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(Un)Dressing Decadence: Masquerade and Murder in *Mascara*¹

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Mirrors: no man has ever described
What you hide in your deepest heart.
Gaping like holes in a sieve,
You fill in the blank voids of time.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*²

It opens on a blue vista of sea. A white villa looks out over the waves and glows in the evening light. A woman comes out, encased in a tight-fitting white trouser suit. She climbs into a car and drives off. The sea remains, its waves stretching out to the horizon as in a painting by René Magritte. Night falls. We see the woman driving in close-up, her face lit pale yellow by passing cars. We may recognize her as Charlotte Rampling, the cinema's perverse glamour icon *par excellence*. Yet her image here is altered, her hair cropped short so she resembles an androgynous boy. Her throat rises from the up-curving collar of her white suit, which encases her like the sculpted calyx of a lily. One earring dangles from one ear. Its white geometrical swirls suggest a sculpture by Constantin Brâncuși.

'Nobody dresses like that', says director Patrick Conrad. 'Not even to go to the opera.'³ Yet at the start of his 1987 film *Mascara*, that is precisely where Rampling is headed. The chic androgyny of her outfit and overall style are crucial to the film that follows. Her clothes were created specially by the French designer Claude Montana. The fashion journalist Marielle Cro describes his style:

Montana was particularly fond of the androgynous look – maybe thanks to the memory of (his) rather aristocratic-looking aunt, who wore trouser-suits and had her clothes made to measure by a gentleman's tailor. Montana reinvented men's clothes for women and cultivated a female dandy look.⁴

In addition to its visible androgyny, it is of vital importance to the overall scheme of *Mascara* that the colour of this outfit is white. An audience has no way of knowing this so early on in the film.

Yet already, we get a sense of entering a world that is strangely ‘other’. One in which the expected tropes of dress, fashion, and behaviour no longer apply.

A flamboyantly Orphic tale of incest, fetishism, cross-dressing, grand opera, and murder, *Mascara* revolves around two opposing but interlinking spaces. One is the rather grand opera house of an unnamed European city; the other is an underground S&M drag club called Mister Butterfly. Each is a place that Bill Thompson, in his study of sadomasochistic aesthetics, would refer to as a ‘super-setting’ – a rarefied or privileged space that ‘provides the boundary between the action and everyday reality’.⁵ The action of *Mascara* is *outré* enough in its own terms and rendered doubly improbable by the highly theatricalized realms in which it transpires. The drag club, furthermore, is a deliberate and conscious evocation of the Underworld of Ancient Greek myth, with dollops of kinky sex and transvestite opera performance thrown in for good measure.



Fig. 1 (00:56:58): Charlotte Rampling as Gaby and Michael Sarrazin as Bert.

Might all of this explain why *Mascara* – a high-profile Belgian-Dutch-French co-production that featured in the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival – was greeted with such blank incomprehension by critics and audiences? Its executive producer, Menahem Golan of Cannon, refused to release it theatrically in the United States. Critics at that year’s Chicago Film Festival denounced it as homophobic, even though not one of its main characters is readily identifiable as a gay man. Citing its use of *Salome* (1905) by Richard Strauss, a critic for the London magazine *Time Out* opined, ‘Even ardent searchers after nefarious enjoyment should draw seven veils over this one.’⁶ Its director Patrick Conrad – a Belgian painter, poet, filmmaker, and author of best-selling psychological crime fiction – describes it to this day as ‘a doomed cult movie’ that ranks among the most obscure and sulphurous of *films maudits*.

‘Anything that is not normal is in my work’, Conrad says. ‘I don’t think there’s anything I didn’t write about’. Above all, *Mascara* is a film about the curious fetishism of clothes and the ways in which fancy dress – whether an operatic or drag costume, or an *haute couture* outfit for some high-toned evening event – can serve not only to reflect a person’s identity, but also to construct it. Historically, as Benjamin Linley Wild explains in *From Carnival to Catwalk*:

Fancy dress provided an immediate means to contemplate the issue of role-plays because of the parallels that exist between anonymizing layers of costume and the different identities that people construct within themselves.⁷

The characters in *Mascara* definitively – at times, fatally – become the disguises they adopt. Not one of their multiple faces will survive its collision with the all-conquering power of the mask.

Yet the film starts with a near-collision of another sort. As she speeds into the city *en route* to the opera, the woman played by Charlotte Rampling narrowly misses running over a man (Derek de Lint). He is crossing the road with what looks like a theatrical costume slung over one arm. It is, we learn later, a costume for the opera she is about to attend. ‘I could have killed you’, she purrs with a smile that makes Death seem an inviting prospect.⁸ Soon she is off again to her rendezvous with another man (Michael Sarrazin) who sits in evening dress before a large full-length mirror. She enters and crouches down beside him. Their two faces hover side by side in the glass, uncannily

alike, like twin halves of one androgynous being. We learn their names are Bert Sanders and Gaby Hart. He is the city's Chief of Police; she works as a translator. Are they lovers? Are they siblings? Their relationship is not defined at this point. What each loves in the other is visibly a reflection of his or her own self.

The role of mirrors in *Mascara* reflects the centrality of mirrors in the Orphic universe. That centrality is expressed eloquently by Rilke in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (see above) and by Jean Cocteau in his classic film *Orphée* (1950) where 'mirrors are the doors through which Death enters'.⁹ The bond between Gaby and Bert – or, at least, his obsessive devotion to her – seems built around the innate narcissism of mirror reflections. As Suzanne R. Stewart writes:

On the man's side, his slavish admiration of woman, his fascination with her narcissistic self-sufficiency, has its origins in the man's own narcissism, which he now sees reflected in the woman he loves: what man loves in woman is not woman but man.¹⁰

Yet the spectacle they witness at the opera will change forever their perceptions of themselves, of one another and of whatever relationship it is that unites them. The agent of that change is nothing more nor less than a stage costume.

The opera that night is *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762) by Christoph Willibald Gluck. The role of the poet Orpheus, who journeys to the Underworld in search of his dead bride Eurydice, was written for a castrato but is now played either by a counter-tenor or (as it is here) by a contralto in male drag. Any performance of this opera necessarily involves questions of androgyny and gender identity. Yet here it is the soprano role of Eurydice that takes centre stage. As her husband leads her up out of the Underworld, she pleads with him to turn around and look at her – the one thing the Lord of Hades has forbidden him to do. She wears a diaphanous white gown, speckled with sequins to catch the light, and a towering headdress of white plumes. Inside the gown is a luminous red heart that pulsates softly on and off.

This gown was the creation of the noted Dutch designer Yan Tax. Its near-blinding whiteness is an essential part of its allure, connoting as it does both purity and innocence, ghostliness and death. It also places *Mascara* squarely within a centuries-old tradition of artistic and

literary decadence. The cultural historian Mark Booth quotes the sixteenth-century author Francesco Sansovino and his evocation of dandies in Venice:

During fine summer weather they were in the habit of wearing the most costly white silk dresses, their vests were of white velvet, their ruffs of the whitest cambric, their pantaloons and stockings of white silk, and their hats of white velvet with white feathers in them.¹¹

This obsession with whiteness would become a key element in the 'look' of lethal *femmes fatales* in decadent literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vampiric opera diva in *The Glass of Blood* (1892) by Jean Lorrain is surrounded by 'white irises, white tulips, white narcissi' and clothed in 'a long dress of white velvet trimmed with fine-spun lace'.¹² The deadly but seductive snake woman in *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911) by Bram Stoker is 'clad in some kind of soft white stuff' and wears 'a close-fitting cap of some fine fur of dazzling white'.¹³ The opera gown in *Mascara* thus becomes a visual nexus of sex and danger, seduction and death.

For Bert and Gaby, this gown becomes the object of an intense and fetishizing obsession, one as overpowering as the homicidal desire of the Wicked Witch for the ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or the self-destructive longing of the young ballerina for *The Red Shoes* (1948). At a party after the performance, Gaby meets the designer Chris Brine and recognizes him as the man she almost ran over. 'Eurydice's dress is one of the most beautiful things I've seen!' she says. Already, there is an undercurrent of eroticism between them; it will lead inevitably to romance. Bert, in contrast, is seized with a compulsion to possess the gown itself. The next day, he begs Chris to let him borrow it 'for just one night' as a gift to a special friend who is celebrating her birthday. Chris agrees because he assumes the wearer will be Gaby. He insists he must come along to help the wearer change in and out of it.

Moments later, Chris is driving his white Citroën across the flat expanse of beach outside Gaby's house, to an orchestral interlude from *Norma* (1831) by Vincenzo Bellini. He brings her, as a birthday present, his original sketch for Eurydice's gown. 'I think it will look great on you', he says. Gaby is mystified and says her birthday is not for many months. Her outfit here is a direct photographic negative of the one she wore in the opening scenes: a long-sleeved black top and

black Turkish-style harem pants. The pale minimalist chic of her apartment is disrupted only by a vast Art Deco painting that hangs above the fireplace. It depicts a beautiful naked woman, crouching with her wrists bound by chains. It is the 1929 image of *Andromeda* by Tamara de Lempicka. Is Gaby also chained and imprisoned in ways she might not feel free to discuss? Chris meets her daughter Laura, who seems to suffer a congenital brain defect. Gaby tells him she has been a widow for some years.



Fig. 2 (00:10:48): Michael Sarrazin, Charlotte Rampling, and Derek de Lint as Chris.

Meanwhile, Bert goes to the Central Station to meet a strange woman off a train. Her name is Pepper (Eva Robins) and her gold torrent of hair, moody dark eyes, and impeccably sculpted cheekbones make her a platonic ideal of cosmetically constructed beauty – evoking such Eurotrash film goddesses of the 60s as Ursula Andress, Virna Lisi, or Marisa Mell. Yet her voice is a pitch too low, her jawline a shade too strong and manly. ‘I look a wreck!’ she says as she shakes her hair loose about her shoulders. Might this be the mysterious, unnamed being who is destined to wear Eurydice’s gown?

The path and the turning. An impulse received.
 New horizons. The two become one – but do they?
 Are both of them not, perhaps,
 The road they make together?

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*¹⁴

Fans of European genre cinema may recognize Eva Robins as Roberto Coatti, an Italian actor and model and one of the first openly transgender stars. ‘Eva is not a drag queen’, Conrad insists. ‘She’s a woman with a dick.’ Her androgynous persona fits seamlessly into the sexually ambivalent world of *Mascara*. She is a living embodiment of the archetypal myth of the hermaphrodite, a being at once female and male. As Rebecca Arnold writes:

While unisex seeks to mask the body in supposedly genderless clothes, androgyny seeks to unite male and female, masculine and feminine in one body. The resulting hermaphrodite vision represents a return to a ‘sense of primordial cosmic unity’, a point of union which would assuage gender confusion and anxiety, by evoking a mythical pure state of being before the Fall.¹⁵

As in the lines of Rilke quoted above, two opposing poles seem to fuse yet also to co-exist as discrete entities. Each one exists, simultaneously, as itself and as the other. Most of the actors in *Mascara* inhabit this sliding scale in-between two genders. As Conrad points out, Charlotte Rampling is the one member of the cast who is actually ‘a full-time woman’.

Yet even here, the dividing line is neither clear nor absolute. The role that has defined Rampling’s screen persona is that of a sex slave in a Nazi concentration camp in the Liliana Cavani film *The Night Porter* (1974). As she sings and dances topless to a song that was a hit for Marlene Dietrich, she is costumed androgynously (by Piero Tosi) in black trousers and braces, a peaked SS cap and black silk evening gloves. Her hair is cropped short (as it is in *Mascara*) and she looks at once like a girl in male drag and like a perversely beautiful boy. This image has shaped her enduring queer fan base and made her a muse to fashion photographers such as Helmut Newton. *Mascara* plays adroitly with the gender fluidity of Rampling’s screen image and makes her androgyny a

keynote of its plot and *mise en scène*. It makes symbolic, if not literal, sense that Chris Brine confuses the androgynous Gaby with the transgender Pepper.

It is on a quest for Gaby (so he thinks) that Chris joins Bert on his descent into the bizarre sexual Underworld of Mister Butterfly. He bears with him the white feathered headdress, the white gown with its pulsating red heart. With these, he hopes to invest the woman he desires with the mythical persona of Eurydice. Bert leads him to a deserted pier along the seafront. A red light flashes at the top of a deep flight of stairs. Standing in the light and bathed in a sulphurous glow is Bert's gaunt, imposing sidekick (Harry Clevon) who plays the role of Charon, the ferryman who ushers the damned into Hades. He leads them through a labyrinth of concrete tunnels, to a service elevator that plunges down deeper still. A neon sign spells out MISTER BUTTERFLY.



Fig. 3 (00:29:45): Mister Butterfly.

The club's name is a transsexual alias for the heroine of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904). It has echoes of the predatory chauffeur (Pierre Clémenti) in *The Conformist* (1970) by Bernardo Bertolucci – who lures boys to his lair by offering to display 'my scarlet kimono, just like the one in *Madame Butterfly*'.¹⁶ The club was conceived by Conrad as a sexualized recreation of

the Classical Greek Underworld. A man in a chainmail mask sucks a raw oyster from its shell, passes it mouth-to-mouth to a blond youth. A boy in silver eyeshadow performs fellatio on a bunch of red lilies that burst from the black leather crotch of another man. A man in evening dress (minus his trousers) crawls across the floor towards a naked muscleman crouched atop a pillar and prostrates himself in an act of worship. A chanteuse named Lana (played by the transgender cabaret star Romy Haag) sings the Kris Kristofferson ballad 'Help Me Make It Through The Night' in a plaintive, husky wail.

It is here that Pepper is to don the white gown and, with it, the identity of Eurydice. She stands in her dressing room before a vast mirror, naked apart from her white silk panties. Bert orders the befuddled Chris to robe her in preparation for that night's performance. Before her act even begins, Conrad imbues it with the air of a sacred ritual. As Camille Paglia writes in *Sexual Personae*:

Ritual transvestism, then and now, is a drama of female dominance. There are religious meanings to all female impersonation, in nightclub or bedroom. A woman putting on men's clothes merely steals social power. But a man putting on women's clothes is searching for God.¹⁷

There is no denying Pepper wears the gown divinely. In a way that was unusual in the neo-conservative 80s, Conrad treats his transgender actors not as freaks but as icons for adoration and worship. Through the body of Pepper and the magic of Eurydice's gown, the two levels of performance in *Mascara* – the upper world of the opera and the underworld of drag impersonation – fuse and blend into one. In so doing, they fulfil a dream of androgynous perfection that eludes most of us. 'We are so limited as men and women', Conrad says. 'Transvestites are everything. They are angels.'

As she takes the stage, Pepper/Eurydice hovers above a *trompe l'oeil* pool, an expanse of plastic aglow with neon tubes. Her reflection floats within it like a lily adrift on water or Narcissus enraptured by his own face. She lip-syncs Eurydice's big scene in line with the time-hallowed traditions of transvestite performance. As Philip Core writes in his examination of drag:

Singing and dancing to music (often mimed to a well-known recording by a great star) allows the 'drag artist' to become – seriously but with a little irony – the woman of his dreams... This is ancient totem magic, the perverse lure of Tiresias of the two sexes, an insult to nature and an invocation of both her active forces.¹⁸

These 'forces' – although Core never enumerates them – are presumably Eros and Thanatos, Sex and Death. They will come into terrifying conflict in the next scene. After the performance, Bert and Pepper toast their triumph in a dressing room lined with mirrors. It has brought back to Bert memories of his childhood, which he evokes in the fetishized language of clothes. He describes his sister on the day of her confirmation: 'She wore a white dress, dainty white gloves and her first pair of high heels. It was a very special event!' As always, the clothes that obsess him are coloured white. He recalls how they sneaked away to indulge in forbidden sexual games. His idyll shatters when Pepper – erotically aroused by wearing the garb of Eurydice – makes an unwelcome sexual pass.



Fig. 4 (00:39:31): Michael Sarrazin and Eva Robins as Pepper.

This scene is intercut with the action back in the clubroom where a trans performer slinks down a staircase, draped in glistening gold chains and lucent ropes of pearls, lip-syncing the final scene of *Salome* by Strauss. She resembles a Gustav Klimt painting sprung to life. In this scene, the Princess Salome sings her twisted song of love to the severed head of Iokanaan, the prophet whose execution she has ordered. A musical setting of the 1891 play by Oscar Wilde – which was inspired

in turn by Gustave Flaubert's story 'Hérodiade' (1877) – this opera bears an eerie resemblance to *Mascara* as a work where 'insanity and perversion are presented for viewing pleasure'.¹⁹ What it shares with *Orpheus and Eurydice* is a built-in queer and androgynous subtext. According to Marjorie Garber and other critics, Flaubert modelled his character on a homosexual Egyptian dancing boy, Hasan el-Belbeissi. Garber writes:

It is no accident that the Salome story conflates the myths of Medusa and Narcissus, the decapitated head and the mirror image. This conflation was known to [...] Aubrey Beardsley, whose illustrations for Wilde's text clearly show Salome in the act of kissing Iokanaan's dead lips, holding aloft the head with its snaky locks, transfixed by self-love on the bank of a reflecting pool. Self-love, and self-hatred.²⁰

The forces of self-love and self-hatred collide in the dressing room as Pepper disrobes very slowly with her back towards Bert and the audience, in a manner not unlike Salome in her Dance of the Seven Veils. Her nude body in the dim light seems no more than a tantalizing mirage. Turning with the slow and choreographed precision of a dancer, she stands fully exposed, displaying breasts but also a penis.

The gender ambiguity of Salome has long played a part in the myth. A photograph from the 1890s was thought to show Oscar Wilde himself in drag as Salome.²¹ The Ken Russell film *Salome's Last Dance* (1988) climaxes with an androgynous young woman (Imogen Millais-Scott) performing the Dance of the Seven Veils (bizarrely, to 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' by Edvard Grieg) and ending the dance with a fleeting, almost subliminal flash of male genitals. As Garber points out:

(O)n the level of the Imaginary, the dancer is neither male nor female, but rather transvestic [...] the essence of the dance itself, its taboo border-crossing, is not only sensuality, but gender undecidability, and not only gender undecidability, but the paradox of gender identification, the disruptive element that intervenes, transvestism as a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture. *That* is the taboo against which Occidental eyes are veiled.²²

In Conrad's own 1994 novel *Limousine*, a fashionista named Suzanna Rizzoni reveals herself to be a transgender woman with a functioning set of male genitals. She shouts defiantly: 'Suzy doesn't exist! Everybody is looking for Suzanna Rizzoni, but she is just a name, a label, puppet, a costumed

phantom, an illusion, a vision... And that's why she's immortal!²³ The dynamic in *Mascara* is less aggressive but vastly more complex. Here a transgender actor (Eva Robins) plays a transgender performer (Pepper) who takes on the mythical personae of Eurydice and Salome. Both actor and performer are biologically male, but female in every other respect. The questions they ask Bert are entirely reasonable and pertinent: 'What's stopping you from living out your dreams? Why shouldn't you be yourself at least once?'

Yet such questions are too much for the rigid sex and gender categories that exist in Bert's mind. His inability to reconcile his erotic appetites with these preconceived categories is what pushes him to psychosis and murder. In the clubroom, a drag queen garbed as King Herod (ironically, a drag in drag) points at the transgender Salome and mouths the closing line of the opera: 'Kill that woman!' In the dressing room, Bert grabs Pepper round the neck and chokes her to death. At first glance, the murder seems like an onslaught of homosexual panic akin to the one in *Sarrasine* (1830) by Honoré de Balzac, in which the eponymous hero learns to his horror that Zambinella, the opera diva he desires, is actually a *castrato* who plays women's parts. "I ought to have you killed!" shouted Sarrasine, drawing his sword with a violent movement.²⁴ The crucial difference is that *Mascara* never defines Bert as being either hetero- or homosexual. His sexuality at this stage seems entirely and innately sadomasochistic.

A clue to his sexual nature may lie in his obsessive love of opera. Suzanne R. Stewart writes: 'Operatic pleasure is always marked by suffering – tears, shivers, sighs – and is closer to an experience of *jouissance* than to one of pleasure.'²⁵ Another facet of sadomasochistic sexuality – according to Stewart – is 'the disavowal and suspense of genital sexual desire in favour of a sexualization of guilt and punishment'.²⁶ This, in an extreme form, is what Bert does in refusing to make love to Pepper and killing her instead. Eurydice's gown functions as sexual catalyst for all the characters in *Mascara*. In admiring it, Gaby voices her initial attraction to Chris. In making Gaby a present of the sketch, Chris expresses his reciprocal attraction to her. In wearing and removing it, Pepper acts upon her long-suppressed desire for Bert. In seeing it removed, Bert discovers his own

sadomasochistic libido, killing anyone who challenges his fragile self-image or his rigidly defined boundaries of gender identity.



Fig. 5 (00:37:28): Salome.

Although he is present in the club, Chris Brine is a witness neither to the murder of Pepper nor to the impersonation of Eurydice that precedes it. He is confined strictly to the dressing room in which he costumed Pepper for her act. He asks no questions when Bert brings him back the gown and tells him the diva is resting. Yet later that night, he sleeps with Gaby and wakes in the throes of a nightmare. He says he was dreaming of Bert Sanders. ‘What was my brother doing in your dreams?’ Gaby asks. It is the first direct indication that Bert and Gaby are brother and sister. Furthermore, that they have been and possibly still are incestuous lovers. Also, that Bert may be the father of Gaby’s daughter Laura. Incest has been a common theme in Charlotte Rampling’s filmography – notably in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1971) by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi and *He Died with His Eyes Open* (1985) by Jacques Deray – yet *Mascara* is unique in making her both an object of incestuous desire and the androgynous dream goddess of an Orphic underground realm.

Just in case we have not picked up on the latter aspect, Conrad includes a scene in which Gaby steals into Chris's *atelier* and stands behind a mannequin that is draped in Eurydice's white gown. The mannequin is missing a head, so her face fills the empty space and becomes that of Eurydice. She orders Chris *not* to turn around and *not* to look at her, in a direct and conscious subversion of the Orpheus myth. Now is her turn to assume the mythic persona of Eurydice, one that transcends all notions of identity, sexuality, and gender. As in the West African masquerade rituals examined by Wild, 'The men – sometimes women – who wear these costumes temporarily lose their human identity and become conduits for specific deities to manifest themselves.'²⁷ The gown invests its wearers with a symbolic resonance that humans ordinarily lack. Yet its history is far from over. Its flowing, diaphanous folds hold a wealth of secrets still to be revealed.

iii

The words he speaks transcend his very being;
Already, he has come to a place where none may follow.
The strings of his lyre no longer control his hands;
He obeys and he transgresses in one moment.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*²⁸

This issue of revelation is central to any discussion of drag in particular or masquerade in general – or, indeed, to any discussion of gender or sexuality that transcends the strict biological norm. Garber writes of the motivations implicit in any transvestite performance, which are at once 'to reveal' and 'to conceal':

Conceal what? Reveal what? When the wig is doffed, ceremonially, at the end of a transvestic stage performance, what is the 'answer' that is disclosed? Only another question: is *this* the real one? In what sense real? What is the 'truth' of gender and sexuality that we try, in vain, to see, to see through, when what we are gazing at is a hall of mirrors?²⁹

After his killing of Pepper, Bert will employ Eurydice's gown for just such an act of revelation and concealment. The habitués of Mister Butterfly are understandably anxious to know what has become of their star. None of them know she is dead, as Bert was able to remove her body. Yet now Bert decides to 'explain' her disappearance by constructing a fictitious serial killer. The

problem is that any such killer requires another victim – and that victim must, of necessity, be dressed in Eurydice’s gown.

Planting a stash of cocaine in Chris’s apartment, Bert blackmails him into bringing him the gown again and helping the star to change into it. The only question is who is to play the victim. His choice falls on Lana, the resident chanteuse played by Romy Haag. A transgender cabaret artiste who ran her own nightclub in Berlin in the 70s and 80s, Haag resembles Eva Robins in retaining a full set of male genitalia along with a full female identity. Yet her persona lacks the seamless androgyny of Robins. ‘She is more a drag queen’, says Conrad, ‘more burlesque’. Her impersonation of Eurydice has overtones of camp and grotesquery that Robins’s never had. She performs the big scene with her image mirrored – as Pepper’s was – in the *trompe l’oeil* plastic pool. As it did for Pepper, the wearing of Eurydice’s gown prompts Lana to voice her long-suppressed desire for Bert. (The appeal of Bert for these two transgender women is something an audience must take on faith.) He strangles her, as before, in her dressing room. We see her death reflected in a multiplicity of mirrors.

The staging of this scene is a direct and deliberate visual quote from *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) by Orson Welles, where the climactic shoot-out takes place in a Hall of Mirrors. That film has its own dimensions of androgyny and sexual ambivalence – not least in the way its floridly female star Rita Hayworth has her trademark flowing auburn hair cropped short and bleached a harsh peroxide blond, like a beautiful boy in a film by Jean Cocteau. Just in case we miss the connection, we see Lana in an earlier scene with a sailor’s cap perched atop her head at a jaunty angle – exactly like Hayworth in an iconic shot from the Welles film. Yet all of this, to Bert, is simply a means to an end. The horrified denizens of Mister Butterfly discover Lana’s corpse and Bert points out the blindingly obvious. The outsider Chris Brine was present at the club on the night of both killings.

Bert's obsessional staging of his own sadomasochistic fantasies seems typical of a type that Bram Dijkstra identifies as 'the executioner's assistant', a man who seeks power in a fantasy world to compensate for a lack of power in his actual life:

He has no personal being, feeding on defeat to turn his personal, parasitic existence into a secret mirror world of the executioner's values. In this realm of moonlight and looking-glass magic, of fantastic dreams and majestic feats of submission, he tries to make the executioner see him as the threat he very well knows he isn't.³⁰

Like Orpheus in the sonnet by Rilke, he has lost all sense of whether he is in control of his fantasies or his fantasies are in control of him. The fact that both his victims are transgender women adds a final and deeply ironical twist to Bert's lack of control. Both Pepper and Lana (like the actors Eva Robins and Romy Haag) have taken on a female identity – which Bert persists in viewing as fake – and lived it as an actual real-life truth. They are punished not for being 'fake' women but for being 'real' women who live beyond the parameters of biological sex.

Hence it makes perfect sense when *Mascara* returns to the opera house and the opera on show – again, in a production designed by Chris Brine – is *Norma* by Bellini. This is an opera where the notion of womanhood is challenged and thrown into crisis. Norma, like Medea, is a pagan priestess who betrays her beliefs for an outsider. When the man betrays her in turn, she is pushed to the brink of killing her own children. Catherine Clément describes Norma as one of 'these furies, these goddesses, these women with fearsome arms and inspired eyes [...]. [T]hese recalcitrant women, bent on their own destruction, determined to leave their lives behind.'³¹ On opening night, the woman who leaves her life behind is Gaby. Seated beside her brother, she gets up abruptly and storms out in the middle of an act. When he follows her and begs her to come back, she says Chris has told her all about his secret life. She urges Chris not to lend Eurydice's gown to Bert when he asks for it the next day. She warns him darkly: 'He wants you with the dress!'

The sense in which Bert 'wants' him is necessarily open to question. At no point does *Mascara* hint that Bert is homosexual (in general) or feels any desire for Chris (in particular). Yet the next stage of his plan is to entrap Chris by himself putting on Eurydice's gown. As Bert takes

the stage at Mister Butterfly to lip-sync the big scene, the camera travels slowly up his body, lingering on the diaphanous white folds, the pulsating red neon heart. His face is plunged in shadow but an aureole of light glows around it, like a halo, on the headdress of white plumes. Now the light shifts to reveal his face, caked a pale white and lined with mascara. Up until this point, Eurydice's gown has clothed only women. Some of these are women through biological origin (Gaby and the diva who sings at the opera) while others (Pepper and Lana) are women through a conscious choice of gender identity. Yet now we see the gown draped grotesquely on a man in drag. In a perverse way, Bert has embraced his own mythic and androgynous ideal. As Peter Ackroyd writes:

If, as the Creation myths assert, Chaos – or the unity of undifferentiated sexuality – is the progenitor of all life, then the separate sexes represent a falling off from that original fecundity. Androgyny, in which the two sexes co-exist in one form, and which the transvestite priest imitates in his own person, is an original state of power.³²

'He becomes what he loves, what he hates, what he kills', says Conrad. 'He becomes his own obsession?.'



Fig. 6 (01:17:42): Charlotte Rampling and Derek de Lint.

His act ends and the applause is underwhelming. A man remarks snidely, 'It takes balls to do that!' It is a pointed reminder of Bert's maleness at the moment he purports to cast it to one side. Garber sees this as a paradox innate in drag performance:

[T]he male transvestite represents the extreme limit case of 'male subjectivity', 'proving' that he is male against the most extraordinary odds. Dressed in fishnet stockings, garter belt, and high heels, or in a housedress, the male transvestite is the paradoxical embodiment of male subjectivity. For it is his anxiety *about* his gendered subjectivity that engenders the masquerade.³³

In truth, Bert has seldom looked more 'manly' than he does in this flamboyantly female garb. Yet something inside him seems to have been liberated by this masquerade. Back in the dressing room, he makes a flagrant pass at Chris. 'I look like Gaby, don't I?' he says. He sidles up to Chris, sticks his tongue in his ear and sighs, 'I love you!' How much of this is merely an act, put on to provoke a violent response? How much is an authentically homosexual side of Bert that is set free, for the first time, by the power of Eurydice's gown? As Wild asserts, 'the liminal nature of fancy dress costume emboldens people, enabling them to express aspects of their characters, and to articulate ideas about themselves that would be otherwise difficult.'³⁴ These are questions that *Mascara* does not set out to answer. All we know is that Chris lashes out and punches Bert in the gut.

In the clubroom, another performance is in full swing. A drag Tina Turner is dressed up as Aunt Entity in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985): a chainmail dress, a blonde bouffant wig, and gold earrings that look like Slinky toys crawling up both sides of her head. A shaven-headed chorus wear PVC body suits in black or red, with a matching patch over one eye, like drag clones of Bette Davis in *The Anniversary* (1967). They hear shouts from the dressing room and run to join in the fun. Bert tells them he has caught the killer. Like the Furies of the Orpheus myth, they descend on the intruder, kicking and blinding and castrating Chris with their spiked heels. 'The Furies', writes Camille Paglia, 'are daemonic spirits of earth-cult, black as their mother night', who 'come from the realm of Dionysian *sparagmos* or ritual dismemberment'. Their force 'annihilates form and obliterates the eye'.³⁵ Having mauled Chris to the consistency of steak tartare, they haul him above ground and hurl him into the sea to drown.

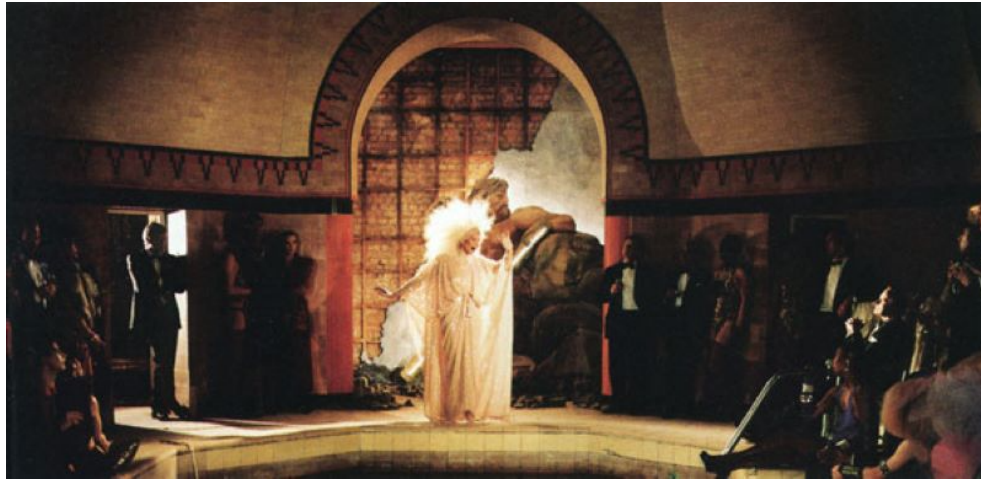


Fig. 7 (01:09:46): Eurydice's gown.

Perhaps a shade improbably, Gaby has found her way to the pier in time for this final act. She is a helpless and horrified witness to the killing, like Elizabeth Taylor at the ritual murder of her Cousin Sebastian by a mob of cannibal rent boys in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959). Yet somehow, Gaby finds it in herself to become the avenging angel. She sees Bert standing in the tatters of Eurydice's gown, its rags aglow in the moonlight. She follows him coldly but implacably to the end of the pier. She tells him they must leave this dreadful place and go away together. Then she stretches out her arms as if to touch him – but does not. The sheer hypnotic force of Charlotte Rampling's eyes seems to propel Bert backwards off the pier and into the dark water below. We hear an echo of Lana as she sings 'Help Me Make It Through the Night'. Gaby, at least, appears to make it through. The police call the next morning and drive her down to the beach to identify two dead bodies.

As Gaby cradles Chris in a visual echo of a *Pietà*, the song fades out and merges with a soft lapping of waves. 'There are no happy endings', Conrad says. 'There are simply endings'. In 1987, there seemed to be no happy ending of any sort in view for *Mascarara*, which was dismissed by critics – and shunned by audiences – as an overheated stew of sex and sadomasochism, high camp and *haute couture*. Yet now that societies are riven by 'culture wars' over gender identity and transgender rights, *Mascarara* feels like a film whose time has come. Elizabeth Wilson writes in *Fashion and Modernity*:

It's as if gender, on the surface so outraged, is for that very reason divorced from a sexuality that remains opaque [...]. The rigid sexual identities we cultivate [...] are really fictions elaborated by the nineteenth-century sexologists; they merely imprison the waywardness of lust, constraining us in sexual and social roles.³⁶

Colleen McQuillen goes a step further in *The Modernist Masquerade*: “The implicit link between mask and menace, disguise and demonism, provides a counterpoint to the emergent understanding of identity as a temporary social construct.”³⁷ We emerge from *Mascara* with a sense that all identities are temporary, that we ourselves might one day put on Eurydice’s gown. Its diaphanous white folds, its glistening white plumes, its luridly pulsating red heart may whisper to us secrets we have yet to tell ourselves.

¹ With heartfelt thanks to Patrick Conrad and Jane Gershenson for their warmth, generosity, and support. Thanks also to David Cairns and Katja Robinson – and not forgetting Carlito and Choco Chanel.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Part Two, Number 3, Lines i-iii, my translation. <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks10/1000531h.html> [accessed 30 March 2023].

³ All quotations from Patrick Conrad are from interviews conducted in Antwerp on 24 and 25 March 2023.

⁴ Claude Montana and Marielle Cro, *Montana – Claude Montana, Fashion Radical*, trans. by Ruth Sharman (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), p. 56.

⁵ Bill Thompson, *Sadomasochism: Painful Perversion or Pleasurable Play?* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 163.

⁶ Wally Hammond, ‘Mascara’, *Time Out*, 10 September 2012 <https://www.timeout.com/movies/mascara> [accessed 28 March 2023].

⁷ Benjamin Linley Wild, *From Carnival to Catwalk: Global Reflections on Fancy Dress Costume* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), p. 21.

⁸ Patrick Conrad (dir.), *Mascara* (1987) VHS, Warner Home Video UK, 1987.

⁹ Jean Cocteau (dir.), *Orphée* (1950) Blu-Ray, Criterion Collection, 2011, my translation.

¹⁰ Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 120.

¹¹ Mark Booth, *Camp* (London: Quartet Books, 1983), p. 109.

¹² Jean Lorrain, ‘The Glass of Blood’, in *The Dedalus Book of Decadence (Moral Ruins)*, ed. by Brian Stableford (London: Dedalus, 1990), pp. 86-87.

¹³ Bram Stoker, *The Lair of the White Worm* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 22-23.

¹⁴ Rilke, Part One, Number 11, Lines vii-x, my translation.

¹⁵ Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 122.

¹⁶ Bernardo Bertolucci (dir.), *The Conformist* (1970) Blu-Ray, Arrow Video, 2013, my translation.

¹⁷ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae – Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 90.

¹⁸ Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth* (London: Plexus, 1984), p. 77.

¹⁹ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last 400 Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 439.

²⁰ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 340.

²¹ The image of ‘Wilde as Salome’ published in Richard Ellmann’s 1988 biography *Oscar Wilde* is not really Wilde. In 1994 Wilde’s grandson Merlin Holland revealed that it was in fact a photograph of Hungarian opera singer Alice Guszalewicz.

²² Garber, p. 342.

²³ Patrick Conrad, *Limousine*, trans. by Stephen Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. 292.

²⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *Sarrasine*, trans. by David Carter (London: Hesperus Classics, 2007), p. 42.

²⁵ Stewart, p. 97.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁷ Wild, p. 50.

- ²⁸ Rilke, Part One, Number 5, Lines xi-xiv, my translation.
- ²⁹ Garber, p. 389.
- ³⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 352.
- ³¹ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, trans. by Betsy Wing (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 103.
- ³² Peter Ackroyd, *Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 37.
- ³³ Garber, p. 96.
- ³⁴ Wild, p. 109.
- ³⁵ Paglia, p. 101.
- ³⁶ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. 201.
- ³⁷ Colleen McQuillen, *The Modernist Masquerade: Stylising Life, Literature and Costumes in Russia* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2013), p. 61.