, but she has also stepped into spotlights that bring disaster. Prior to this moment of the film, Piaf has been shown coming off her famous "suicide tour" of 1959, where she keeled over onstage – repeatedly, and in different cities — exhausted by singing and touring, but refusing to quit. This sequence requires that we hold multiple "Piafs" in our heads as she prepares to take the stage this time. We yearn for her prior success, as when we saw her triumphant star-making performance in a 1930s radio broadcast to all of France, and we fear her past failures, such as those we witnessed on the "suicide tour."

Like other comeback performances, this one determines the meaning of the past as well as the future, and the film makes this explicit. As Piaf prepares to go onstage, we hear a voiceover that seems to be rooted in an earlier sequence where a younger Piaf, happy and knitting on the beach during the 1950s, is being interviewed by a journalist. The journalist asks her, "What do you think is the most important thing in life?" "Aimer," answers Piaf. The journalist continues to ask questions about Piaf's inspiration and values: "Aimer," she repeats, mantra-like. Extracts from this interview on the beach are intercut with an older Piaf, climbing the steps to the stage of the Olympia. As she nears the microphone, we see another flash-forward to Piaf on her deathbed, eyes glazed (has she died?), but possibly also contented. We are encouraged to imagine that this expression indicates, as the song says, she has no regrets, that her love of the curtain going up has made it all worth it. Then the film intercuts another image, that of a small girl in a field, holding a sparrow. A child of the Parisian slums, this moment in a rural setting hardly seems like one that occurred in Piaf's real life, but it functions, melodramatically, as a return to a space of innocence for the character. "Piaf" means "sparrow," and the image suggests a young Edith, discovering and caring for the bird as she might for her potential, future self as she encounters it in a pure and idealized natural setting, far from the corruption and grime of the city. If only there were such a place for her.

Undeniably, the ability to flash forward or flash backward is available to any film, and is quite typical of a number of melodramatically-structured biographical narratives, regardless of subject. But the diva uniquely exploits the flash-forward and flash-back effects as a central part of her meaning. The comeback and the "has-been" define the diva as they do not, necessarily, define an ordinary star. The comeback, though marked by history, by what came before, does not function like a historical event, but as a resurrection. The comeback is a "return," a repetition, purposefully evoking other time-spaces of the diva's existence, inducing a collision with the "now" of the comeback performance. The "temporal asymmetry of 'never together'" is overcome in these moments, and the diva soars above mere chronology.

When understood this way, cinema, for all its desperation to fabricate a sense of "presence" to rival that of the diva in live performance, potentially expands the diva's powers beyond the stage, allowing what is implicit in live performance, the multiple time-spaces evoked by the comeback, to be pictured explicitly onscreen. But the melodramatic structure of the

narrative is a means of containment. Like the diva's voice, cinema's power to manipulate time is a threat to semiotic order, and must be wrestled back into conventional meaning-making by melodrama.

The awe and fear of the diva is tied to the awe and fear of the cinematic machine, as well as to her gender. Fear of the daemonic nature of cinema's ability to manipulate time has dogged cinematic technologies since their inception. In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Doane recounts a pertinent story from an 1895 edition of *Scribner's Magazine* called "The Kinetoscope of Time." In this penny dreadful, a man enters a darkened room where he peers through holes in a curtain, and is able to see historical events through the lens of a machine. Eventually the proprietor approaches him and offers to show him two more scenes: one from his past, and one that will show him his own death. But this last vision will come at a price: "The vision of life must be paid for in life itself. For every ten years of the future which I may unroll before you here, you must assign me a year of your life — twelve months — to do with as I will," (2). The proprietor is painted as a sort of vampire, an ageless figure that will drain the life from others in exchange for the everlasting un-death offered by cinema. Doane writes that, "the mysterious proprietor of the kinetoscope is contaminated by the attributes of his own machine — specifically its ability to access other times (the protagonist's past, his future) and the denial of mortality (the proprietor does not know death)" (3). The diva film, like the proprietor of the Kinetoscope of Time, offers the past and future, seeming to cheat death. The "deathlessness" enabled by cinema is one occult power frequently exploited in the myth of the star, often used hyperbolically by the entertainment industry to its own advantage. Think, for instance, of Norma Desmond's declamation that "The stars are ageless," or Bill Sampson's somewhat sarcastic lament to Margo Channing in *All About Eve* (1950) that "[...] actresses never die! The stars never die, and never change." In one sense, this myth is the work of cinema's self-aggrandizement, a bid for some kind of eternal quality, a longed-for classicism<sup>100</sup> on par with the other arts. But in another sense, and much like the penny dreadful "The Kinetoscope of Time," the movies also seek to lure with this unwholesomeness, beckoning with the glinting edge of the occult.

One seldom hears this "eternal" or "undead" rhetoric around male stars because it implies a resistance to aging that is a distinctly feminine concern. In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Doane draws an explicit link between cinema's ability to "reverse time" and the fear of femininity. She describes an early Edison film, *The Artist's Dilemma*, where a demon turns back the hands of a clock, and then makes a woman emerge from it. "'Edison's demon' makes the image of a woman emerge from a reversed time. With his broad strokes of the paintbrush, the clown/demon undoes the work of time. The fact that it is an image of a woman is by no means unimportant. For the spectacle of the woman has historically acted as an impediment to the linear narrative trajectory in film" (134). But in the diva film, it is not the female body that threatens to halt the narrative. Instead, it is the female voice (yoked to the real danger, female sexuality, as is the visual spectacle of the body) which is the semiotic threat, particularly in the circular and temporally unbounded space of the comeback number.

But melodrama is the antidote to this fear. By staging the diva's story as a trial by audience, melodrama seeks to contain the threat of meaninglessness, of the unbounded time of cinema, and of the void of the female voice, associated as it is with the ineffable, the inexpressible, and that which is beyond language. The comeback scene seeks a ruling on the diva

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<sup>100</sup> For a compelling explanation of why melodrama instead of classicism is the predominant mode of popular cinema, see Williams, "Melodrama Revised" (1998).

by putting her more disturbing and occult qualities — and those of cinema — in the context of a “courtroom scene.” Considered this way, the cinematic illustration of multiple time-zones is not necessarily just a display of the diva’s power, it is also a way that melodrama puts the cinematic machine in service of its own ends. The “scrapbook” effect inherent in the multiple time-zones evoked (whether implicitly or explicitly) by the cinematic comeback is evidence for the jury, a melodramatic ordering of the diva’s greatest (and worst) hits, Exhibits A through Z for the audience’s consideration. Does she merit a welcome back into the fold? Yes, these flashbacks tell us that she does (how she’s suffered!), as does the persuasive nature of her virtuosic performance.

### **“Somewhere A Place For Us”: A Space of Innocence and a Longing for Antiquity**

It is sinister to undo the work of time. The diva’s threat, like cinema’s, (like modernity’s) is an anarchy of meaning. But melodrama contains this threat, making partial sense of it all. One way it does this is by harkening to an imagined “space of innocence.” In his discussion of stage melodramas of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Brooks writes of the frequency with which the plays begin in a garden or a place where the protagonist is innocent and, therefore, virtuous. Inevitably, something goes wrong and innocence is cast adrift. “Expulsed from its natural terrain, its identity put into question through deceiving signs, it must wander afflicted until it can find and establish the true signs in proof of its nature” (30), writes Brooks.

We’ve established that the diva can “turn back time” in the comeback, and this is the moment that the diva narrative hinges upon — but is this the return to a space of innocence demanded by melodrama? *La Vie En Rose* seems to come the closest to an explicit place to which the diva can return, a lost “home,” as envisioned by the scene where a young Piaf cares for a sparrow in a field, a bird which is emblematic of her future self. This scene fits perfectly with the Brooks-ian need to return to some agrarian, pre-modern past, a longing to make up for what has been lost to modernity. The curious thing is that few other narratives about female performers seem to take this tack. One could argue that the star system does this work for the narratives, particularly in a case like Garland’s. Though a film like *I Could Go on Singing* may not make it explicit, her iconic and unshakeable existence as Dorothy in the minds of the culture functions as a space of innocence for Garland (Dorothy was a farmgirl, after all!), and is bound to be evoked by her mere presence, no matter what the role. Many of the television biographies about her also fabricate this effect by ending on “Over the Rainbow” or making some allusion to *The Wizard of Oz*.

This carries over to her daughter, Liza Minnelli’s roles onscreen, too. There is no possible “space of innocence” for Liza — as a star, we know too much about her, we know that she was born into trouble, and that there were probably few halcyon days of her early existence. Even in her star-making role as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, there is no pleasurable harmless and secure space to which we can imagine her returning, no “place like home.” Sally, like Liza, has only deceased or unstable, jet-setting parents — her mother is dead and her father is a diplomat, i.e. elegantly “homeless” — on whom she cannot really rely. And yet, in a way, the film exploits the lingering memory of Garland to both create and destroy an imagined “space of innocence.”

If there is a “comeback” number in *Cabaret*, it is the title song, which occurs at the end of the film after Sally ends her romantic relationship with her boyfriend, Brian, and aborts her pregnancy with their child. She is back to pursuing her goal of stardom (back to fulfilling her function as a diva), and demonstrates this redoubled commitment to her show biz career by performing a song with lyrics that affirm the importance of entertainment: “What good is sitting

alone in your room?/ Come hear the music play/ Life is a cabaret, old chum/ Come to the cabaret!” The number is fraught with ambiguity because, as a film about, among other things, the rise of fascism in Germany, *Cabaret* is in no way a straightforward celebration of entertainment à la the MGM musical. This is not the place to fully analyze all of the meanings of this very complex final number, but Minnelli’s inheritance of a certain show biz legacy from her mother *does* seem to force the concept of a “space of innocence” into being.

The final number of *Cabaret* is shot like a typical diva comeback scene: there is an establishing shot of the cabaret and the audience, a long shot of Minnelli that advances to a medium shot, but the emotional heart of the song, a moment during the bridge, is filmed in almost extreme close-up. The close-up is the move that raises the specter of Garland. Made in 1972, just three years after Garland’s well-publicized demise in 1969, *Cabaret* cannily exploits Minnelli’s connection to Garland’s memory, which includes her tragic death. The lyrics leading up to the bridge are filmed in a medium shot and evoke a character who has many resonances with Garland. Minnelli sings: “I used to have this girlfriend known as Elsie/ With whom I shared four sordid rooms in Chelsea/ She wasn’t what you’d call a blushing flower/ As a matter of fact, she rented by the hour/ The day she died, the neighbors came to snicker/ ‘Well, that’s what comes from too much pills and liquor!’/But when I saw her laid out like a queen/ She was the happiest corpse I’d ever seen!” It is impossible to watch this without thinking of Minnelli’s inevitable acquaintance with similar snickering about her mother. Practically every news outlet in 1969 declared some equivalent of: “Judy Garland Dead at 47, That’s What Comes from Too Much Pills and Liquor!”

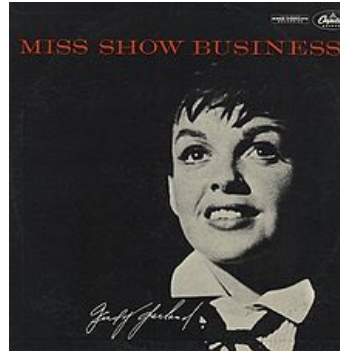
But the film really leans into this connection, and as Liza continues the song on the lyrics, “I think of Elsie to this very day...,” lyrics that make space for reminiscence, the shot changes to a tight close-up of Minnelli’s face and the lighting transforms so that the details of Minnelli’s hair and costume are muted and all that can be seen are her facial features. This is the moment where Liza’s face, almost floating in space, uncannily resembles her mother’s (figures 10 and 11). It is Garland, of course, of whom we imagine her daughter thinking “to this very day.” And we have the sense that it is Garland, not Elsie, passing along this advice to her offspring, when Minnelli sings, “I remember how she’d turn to me and say/ ‘What good is sitting all alone in your room?/ Come hear the music play/ Life is a cabaret, old chum.’” This *would* be the advice of Judy Garland, Miss Show Business, would it not? “All the suffering was worth it, if you just ‘come hear the music play!’” Once again, Williams’ “visceral sort of ethics” are implicit here in the musical (and thematic) patterns of repetition and return. “She was the happiest corpse I’d ever seen” is another way of saying “je ne regrette rien,” and when Liza snaps out of the close-up, seeming to break free from her reverie, she takes the advice that her mother gave her, and she passes it on to us, the spectators: “Come to the cabaret!,” she beckons as she looks directly at the camera. (Here we are again, the “third generation of foot-bound star!”)

In this sense, twenty-six-year-old Liza Minnelli’s star-making film is actually another Judy Garland comeback because, once again, the “comeback” number determines both the past and future, as Garland determines past and future for Minnelli. The character of “Elsie” evoked Garland as The Past, but Garland’s resonance will also influence Minnelli’s future. The film courts the uncanny as Minnelli eerily prognosticates in the next lines: “And as for me, and as for me/ I made my mind up back in Chelsea/ When I go, I’m going like Elsie!” Even in 1972, without the extra-textual resonances of Minnelli’s now-known problems with “too much pills and liquor,” it seems perverse to have the promising daughter of a beloved and famous drug addict vow to die just like her mother. (Minnelli, herself, seems aware of this resonance and has

changed the lyrics to “I’m *not* going like Elsie!” in her live performances of the song since being treated for drug and alcohol addiction at the Betty Ford Center in the 1980s.)



Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* (Fig. 10)



Judy Garland in 1955 (Fig. 11)



Garland as Dorothy (Fig. 12)

But what of the “space of innocence” in this film? I’ve established that *Cabaret* is purposefully raising and exploiting Garland’s meaning in this number — press a bit on Liza here, and she yields Judy. *Cabaret* is too early in Minnelli’s career for this to be any kind of “comeback” for her as a star, although the title song is a “comeback” of sorts for the protagonist of the film. No, the space of innocence in “Cabaret” is manufactured by the close-up on Minnelli. The close-up encourages us to look beyond Minnelli to Garland and when we look at Garland we cannot help but be nostalgic for Dorothy (figure 12). *The Wizard of Oz* is the ur-text here, painfully reminding the culture of Garland’s victimhood and innocence. Arguably, *The Wizard of Oz* is even larger than Garland, and the great love of the film reaffirms a country that likes to think of itself as a wholesome, earth-bound, God-fearing place. “Kansas,” then, is the space of innocence evoked by *Cabaret*.

But people tend to forget that Dorothy never did like Kansas. She spends the first third of the film trying to leave it. She feels misunderstood and ignored there and longs to go somewhere far, far away. It is part of the great melodramatic work of *The Wizard of Oz* that it seems to reconcile Dorothy’s irreconcilable wish to be both as understood and loved as she is by her friends in Oz — to be a hero, as she is there — and also to go back to Kansas, where there is nothing for her but the familiar. The conflict of *The Wizard of Oz*, the one that prompts “Over the Rainbow,” is the central conflict of every diva narrative: misunderstood at “home” (i.e. in the domestic, family realm), the diva seeks “something more,” and longs to be part of the greater world. She gets to be a part of this greater world and is even embraced by it, but she loses the safety and comfort of home, finding herself more exiled from it the more beloved she becomes by the world outside. This is the same conflict experienced by Streisand-as-Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* — “I’m the greatest star, I am by far, though no one knows it!” — and by Streisand, herself, whose star myth revolves around her burning desire to leave Brooklyn; it’s the same conflict of Anna Mae Bullock, another name for a young Tina Turner, who sings too loudly and too sexy for the church choir in Nutbush, Tennessee in *What’s Love Got To Do With It?*; it’s the same conflict experienced by a teenaged Whitney Houston chomping at the bit to be allowed by her mother to sign a recording contract because she knows she can sing better than anyone else on the radio; and on and on. The difference is that *The Wizard of Oz* asks us, with soaring violins and Garland’s plaintive line readings, to accept that “There’s no place like home,” even though we have no real reason to believe that that is true. Sure, Dorothy has a greater appreciation for

her family now because she knows what it is like to be without them, but why should we think that things will be different now? Will they pay more attention to her now that she hit her head during a cyclone? And what's to keep them from trying to take Toto if he takes a dislike to another neighbor? In many ways, the ending of *The Wizard of Oz* is one of the most unsettling in cinema, demonstrating how uneasily melodrama's desire to return to a space of innocence rests with the experience — and promise — of living modern life.

The thing about living in modernity is that one imagines there can be something *more* than the conditions, traditions, and place into which one is born, and the diva is a thoroughly modern woman. Although a diva-in-training may be shaped by Kansas, she is never content to remain there. What characterizes the diva is that she is dying to *leave* the place of tradition and stasis to join the world and enter public life. And by the time she makes her name as a diva, there is no cozy plantation home or agrarian village that will have her. There is no space of “rest” for her, as the diva is all about forward momentum — another mark of her modernity.

And yet, the diva as a type is characterized by an un-nameable longing and an undeniable nostalgia. But nostalgia for what? What historical time can we name when divas roamed freely and flourished? There isn't one, but this unnameable longing is part and parcel of what fuels the melodramatic mode. Following Peter Brooks' argument, melodrama was one way for a “post-Sacred” Europe (no longer invested in the absolute word of God and King), to try to make legible a morality that had become equivocal and relative, a state of affairs which left people ill at ease and in search of an ever-evasive moral clarity (Brooks 14-15). Melodrama, Brooks argues, is “a central fact of the modern sensibility,” emphasizing that the mode is emblematic of the way that “modern art has typically felt itself to be constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code” (21). The feeling of unnamable loss is, in many ways, central to the modern way of being. One can conceive of this loss in many ways – as a lack of “wholeness,” or a lack of “unity,” stemming from the absence of faith in older explanatory conceptions of the world. If we recognize the diva as one of the most important figures of the “melodramatic imagination,” we can understand how her hyperbolic performance style, coupled with the ritual suffering of the comeback, often compels the use of occult or sacred language:

“The religious ritual of greeting, watching and listening to Judy Garland took place last night in Carnegie Hall. Indeed, what actually was to have been a concert – and was – also turned into something not too remote from a revival meeting. From the moment Miss Garland came on the stage, a stage, incidentally, on which have trod before her the immortals of music, the cultists were beside themselves. What Rev. Dr. Billy Graham would have given for such a welcome from the faithful! They were on their feet even before the goddess had grabbed her microphone, and by the time she had bestowed the first of those warm smiles, they were applauding and screaming, ‘Bravo!’” (Lewis Funke, *The New York Times*, April 24, 1961)

“The only term I can think of to describe the astounding, inexhaustible stamina of a woman whose rapid recovery from encephalitis, hip and knee replacements, obesity and an addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs must set some kind of a record is to call it a resurrection.”  
– Steven Holden on Liza Minnelli at The Beacon, *The New York Times*, 2002

“revivalism and the ancient rites of Dionysus”

– Rowland Barber on Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall, “The Eternal Magic of Judy Garland,” *Good Housekeeping*, January 1962

“unsettlingly primitive exchanges of affection between a star and her fans”

– Ben Brantley on a Liza Minnelli concert, *The New York Times* 1999

“The famous *Non, je ne regrette rien* was written after an illness brought on by Piaf’s ‘suicide tour’ of 1959, when she would frequently collapse on stage. The song, she said, brought her back to life and her audiences also saw it as a sign of resurrection.”

And then, from a fan: “It is not that she is singing to you – it is that she is confessing for you.”

– Milton Bracker, *The New York Times*, 1961

Repeatedly, the diva in comeback is compared to a fervently worshipped goddess who is capable of resurrection. Notice, too, that this sort of language tends to come on the heels of some mention of personal or vocal malady. The diva’s willingness to suffer for her public, to confess and suffer punishment for their “sins,” is the very sign of her divinity. Granted, these mentions tend to mix Christianity<sup>101</sup> with pagan antiquity, but the point is that they all evoke previous versions of the Sacred. This is another way of indicating a “realm of spirit” that can no longer be called such a thing, but whose certainty we long to access. In its straining, its broad gestures, its swooning and hidden identities, melodrama, like the diva, is an attempt to find absolute meaning in a world that has deposed the concept. Brooks argues that melodrama seeks, in its exaggerated gestures and intensified situations, to elucidate the “moral occult,” which he defines as:

... the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality. The moral occult is not a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desecralized remnants of sacred myth. It bears comparison to unconscious mind, for it is a sphere of being where our most basic desires and interdictions lie, a realm which in quotidian existence may appear closed off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm of meaning and value. The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult.

(5)

I have tried to stress the diva’s modernity and have argued that Gautier’s bestowal of the moniker “diva” upon certain opera singers was a tongue-in-cheek move, glorifying women who were in the paradoxical position of being acclaimed and lauded by polite society, but simultaneously excluded from it, opera singers being the near-equivalent of courtesans.<sup>102</sup> And yet, there is, undeniably, a *barely* “desacralized” awe that clings to the diva as a type. The ritual of concert-going bears this out, as does the near-religious hyperbole that attends the diva in the media and in the discourse of fans (“la divine” is still a nickname used to refer to certain opera singers, and Callas has long been known as “La Divina Assoluta”). J.Q. Davies’ article,

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<sup>101</sup> For more on the Christian tradition of melodramatic suffering, see Richard Allen, “The Passion of Christ and the Melodramatic Imagination” (2018).

<sup>102</sup> In *The Queen’s Throat*, Koestenbaum writes, “Though fêted by crowned heads, the nineteenth-century diva, like other musicians, was not considered part of polite society. A silken cord at private gatherings separated her from the wealthy partygoers she was paid to entertain. Nor did she have full civil rights: governments classed her as a prostitute. Many performers in Europe, whether musical or dramatic, were similarly disenfranchised. France gave theatrical players their religious rights (Communion, marriage, burial) only as late as 1849” (107).

“Gautier’s ‘Diva’,” enumerates the many explicit comparisons of 19<sup>th</sup> century opera divas and pagan goddesses, and details the centrality of Vincenzo Bellini’s opera *Norma* to the inception of the type. The title character of *Norma* is a Druid High Priestess who sings the famous aria, “Casta Diva,” to the moon goddess, and *Norma* was created for Maria Malibran, one of the sopranos in the Malibran-Sontag duets, who inspired the first uses of “diva.”

Though there may be no seamless evolution from a priestess of Delphi to a prima donna on the stage of La Scala, these figures still have much in common. The power of the modern diva is that she *does* remind us of something older, or of what we imagine “magic” must have been like. The reason that the diva, above other types of performers, has this particular “magical” pull is precisely because she is characterized by a highly emotive and overtly theatrical performance style, which is, in many ways, at odds with the values of “realism” in modern entertainment. This is one of the primary paradoxes of the diva: the most modern of types, the figure whose very definition is dependent upon the irony of the fact that we no longer believe in goddesses or magic, is marked by a performance style that is about as far from the quintessentially modern values of “realism” as one can get. The diva’s performance is a solo incantation, quite odd when one thinks of it in comparison to other styles, even other styles of singing or dancing. In most high diva moments, such as the comeback, the diva’s performance is extremely internal (emphasized, in cinema, by the close-up), consists of limited movement, does not focus on a display of the female body, and does not advance the plot. Our rapt attention during the diva’s performance is akin to ritual, in that there is nothing tangible or rational to be gained from it, nothing even very kinetic to watch. For the spectator to be so invested in this moment, which features the least amount of “action” in the entire film, is to betray an investment in spirits (which have become psychology), in intangible things that animate the universe. What is this exchange, if not a leftover investment in magic?

The difference may be that magic works (or is supposed to), and melodrama is bound to fail. Here Brooks explains how the ethical dramas that were once rooted in a relationship to the Sacred, which could also be described as an absolute relation to one’s place in one’s community, have transformed into melodramas of individual psychology. But the contours of this psychology are difficult to discern, as they float by in incomplete relief:

In the absence of a true Sacred [...] they continue to believe that what is most important in a man’s life is his ethical drama and the ethical implications of his psychic drama. Yet here they are dealing in quantities and entities that have only an uncertain ontology and, especially, an uncertain visibility: they are not necessarily seen in the same manner, if perceived at all, by an audience, since the social cohesion of an earlier society with a greater community of belief no longer obtains. In the manner of the melodramatist, such writers must locate, express, demonstrate, prove the very terms in which they are dealing. [...] Precisely to the extent that they feel themselves dealing in concepts and issues that have no certain status or justification, they have recourse to the demonstrative, heightened representations of melodrama. (20-1)

The framing of the diva in comeback melodramatizes the diva’s ill-fitting modernity: a high priestess of cathartic ritual, her performances take the form of a sacred rite (grand gestures, incantation, sacrifice), but the content is profane: addiction, divorce, “the man that got away.” The close-up presses us to see “beyond” what we see, and to seek in the diva’s psychology the great cosmic dramas behind “Non, je ne regrette rien,” or “Oh my man, I love him so.”

The fantasy of antiquity serves other purposes, too. By harkening back to an imagined past where a woman of the diva’s talents might use her virtuosity and superiority to serve the

polis, to serve a god, to be lauded, and have a place, we imagine a “use” for the diva’s talents that would not pit her against society, but would give her an unambiguous function within it. In this way, the fantasy of antiquity could be the closest thing there is to a “space of innocence” for the diva, a time to which we might long for her to return. Because even though this ancient time is possibly coexistent with an era of actual human sacrifice, it seems, paradoxically, not to require the torments demanded of her as Romantic genius and modern “working woman.” In this way, the has-been diva is a longing for an imagined time that-has-been, an era of supposed unity of desire and purpose, coincident with a lost sense of the Sacred.

### **“I Could Go On Singing” (Conditional Mood): Possible Futures**

Williams writes of the maternal melodrama in “Something Else Besides a Mother” (1984), “Rather than raging against a fate that the audience has learned to accept, the female hero often accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions” (22). In her view, this questioning is the door to critique and potential social change that melodrama leaves partially open to the spectator. The diva film works much like maternal melodrama in this respect. The fantasy of antiquity does not present a template for something “other,” it is simply an expression of a *wish* for things to be different. Like the comeback sequence, the diva-as-ancient-goddess rhetoric is implicitly a wish that women this powerful would not have to be so maimed, that realizing their talents would not require them to suffer so, and to be as derided as they are praised. But a wish is a hope for a possible future.

What is interesting is that the cinematic body of diva narratives tend to imagine nothing beyond the comeback. At the end of these films, there is often only the space of the stage, the no-man’s land of the audience’s embrace, an ecstatic tableau. But this is not the welcoming back of a diva into a singular family, it is not a recognition of her virtue as a wife or a mother or even just a regular citizen. The diva’s primary relationship is with her public, and the recognition of her virtue is primarily as a performer who has given something to her audience. She is a woman, yes, but also not quite — she is something special, a category of her own — so either the curtain falls or the film fades to black. But where does this void put us in terms of the ends of melodrama?

In her recent work, “Tales of Sound and Fury...’ or, The Elephant of Melodrama,” (2018), Williams writes that “... the primary work of melodrama [...] has fundamentally been that of seeking better justice” (214). Perhaps the virtue of the diva film is that the films do not offer a vision of the future beyond the stage, beyond the sense that there will only be more of the same, and, therefore, it does not let her tormentors off-the-hook. Urged to identify strongly with the diva via close-ups and songs, these films seek to pass on a bodily experience of what it means to be a female performer, a woman in public life. As spectators of diva narratives, we are figuratively asked to stay up for 36 hours and endure delirium tremens, read mocking headlines about ourselves, and sing for two and half hours straight. We feel, musically, that the diva is right, and that she has also been wronged.

At the end of *Whitney* (2018), the penultimate montage intercuts footage and overlays the sound of a young Whitney Houston singing the song “Home” with photo and video coverage of her funeral. Again, the diva is cast as Dorothy. (And here the casting is quite literal — “Home” is a song from *The Wiz*, a later musical version of *The Wizard of Oz*, envisioned for black performers). The song evinces a longing for home, a wish for a space of innocence that the diva never had,<sup>103</sup> but to which we like to imagine that she might return. But instead of leaving us

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<sup>103</sup> The film opens with footage of the Newark riots to establish Newark, NJ as Whitney’s home.

with this uneasy fantasy, where the church footage of the funeral might allow us to fantasize a Christian vision of Whitney finding “home” in heaven, the film cuts to a black screen with the following white text: “In 2015 Bobbi Kristina Brown [Houston’s daughter] was found unconscious in a bathtub at her home. She died in the hospital six months later.” Just as we were about to be lulled into a sad, but somewhat satisfying ending, the film seems to confront us with the brutal price of Whitney’s fame, paid with the life of her twenty-two-year-old daughter, who inherited her mother’s trauma and addictions. There seems to be no avoiding this confrontation – if Bobbi, like Liza before her, is the second-generation of foot-bound star, and she doesn’t make it, what does that imply for *us*, the spectator and third-generation? Surely this is a call to action to end the exploitation of female performers, to envision a new society where desire and possibility could be reconciled.

But THEN new white letters appear on the screen, and the film tells us that “Whitney still holds the record for the most consecutive number ones in the US charts. ‘I Will Always Love You’ is the best-selling single ever released by a female artist.” ‘Does that make up for Bobbi Kristina’s death?’ we may ask ourselves. Is the film implying that the price was fair, that it has all been worth it? What are we to make of the fact that Houston’s career gets the final word?

The film answers this ambiguity with an equally ambiguous “comeback.” The final scene resurrects live concert footage (the comeback must always be “live!”) of Houston in good voice, giving a strong interpretation of the lyrics of her hit, “I Have Nothing”: “Share my life/ Take me for what I am/ ‘Cause I’ll never change/ All my colors for you.” These lyrics seem to be an opening for resistance, and urge us to imagine a world where Whitney wouldn’t have to “change her colors” for the record company or the public or her husband, and try to fit into too many conflicting modes to the point of self-destruction. But this is also a song that ends, “I have nothing if I don’t have you,” reaffirming the diva’s enslavement to her public.

The push-pull of the ending of Whitney is typical of melodrama and the diva narrative. The form can certainly be accused of using a triumphant comeback performance to cloud any critique of its sadistic taste for a morality made legible by suffering, but these moments also engender empathy and indignation that things should be as they are, and in that empathy and indignation, there is hope. Perhaps it is hopeful that the subtitle of yet another new Whitney Houston documentary — even though the subject of the film has, sadly, met her demise — asks this simple question in the interrogative mood: *Can I Be Me?*<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *Whitney: Can I Be Me?* (Dir. Nick Broomfield and Rudi Dolezal, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Although the last chapter ended on the diva narrative's plea for understanding and empathy for female performers, do not mistake that for a desire to demythologize the diva. Nothing could be further from my intent. As Judy Garland once said of her own reputation, "Let the legend build!"<sup>105</sup> For one thing, I do not think it is possible to know the "real" Judy Garland or Maria Callas or Whitney Houston, etc., and *certainly* not through the lens of "diva." Nor do I think that is the most compelling project. Throughout this dissertation, I have not been concerned with defining which performers are real "divas," because I understand the diva as a cultural type, not a type of person. Instead, I have been interested in what the diva *myth* means to culture and representation, how it takes form in cinema, and how it continues to create new meanings, and to adapt to changing times.

I hope I have shown that "diva" is both a symptom *of* — and an emblem of resistance *to* — patriarchal oppression and fear of women. As such, the diva's meaning is ambivalent to its core. Like the female voice in which it is rooted, *diva* is cast outside of language and representation, an undeniable presence that, nonetheless, fails to signify. Depending on the context, this history of meanings can mean either freedom or exile.

I have made the case throughout that the diva "troubles the machine" (and is troubled *by* it), but this does not mean that the diva is totally opposed to technological reproduction, nor does she totally frustrate its urge to "bring her closer" to her adoring public. The diva is actually defined *by* the machine — or rather, defined *against* it — conjured as she was by the Decadents as an antidote to modernity's mechanization of life. But this means that the diva and technology are actually two sides of the same cultural coin — doubles, if you like. The diva is the dark, Dionysian twin of the Industrial Revolution's bright Apollonian promise, both born from the heavy womb of a civilization in decline, and on the brink of major change.

The diva onscreen is informed by this dynamic of twin-ship as the diva spurs technology to try to replicate her auratic power. Like Maria Malibran and Maria-Caradori Allen trying to out-sing one another and inspiring each other to ever-greater heights,<sup>106</sup> the diva and technology are like *Mame*'s "Bosom Buddies"<sup>107</sup>: competitive, but inseparable. As the diva summits new peaks of artistry and renown, technology responds by finding increasingly ingenious ways to reproduce the illusion of her presence.

In January of 2018, a *hologram* of Maria Callas played the Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center, created by the company Base Entertainment. Anthony Tommasini, classical music critic for *The New York Times*, thought the hologram was pretty good, even adding little flourishes to the performances that Callas never performed, such as shuffling a deck of cards during excerpts from Act III of *Carmen*, where the character consults a Tarot deck.<sup>108</sup> But Tommasini ultimately recommended that newly-minted opera fans go to hear Sonya Yoncheva or Anna Netrebko at the Met, instead. Opera, of course, cannot sacrifice its liveness.

Meanwhile, diva narratives proliferate in contemporary documentary and narrative films. 2017 and 2018 saw the release of not one, but *two* major Whitney Houston documentaries,

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<sup>105</sup> Liza Minnelli often repeats this quote of her mother's. See, for instance, *A Tale of Two Sisters: Lorna Luft and Liza Minnelli* (Dir. Niall Connor Jackson, 2004).

<sup>106</sup> Davies, ("Gautier's Diva" 139)

<sup>107</sup> Music and lyrics by Jerry Herman, 1956.

<sup>108</sup> See Tommasini, "What a Hologram of Maria Callas Can Teach Us About Opera" (*The New York Times*, Jan 15, 2018).

following the singer's tragic death in 2012: *Whitney* (Kevin Macdonald, 2018) and *Whitney: Can I Be Me?* (Dir. Nick Broomfield and Rudi Dolezal, 2017). This comes on the heels of Asif Kapadia's 2015 Oscar-winning *Amy*, about the life and tragic death of singer Amy Winehouse, as well as Liz Garbus's 2015 Oscar-nominated Nina Simone film, *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Garland, too, remains a constant obsession of the culture, and Renée Zellweger will play her in yet another biopic called *Judy* (Dir. Rupert Goold), a film which takes place over the course of a few days during Garland's late career in London, due out in the Fall of 2019. Cinema is nowhere near done with the diva.

As a way to conclude, I would like to take a closer look at two films about divas that came out in the past two years: the first is Alan Elliot and Sydney Pollack's *Amazing Grace* (2018), which documents Aretha Franklin's gospel performance at the New Temple Baptist Mission Church of Los Angeles in 1972, and the second is *Maria By Callas* (2017), an impressionistic "documentary" by Tom Wolf. Both films seek to deliver the diva's presence in inventive ways, but what is even more interesting are the ways that both films foreground the mechanisms of cinema — specifically, *film*, not digital cinema — as proof of their authenticity.

*Amazing Grace* (2018) is as much a sacred service as it is a show, and this is emphasized not only by the church setting, but by the presence of a pastor, the Reverend James Cleveland (who doubles, in effect, as the Master of Ceremonies), and also by the presence of Franklin's father in the audience, a famous pastor, himself, the Reverend C.L. Franklin of Detroit. The presence of both pastors verifies that yes, this is a performance and a church service, but it is also a family affair, and all of these elements are emphasized to prove the authenticity of what we are about to see and hear. "Authenticity," too, has a historical link to blackness in an American context, and the film — made by a white director and a largely white crew — certainly seeks to exploit this link, which serves to authenticate the setting (a black church) and the emotional truth of the lead performer, Aretha Franklin. Many other markers of "authenticity" are present, too: Franklin's earring threatens to fall off her ear, a pair of older gospel queens in the audience are so moved that they have to be restrained, and Franklin grinds her voice — unbeautifying it — at the emotional height of certain songs, to prove that true feeling necessitates a willingness to go beyond mere "prettiness." Furthermore, the film uses a somewhat reflexive style, and does not seek to hide the act of filming, but constantly foregrounds it by showing the other cameras and camera operators (even, briefly, the director Sydney Pollack) located at different points throughout the theater, and by including Rev. Cleveland's announcements to the audience pertaining to the fact that the concert/service is being filmed. Mid-way through the performance, Rev. Cleveland, in tears, even throws a handkerchief at the camera in a fit of soul.

One of many intriguing things about this film is that, although Aretha Franklin is the ostensible subject, the audience barely ever hears a word from her. The majority of the film documents the gospel performance that she gives in the church, but there are also several moments where we are shown the rehearsal process and here we expect to get Franklin "behind the scenes," to be interviewed or to give us insight into her artistic process, her expectations, fears, or hopes for the performance. But there is very little of this. What we do see is Franklin sweating and worrying and pacing impatiently, evidently wanting to get on with it. The effect of this silence is, arguably, to intensify the aura around her singing.

Still, it is film itself that plays the most important role in the many dramas of authentication here. *Amazing Grace* opens with the following statement: "Because of technical problems, the film was never finished." The film was held from release for decades for, among other reasons, a massive problem with synchronizing the sound to the image. (The uncanny

asynchronization of the diva strikes again!) It turns out that the film was made without using a clapperboard, so there was no definite point from which the editors could work to synch the audio with the images. In addition, the camera operators repeatedly turned their cameras on and off throughout the filming, leaving many different segments of film with which to contend.<sup>109</sup> *Amazing Grace*, then, is a comeback. Not only is the recently-deceased Aretha Franklin brought back before our eyes, but the old 35 mm stock, itself, was finally corralled into meaning in this “second event,” the act of synchronization, which determined its ultimate fate and place in the culture.

It is important that the uniqueness of this feat is equally dependent upon both Franklin, the diva, and the idea of 35 mm, the technology. This story of long-awaited synchronization is special and worthy of note (it even made headlines), not only because the world now gets to see long-lost footage of Franklin, but because the story of the asynchronization between old film and its soundtrack seems so intriguingly analog, so old-fashioned and quaint. It is the idea that this type of technical problem would never be faced today, in our digital age, that adds fascination. Therefore, with the final melding of sound and image, it is not only Aretha, but 35 mm, too, that makes a comeback.

*Maria By Callas* has a similarly nostalgic relationship to analog film. Unlike *Amazing Grace*, in *Maria By Callas*, words play a significant part. Wolf’s film strives to recreate the “real” Callas, in a sense, by relying only on the singer’s own words about herself, as well as photographs and film footage. Like *Amazing Grace*, there is no narration. In fact, if one was unfamiliar with the major events of Callas’s life, one would not necessarily leave this film with any strong sense of “what happened.” The film assumes that the viewer is well-acquainted with Callas’s legend, and seeks to give a more intimate look at the performer as a person. It even opens with the following lines, spoken by Maria herself on a talk show, “There is Maria, and there is The Callas.” The film strives to bring its audience “Maria” by colorizing a great deal of the photos and film footage, attempting to give “life” to a celebrity who is most often seen in black and white. Presence is still a foremost obsession of cinematic renderings of the diva.

What is interesting is that the apparatus of old cinema — of film — is not concealed at all, but repeatedly highlighted in this new bid for presence. Old film footage of Callas’s fabled performances of *La traviata*, for example, is reproduced onscreen in this digital film, by showing the entire body of the film strip, perforations and all. Furthermore, most of the film footage, especially the performance footage, which documents Callas onstage — the diva’s sacred ground — is of relatively poor quality, shot from far away, and often damaged with age and wear. But this only adds to its aura. Though of poor technical and physical quality, its subject (the diva) makes this film footage special and rare. In its ability not to sharply recreate, but to merely *suggest* what La Divina would have been like *live*, the old film footage achieves a poetic affinity with its subject. Framed against a black background, the filmstrip displays its own signs of age and neglect, and nestled at the heart of it is the diva, also suffering her own heartbreak and wear.

Melodramatically, they rest here, evoking pathos and nostalgia for what was. Film, like the diva, is exploiting its scars, its own sense of “that-has-been.” This old media will become part of the diva’s legend, “proof” of uncanny presence, too — hers *and* its. Meanwhile, the digital entity that presents them both will remain hidden, recouping the diva and film for its own gain by creating nostalgia for them both.

One may fantasize that now that film (if not digital cinema) is “dead,” the diva can welcome it to her side in the shadowy realm of “aura,” where all the has-beens go. But, even

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<sup>109</sup> Farber, “Amazing Grace” (*The Guardian*, April 8, 2019).

though the Decadents gave her the name of an ancient goddess, I have shown that the diva never was old-fashioned at all. In fact, the diva is quintessentially modern, and tied inextricably to her technological twin. Through this symbiosis, the diva and cinema will, no doubt, adapt and change, but if history tells us anything, the diva will continue to be paradoxically *passé*, yet ever-present.

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