



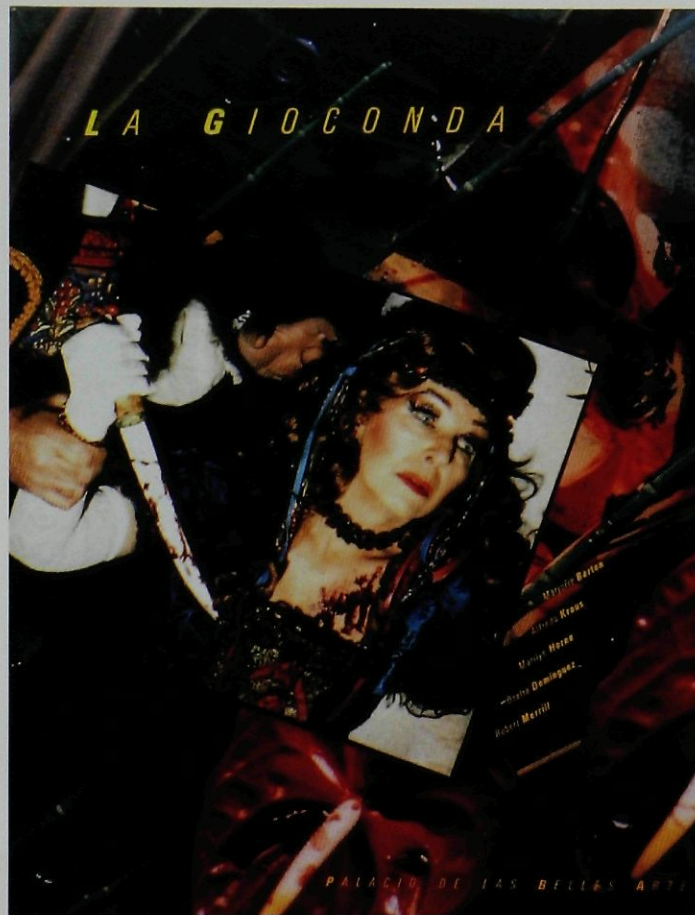
phantoms of opera

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Music has a long-standing score to settle with the visual media, in particular with the movies, which started out silent, with music in the background “covering” sound. Even F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) was subtitled “A Symphony of Horror.” The crossover into the land of phantoms forces entry of visibility into spheres and fear of the invisible. Thus, the professor looks through a microscope to behold the polyp blown up out of invisibility and identifies it for his students as “almost a phantom.” Music keeps up these appearances in Rupert Julian’s *Phantom of the Opera* (1925). Although the phantom begs Christine not to look at his mask or at what it covers, but to consider only his gift of song, the mass-media Sensurround has already reduced what’s there (not even invisibility is exempt) to utter visibility. The unmasking will always take place, and we will always see everything that beauty (and the beautiful voice become flesh) had to repress to get ahead. The horror of this film, then, comes down to the “either/or” switch within the visual, which, at either setting, will unmask the bond between beauty and horror. Something that must always be held down in our mediatic reduction to the visual sense gets thrown back up to haunt the work (or opera) of cinema.

But this cinema of opera is a late arrival of Wagner’s preview of cinema: for his media-spectacularized operas, Wagner concealed the orchestra, made it into a loudspeaker, and turned off the house lights; the focus was fixed on light shows of traumatic relation, in which screaming, dying, crying and just plain breathing held the stage beneath the endless melody, the first music made for the movies.

In the 1980s and ’90s, the visual returns on our investments in opera have reopened, like a re-wounding, but also celebrated—as in the concurrent open-sesame or season of liberation for the multis and marginals—the operatic moment when the shit hits the fans or, on the upbeat, where their projections can be reclaimed. When artist Nancy Barton faced the music in 1988, she found it was the opera in the foreground—of loss and reunion and lost again—that was looking for her. Opera is, for crying out loud, not about music; it’s for those of us who hate music which, bottom line, is background music, which from the primal mass or horde through the Christian mass to modern mass culture, has covered up the cries of sacrifice, the sounds in the back of our head as we eat and chew. But once you know that much, as every melancholic (like Freud, for example) must, then all you hear in music is a



certain backgrounding of the death wish, which at the same time turns up the volume on this staticky resounding of the identifications we all still gag on. The psychoanalytic perspective therefore opens up the orifices of opera not in the mouth nor in the ears, but takes them in or up primarily (or primally) as anal projection. But that’s why the melancholic who’s music shy can take, follow, adore opera (Freud’s favorite was *Don Giovanni*). Opera makes a spectacle of its resistance to music’s abstraction and cover-up of the losses opera struggles to recount, but up front, in their wake and face.

In the photo-montage series (and narrative) entitled *Swan Song*, Barton unfolded her opera of mother-and-daughter relations with loss—loss of family members, loss of mother’s aspirations, loss of voice—in the Big Between that set each beside herself. To commemorate a disconnection that’s also a connection, not in the interpersonal columns but intra-psychically, for every woman for herself, she constructed a bigger-than-life web of opera poster mockups with her mother dressed for each diva part together with running commentary made up of autobio-

OPPOSITE: NANCY BARTON, *SWAN SONG*, *SALOME 2*, 1988, PRODUCTION STILL.

ABOVE: NANCY BARTON, *LA GIOCONDA*, 1988, COLOR PHOTOS, SILKSCREEN.

graphical and gender-theoretical citations. We could recognize this series because, by the 1980s at the latest, just these discourses and images of marginal invention and intervention had become second nature to us. If not the native habitat of the subject, they certainly comprised that of the subject of opera as reconstituted between *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (1979/1988) and *The Queen's Throat* (1993) from the margins on in. But Barton doesn't let us forget (perhaps in contrast to Catherine Clément and Wayne Koestenbaum), that this at once theoretical and autobiographical impulse is, for example, *techno-feminist* and belongs, in any event, to an autobiography of *media*—a kind of ghostwriting on the wall of the crypt—to which the marginal identifications have already and always entrusted their own story. The resistance to technology's address in the sideshow of career theory, for example, doubles the resistance that is also there, and which is on the same wavelength, to all inside viewings of our grief-stuck metabolizations of loss.

In 1984, Ulrike Ottinger brought the opera to the mass-media Sensurround in her *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der*

Boulevard Presse (which was the third film in the trilogy she commenced in 1979 with *Ticket of No Return* and picked up again in 1981 with *Freak Orlando*). Ottinger has characterized her film work as focused on the transfer, the crossing or transference that passes between cultures over time, across and against the homogenizations of history and, in real-time, over a world of difference. What Ottinger refers to as the cultural transfer, then, is less about differences between interpersonal, multicultural identities and more about a difference that begins in the Big Between inhabiting every psyche.

When the titles of her films forsake the brevity of proper names, all the difficulties or differences of the crossing, of the “trans-,” begin coming up already with the translation. *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press* is the standard rendering into English of what's due to German. The reason it's not “Picture” already, like on the Wilde side, is because in German the operative word is *Spiegel*, which means “mirror.” Mirror, mirror is above all important. Because who's the most self-reflexive of media is the question the film asks itself as part and picture of the



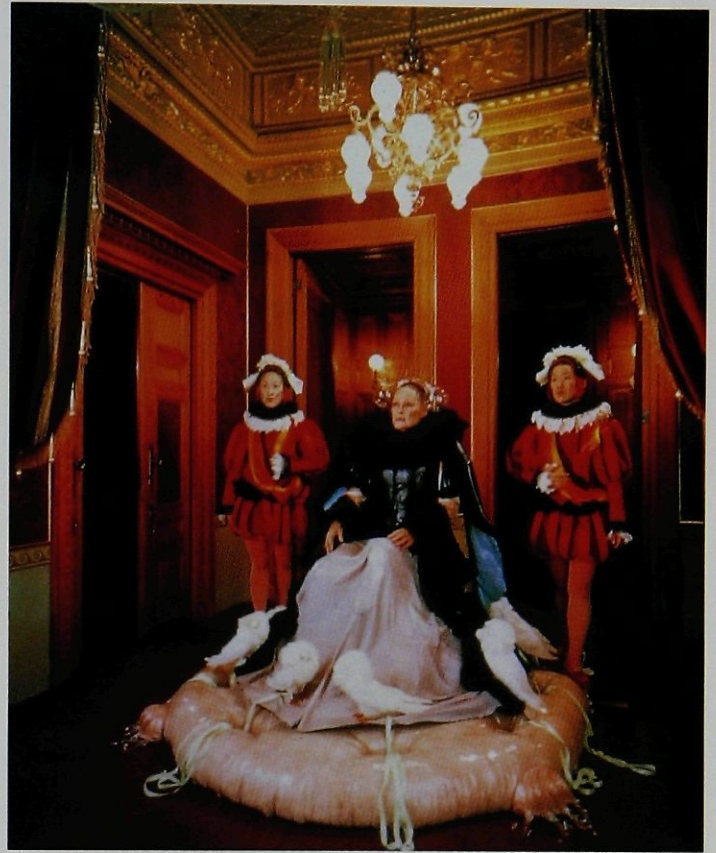
ULRIKE OTTINGER, *DORIAN GRAY IM SPIEGEL DER BOULEVARD PRESSE*, 1984, FILM STILL.

whole techno-mass Sensurround, which has us covered by containing itself and whatever it surrounds, double or nothing, within the endless relay of self-reflexivity. How many newspapers and magazines bear “mirror” in their titles? A mirror on the world? I don’t think so, dear reader. When you look into it for the news you’re just looking at yourself just as those you like to think of as controlling you already see you, doubled and contained, but also basically as nothing.

Ottinger selects in addition to our media Sensurround, reconstructed in particular as the so-called “Cockpit” from where Dr. Mabuse has her media empire under surveillance and remote control, opera as the other frame for the movie’s journey into its own interiority as self-reflexive medium. “Just as in the Cockpit there is the TV frame, so in the Opera there’s a fin-de-siècle frame [of the Dandy citation], in other words the image in the image, the camera angle, the frame of the Opera, behind it nature.... In front, the actors inhabiting a wild untouched landscape with their highly artificial Opera gesticulations.... The image within the image—its endlessness, it is also at the same time the mirror that extends itself infinitely—gives us the contrast between nature and art, but nature already caught in the frame, not only the frame of the camera.”¹

The mass of media and the opera are each just the staggered fall of the other, the fall the allegorical perspective has taken in all the standard receptions that stay tuned to totalization. In Walter Benjamin’s *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), which is as much about the Baroque theater as it is about post-WWI Expressionist drama, or, for that matter, about all the words and worlds between or since then, the allegorical mode has one context: it comes after the catastrophe. Allegory is realized within the perspective of the melancholic. The object becomes allegorical under the melancholic’s gaze; life leaves it; it remains as dead, but as eternally preserved. Benjamin has one openly psychoanalytic analogue for this double reading (his reference to Freud’s understanding of melancholia remains hidden), which he uses not once but twice. It is typical for the sadist, says Benjamin, to demean his object and give it satisfaction, too. The same goes for the allegorist.

All the elements of the Baroque mourning pageant or *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin argues, found their completion in opera. The overture was already introducing many Baroque dramas. The choreographic inserts plus the overall choreo-



graphic quality of the plot and plotting of court intrigue, the scheme holding the mourning pageant together, the way a paranoid delusion can be the low-maintenance alternative to a deep depression, forecast the dissolution of the mourning pageant and the emergence in its place of opera.

Opera was thus a fallen form of the allegorical *Trauerspiel*, one that became, in exchange, real popular. When opera died it in turn went to Hollywood heaven. All these falls, by the way, don’t add up or subtract according to a linear accounting of decline. The relation of fallenness, in Benjamin’s lexicon, is the non-dialectical and not-in-denial-about-the-melancholic-condition alternative to all the lines we are usually given in the field of transition.

Wagner, who can be seen as having introduced the final theorization of opera, makes ghost appearances in Hollywood films about super-humanity. The endless melody goes on and on even in the visual composition of Burton’s and Schumacher’s *Batman* films. *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984) begins with an overture that frames what can’t be seen for all the trees. And James Cameron is still stuck—perhaps we all are—on the last remaining retrenchment of metaphysical comforts



(according to Nietzsche's after-imagination of Wagner's work), a last honeymoon resort Wagner promoted in such operas as *Tristan und Isolde*: the couple admits the missing witness, the God we invented to witness our sufferings so that not one shred of it would go wasted, unwitnessed, without meaning or instructive value, by making the scene of *Liebestod* where we each watch the other die.

Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), not for the first time, goes down, one, two, however many times for a body count of witnessing the losing of the other as our last stand against *The Abyss* of meaninglessness. But that can also just mean libidinizing what we all had already given up on. Memory

has to fill it all in, as though only blanks were fired: memory as art, whether high or low, saves us from the dead-end realization that even in that last-stand scene of the couple dying in each other's arms, it's always the other who goes first. Instead, via the survivor and guardian of the memories, *Titanic* brings us all in, the movie-going audience, dead or alive, into someone's big idea of immortality as the life, not our own, flashing before our eyes with each screening.

To address the titanic seductions of media power in *Dorian Gray*, Ottinger placed the Cockpit and the Opera on one continuum of her own low-tech repetitions or rehearsals of vast networks of techno-surveillance. Freud's favorite psycho, the paranoid Daniel Paul Schreber, describes his techno-delusional system (the whole world is either empty or watching his every move and thought) in *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903/1955) in an intertextual gridlock dominated by opera references. He reconstructs the psychic pressures that have robbed him of his former world as the techno-pressures that are upon him in his new, delusional order, one that overlaps down to details with the drama or trauma contained in opera. Because Schreber is the last human on earth, and a rotten egg, he must become woman and, at the same time, android in order to receive God's replicational rays and thus conceive by himself, as himself, a new species for the world's survival. In *Opera and Drama* (1850-1) Wagner, Schreber's most famous fellow citizen, asked himself, "What kind of woman must true music be?" The answer: one who sacrifices herself, her whole being, when she conceives. But what distinguishes the psycho Schreber (and this is Freud's reading) from, say, Wagner is that he makes legible within the opera of sacrifice and surveillance the underlying busy intersection between technology and the unconscious, between Schreber's techno-delusional system and Freud's theory of the psychic apparatus.

It's always the more recent past, as Adorno writes to Benjamin in 1935, that's immediately, primarily repressed, and transformed thus into a primal past or prehistory linked to and separated from us as catastrophe.² That's why we see, in Ottinger's trilogy, how Berlin, even though the same vintage in fact as most American cities, can figure as the oldest city in history, the city center of our recent or primal past. The intimate connection Benjamin drew between allegory and sadism—and which Ottinger contin-

ues to put through—is not stuck only on the visualizable details of those styles. The connection is made also in the time we are given to watch or read: time is neither streamlined nor full in Ottinger's films. It's always overlong, it fulfills but then exceeds and thus erodes the long retention span of melancholia.

The century just before this one is also always repressed, catastrophically remote from our own, and can serve therefore as unconscious resource for channeling transmissions—more improper burials or hauntings than outright plagiarisms—in the decade that follows. In *Cremaster 5* (1997), the admission of an encrypted or occult reference to Houdini unties all the knots of unconscious indebtedness, and frees Matthew Barney from all influence. Barney escapes with his androgynous lady of chain, chain, chains inside the psychotic opera of Daniel Paul Schreber. But he doesn't—how could he, now that he's broken out of the chains of encrypted influence?—take up Ottinger's allegorical distance from and within this opera of breakdown and breakthrough. Barney remains inside the holding pattern of Schreber's relations. Were the Deleuzers right after all: can Schreber's mad autobiography be separated from Freud's reading of it? Not really, though you can act just about anything out.

Already in *Cremaster 4* (1994), Barney presented us with a piece of work in a category of science fiction I would re-spell as “psy-fi,” precisely because it was so psychotic-sublime. *Isle of Man*. Say it quickly a few times and it utters the sentence that Freud overheard in the noise of Schreber's mythico-delusional order, the sentence or verdict that goes without saying in every brotherhood of paranoia: “I love man.” According to *Cremaster 1* (1995) there is sexual difference: identifiable women are one big standing ovulation; all androgynous figures, which are male-identified, no matter how ambiguously, get to crawl around, always in training, in vaseline-lubed obstacle courses of anal projection. The “cremaster” names a body part for men only; it's what puts muscle into the rise and fall of testicles. At the end of *Cremaster 4* those model balls, outward bound, pumped up into sheer visibility for the scene they make of para-surgical rewiring, bear testes to a special brand or branding of testimony. The giant in *Cremaster 5*, one of three characters into which Barney divides himself, has big balls that get the takeoff treatment, fit to be tied to doves. What's on exhibition denies or hides from castration. The



prosthetic chains of the Houdini figure (the Magician, another Barney cameo) begin as externalizations of the cremaster muscle. *Cremaster 5* is ultimately the Queen of Chain's remembrance “viewmaster” through which she keeps watching her lover die (while her foot's in one cremaster shape she looks through another). This separation anxiety toes the denial line of all the cremaster images that keep cutting above the sight of castration. Barney's *Cremaster* series, seen as a “psychotic” reversal of a certain masterful obsession with making the cut (as exhibited, perhaps more “neurotically,” by film directors like Hitchcock or Pabst), is shot as video and then re-projected

KURT KAUPER, *DIVA FICTION #1*, 1996, OIL ON BIRCH PANEL, 88 x 44 IN. COURTESY ACME, LOS ANGELES.

as art film (allegedly to cut expenses). Expense accounts can be given for the length of each *Cremaster* segment but not for each one's live-likeness. As video it isn't cut, but it is paced as video. The cut above or around the cutting short of castration falls between media but also inside a video-centric attention span that just won't go away or stay.

We know by now that in the so-called gay nineties, perversion has been the provenance of straight folks. Barney's primal or model performance of gender nonspecificity had him playing football in draggy undergear, at once a negation and an exhibition of what's still there to show. Barney inserts himself into the fifth *Cremaster*, at least in name, as diva, not as divo. Kurt Kauper's *Diva Fictions* were rehearsed, as paintings, in his earlier nude self-portrait. His portrait paintings of divas give the high-lowdown of art and culture, mixing traditional modes of pictorial representation with the "decon" of relations between margin and center stage so basic to opera. In a gallery statement for the Los Angeles showing of *Diva Fictions* in 1997, Kauper asked his viewers "to think about Opera's ability to be meaningful to individuals from a non-elite world: the Divas themselves but also the tradition of gay men and women finding, in Divas, a metaphor for their struggle to make lives for themselves in our culture." But references, however distant or recontextualized, to van Eyck or Ingres, for example, which most reviews of the work have lip-synched, overlook a more immediate continuity that Kauper has picked up, washed up onto the Californian shore from Germany—namely the modernist realism which made it big in the Third Reich, climbing up a tier from the middlebrow realism of stage sets that Wagner established once and for all. The modernist realism of *Diva Fictions*, which Kauper dates back to his visits to the Met's gallery of diva portraits, belongs to a formulaic art that continues to supply the "timeless," current but traditional, hieroglyphics of official portraiture on all sides of the former total war. It was an unrepressed formal decision rather than a political point that German collector Peter Ludwig made when he commissioned a bust of himself, one that could be recognized right away, without looking between the photo-finish lines of mass-mediaticization. When it came to collecting himself (and his wife) for the anticipated opera of leave-taking and remembrance, the collector of American Pop art from Warhol to Kruger decided to give the commission to Arno Breker, the star sculptor of the Third Reich. But a datable, recognizable style doesn't just resurface or stay put. It gets dialed up, channeled, and is thus implicitly framed, down to the core of what's so decorative about it, by technologization. This

risks to consciousness via Kauper's "construction" or genetic engineering of his fictional divas. But even when Victor Frankenstein created a brand-new being out of preexisting corpse parts he was just practicing, as he admits in passing, for the ultimate goal of reanimation of a dead loved one. And the monstrous bodybuilding of the ersatz foundling already held the place of the work of mourning Victor couldn't undertake over his mother's departed body. These are some of the submerged trajectories which make the seemingly incomparable opera explorations conducted by Kauper and Barton do overlaps in the replicational gene pool of candidates for reanimation.

On one side, then, among the latest arrivals of the phantom of opera, there's the opera of the psychotic dandy Schreber, so closely related to its allegorical re-reading by Benjamin, Freud, and Ottinger.³ So there's that side or aside. Then on the other side, there's the legacy of internalization—from Wagner to Cameron—of media powers of surveillance within couples that stay together by dying together. This is not to suggest that there's a winning side to this context, this media contest. But one side is hot off the repression: which *is* hot but also kind of nihilistic, tackily manipulative, and totally dead-end. Instead, let's begin again and return to the question of the "trans-," the legibility of the Big Between in media relations of surveillance which are already at work on the inside of our psychic organizations. ■

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NOTES

1. Interview with Ulrike Ottinger, in Sissi Tax, "...la forza/power/le pouvoir ...," *Konkursbuch* 12 (1984), 28-29.
2. From a letter dated 2 August 1935, reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. ed. Ronald Taylor (London: New Left Books, 1977), 112.
3. Benjamin was in fact already a close reader of Schreber's *Memoirs* and of Freud's analysis of Schreber's case by the time he wrote *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

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