Crossing over with Tilda Swinton—the Mistress of “Flat Affect”

Jackie Stacey

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Abstract Tilda Swinton is hard to classify as a performer because flux and mutability have become her signature qualities. One enduring element in her repertoire, however, can be brought into focus through Lauren Berlant’s concept of “flat affect.” Typically described as mysterious, otherworldly, or ethereal, Swinton often brings to her screen and live performances a quality or atmosphere that contradicts the conventional expectations of feminine emotional expressiveness and legibility in popular cinema. As a contribution to this special issue on Berlant’s work, my article traces Swinton’s styles of flat affect as an aesthetic relationality across a number of films, including *Teknolust*, *Michael Clayton*, *The Deep End*, and *Orlando*. My reading of Swinton’s capacity for flatness places it within the history of her unusual facility to cross between independent and more popular cultural forms and to set *femininity as genre* in motion as she does so. Famous for embodying gender ambiguity since her performance as Orlando, Swinton’s association with androgyny as a pre-queer promise of limitlessness folds femininity back upon its historical conventions and imperatives. In tracing the history of Swinton’s gender fluctuations, this article concludes by reflecting on some of the failures of feminist and queer language to articulate the nuances of affective registers; androgyny, butch, tomboy, trans, and genderqueer designate styles of gendered and sexual embodiment, but these do not extend satisfactorily to aesthetic moods and atmospheres. Closing with a discussion of “offgender” flux, the article considers Swinton’s recent twinning with David Bowie to open up how her performances reinvent affective genres while calling forth their histories and temporalities.

Keywords Tilda Swinton · Lauren Berlant · Flat affect · Gender and genre · Feminist and queer theory

When Lauren Berlant writes about contemporary genres of intimate sociality, she extends a concept of structural repetition from film theory into a more generalised understanding of subjectivity as inextricable from the popular modes of its formation. For Berlant, the cinema has always been integral to the ways in which modern culture has produced affective subjects who inhabit its social and political spaces through fantasy landscapes, the *mise-en-scène* of which structure our everyday lives as much as they do the fictions we consume. Reading these shifting genres as historical and

J. Stacey (✉)
The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
e-mail: jackie.stacey@manchester.ac.uk

political formations, Berlant tracks the ways in which their current charge builds upon (as it also reinvents) previous affective conventionalities that have organised the social categories we inhabit. With the emergence of mass culture in North America and elsewhere, modes of sentimentality have taken particular commodified forms, shaping new styles of what Berlant names “intimate publics”. Bound by the generic histories of melodrama and romance, for example, conventionalised femininities have become legible through a repertoire of emotional intensities articulated through familial, domestic and sexual relations. It is the figure of the woman who has come to stand as the sign of both suffering and fulfilment within these genres. In the cinema, narratives of desirability and/or pathos have marked our relationship to this figure as a site of ambivalence. It is in this context that we might consider femininity as a generic category whose history binds together popular culture and everyday social life in ways that have a continuing political significance.

Berlant’s queer feminist work has developed its own inventive conceptual language to diagnose the place of culture in our current political “situation” and to demonstrate the forms of its affective articulations.¹ This remarkably eloquent theoretical vocabulary has evolved across her trilogy on national sentimentality: (in order of their historical address) *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia and Everyday Life* (1991); *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008b); and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997). Unlike many whose theories of affect have been hailed as a turning away from Marxism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, Berlant instead extends and reimagines these frameworks in order to grasp the cultural nature of politics and the political nature of culture.²

Of particular significance for scholars across the humanities and social sciences concerned with capitalism’s reorganisation of contemporary cultural politics is Berlant’s focus on our investments and attachments to social practices which militate against “our own thriving” and thwart our attempts to achieve the “good life” they seemed to promise.³ Simultaneously “paranoid” and “reparative”, to cite Eve Sedgwick’s (1997) famous diagnosis of critical reading tendencies,⁴ Berlant’s approach insists that, if we are to engage with the political, we must grasp the continuing affective work of its sentimentalising forms and our complicity in mobilising them in our own feminist (and other critical) practices.⁵ In order to track the significance of the cultural within shifting globalised social landscapes, she argues, we need to establish the historical textures of its generic conventionalities. Connecting modes of textual

¹ Berlant conceptualises the *situation* as a “genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos” (2011, p. 6); a situation is “a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life”; as she puts it: “the situation’s state of animated suspension provides a way of thinking about some conventions with which we develop a historical sense of the present affectively as immanence, emanation, atmosphere or emergence” (2011, pp. 5–6). Calling “the historical present a situation”, she argues, suggests a “disturbance ... a genre of living that one knows one’s in but that one has to find out about, a circumstance embedded in life but not in one’s control” (2011, p. 195).

² See in particular Sedgwick Kosofsky and Adam (1995), Massumi (2002), Cvetkovich (2003, 2012), Clough and Halley (2007), Alaimo and Hekman (2008), Freeman (2010), Hoogland (2014) and Angerer (2014, forthcoming). See also “Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory” edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead, *Feminist Theory* (2012), 13(2).

³ For a critical analysis of attachment, see “Wait up!: Attachment and Sovereign Power” by Robbie Duschinsky, Monica Greco and Judith Solomon in this issue; for discussions of our faith in finding the “good life” and our investments in things which are barriers to our own “thriving”, see Berlant (2011, pp. 27–28, 163–164).

⁴ For discussion of paranoid and reparative reading, see Sedgwick Kosofsky (1997), Love (2010), Berlant (2011) and Wiegman (2014).

⁵ This argument about the political capacity to mobilise sentimentality in North American culture has been central to all Berlant’s work. See, for example, her discussion of fetal citizenship in Berlant (1997), her critique of commodified genres of feminine intimacy in Berlant (2008b) and the analysis of our attachment to those things which prevent our flourishing in Berlant (2011).

and political affectivity, Berlant reads particular aesthetic moods and embodied atmospheres as indicative of the genealogies of “the times we’re in” (Wiegman 2014).⁶

This article responds to Berlant’s work by taking it as a springboard for my own thinking about the temporalities of cinematic genres of feminine affect and their place in the mediated reproduction of culture. A key concern I share with Berlant is how we might theorise the changing significance of those affects traditionally assigned to femininity within the emergence of an intimate public sphere. To think of those affective genres as calibrated across mediated cultures and everyday social and political life is to begin to follow Berlant’s interdisciplinary ambitions.

Central to my contribution will be Berlant’s argument in her article in this issue about the significance of “flattened affect” in a “cluster of queer and independent docudramatic narratives emerging in the mid-1980s and continuing into the present” (Berlant 2015: this issue). In what follows, I consider Tilda Swinton as the mistress of flat affect and I elaborate a reading of this aspect of her wider-ranging repertoire in dialogue with Berlant’s long-standing interest in “the problem of understanding the mediations of affect historically” (Berlant 2015: this issue). Swinton has been an exceptionally inventive figure on the British and international cultural landscape since the mid-1980s. As a performer, actor, producer, activist, model, patron, advocate and general style icon, she has appeared in around 70 films, 40 plays and numerous live performances and organised nearly 50 impromptu rural film screenings.⁷ Inspired by Berlant’s writing on the place of affect in gendering public cultures, I conceptualise Swinton’s “styles of underperformed emotion” (Berlant 2015: this issue) as a form of dialogue with the persistence of legibly embodying affect as the enduring sign of femininity in the history of the cinema.

Whilst Berlant’s arguments about flattened affect concern the aesthetic mood of a generation of queer and independent work, this article shifts scale to focus on the capacities of one particular performer (however collaborative her modes of working may be). Coinciding with both the timeframe and the cultural styles in question, I read the “flattened” aspect of Swinton’s work as part of this generational mood in order to elaborate some of the distinctive textures of her affective embodiments. Not so much exemplar or case study but rather a style of presence across this temporal span, Swinton’s work has pulled against the generic expectations of how affect registers femininity in ways that belong to a broader characterisation of this “structure of unfeeling” (in Berlant’s title). For Berlant, flattened affect pervades the aesthetic atmosphere of this “cluster of queer and independent docudramatic narratives”; in considering Swinton’s flat affect, my focus is on one of her styles of embodied performance, which only sometimes belongs to the more general mood of its aesthetic context. And, as we shall see, this is part of how her affective repertoires work.

After decades of feminist and queer theory, it is surprisingly difficult to find a satisfactory language for Swinton’s gender fluctuations. As I range through the possible conceptual candidates, such as trans and genderqueer, or the more dated tomboy or androgyny, they each fail in different ways to capture Swinton’s citational ambiguities. This article is an attempt to work through that failure of conceptual vocabulary to trace the flow of these fluctuations across two dynamic aspects of her persona: first, her recasting of cinematic femininity as less than its historical sentimental excesses but more than merely

⁶ See responses to Wiegman (2014) by Clare Hemmings (2014), Gail Lewis (2014) and Jackie Stacey (2014) in the *Feminist Theory* dossier, “The Time of Reparation: In Dialogue with Robyn Wiegman”.

⁷ For more on these improvised cinema projects, see <http://www.cinemaofdreams.co.uk/> and <http://www.apilgrimage.org/>. See also James (2008). For Swinton on the state of cinema generally, see Swinton (2006).

their opposites; and secondly, her mixture of genders that is less the perfect blend and more the setting of something in motion. I thus read the history of Swinton's flatness as both a reflexive withdrawal from generic modes of feminised sentimentality in the cinema and as inflected by a pre-queer dream of androgyny, not as identity but as an experimental speculation upon its limits that generates instead a sense of a capacity to shift and transform.⁸ If Swinton embodies something beyond femininity's others, she does so through a flattening that is sometimes confirmed in androgyny's promise. Extending the spatial metaphor, the flatness in question here is one that has stepped to the side of its precedents, crossing over and folding back upon the history of its generic conventions as it opens up to test the affective futures of femininity. In this sense, the flat affect of the feminine refers to a process of flattening—in relation to the expectations and anticipations that its historical genres have organised.

Calling Swinton the mistress of flat affect here immediately provokes a very particular sense of the centrality of transgression to the history of heterosexuality.⁹ Both the woman in control and the woman on the side, the mistress implies expertise and adultery. Outdated by the standards of contemporary sexual vocabularies, mistress deliberately introduces a gendered disobedience from a slightly different period to match the refusal of affective formalities within the frame of this debate. If the mistress is the marginal and duplicitous third term in the structure of a secret affair, then such positioning echoes Swinton's unfaithfulness (or her not-quite-faithfulness) to the affective norms of femininity that form the focus of my discussion. And yet, having no masculine counterpart (since master suggests something different), the idea of the mistress holds all the affective pleasures of "an affair", suggesting a frisson in tension with the flatness that is my focus here. For the mistress of flat affect is the one whose control appears effortless; she is the one who performs this better than anyone whilst appearing not to; her anxieties about dependency can be hidden within an open secret. Drawing us back into the prohibitions of previous eras (the 1950s and 1960s perhaps) whose sexual norms continue to "drag" on the present, in Elizabeth Freeman's sense of the term (2010), the mistress offers an anachronistic signal of sexual transgressions and secrets whose archaic description becomes all the more absurd when played across the context of Swinton's reputation for "bohemian lifestyles", past and present.¹⁰ Mistress, in this context, designates the historicity of the conventionalised couple in heterosexual marriage and is constitutive of, as it pulls against, its prescribed affective protocols and disclosures. Belonging to an outmoded yet still legible index, its double register of mastery and trespass plays across the boundaries of masculinity and femininity in a manner appropriate to Swinton's reputation for gender fluctuations. In the sense of resignifying gender, Swinton as mistress also registers as a kind of phallic mastery from which she should have been excluded.

Responding to Berlant's article in this volume, my proposal is that Swinton's exceptional capacity to embody "flat affect" is generative of a particular sense of temporality through its implicit dialogue with the historical genres of cinematic femininity that she can both make

⁸ I am grateful to Lauren Berlant for suggesting the phrase a "pre-queer dream of androgyny".

⁹ My discussion of the term "mistress" here is indebted to exchanges with Rosemary Deller.

¹⁰ These would include her early years in London with Derek Jarman, and more recently, media interest in her relationships with John Byrne (the father of her two children), and her current partner, Sandro Kopp. For example, the *Daily Mail* (14 February 2008) featured an article on what they called her "intriguing ménage à trois" (Boshoff 2008), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-513967/Tilda-Swinton-Her-toyboy-elderly-lover-intriguing-m-nage-trois.html> (accessed 22 August 2014).

intelligible and also supremely refuse to embody.¹¹ I bring together Swinton and Berlant in this article as two figures whose contributions cross over (and work through) more and less popular genres of femininity, in ways that both refuse the parameters of conventional cultural and political imaginaries and display an intimate knowledge of the structural repetitions that have organised their histories. My claim is less that flat affect defines Swinton or vice versa (as it is certainly not her only mode by any means), and more that, across the considerable span and duration of her work, she has consistently demonstrated an exceptional capacity to embody this particular register, in such a way as to bring to the fore not only a sense of the performativity of gender, but also the mediated and temporalised modes of its generic formations. In short, it is hard to think of a contemporary female performer who delivers the register of flat affect quite so expertly as Swinton.

I

Before pursuing some of Berlant’s arguments in more detail, I begin with an example to introduce how Swinton’s flat affect works in dialogue with Hollywood genres of tangible feminine affect. Nowhere is this dialogue more literally enacted than in Lynn Hershman Leeson’s arthouse pastiche *Teknolust* (2002) in which Swinton plays both a scientist (Rosetta Stone) who has engineered three sibling clones by downloading her own DNA, and the colour-coded clones, with comic-book legibility¹²: Ruby, the red one, is the brunette; Marine, the blue one, is the redhead; and Olive, the green one, is the blonde.¹³ Romantic scenes from 1950s Hollywood movies are played across Ruby’s body as she sleeps to generate the libidinal and affective drives she lacks as a genetically engineered automaton. As science fiction and Noir-ish motifs converge, femininity becomes both generic repetition and bio-genetic sequence. The absurdity of Ruby’s flat affect is narrativised through her artificial origins (clones have to learn how to feel), but is also embodied in a human form in Rosetta, as the scientist whose attachment to her alien offspring (likened by Jussi Parikka (2010) to insect-like creatures) is her only form of intimacy. Swinton’s flattened authenticity as these multiple feminine presences on the screen matches the citational style of the *mise-en-scène* with its numerous arthouse references for those in the know. Mimicry becomes a form of emptying out of emotional depth as inauthenticity circulates across different templates and generates new copies of itself. Affect in this film is less a sign of human relationality and more an energy flow between multiple forms of life. Reproductive femininity in both the biological and

¹¹ Two caveats are important here: I am not suggesting that Swinton’s work is solely defined by her capacity to embody flat affect, since of course, there are many examples of her emotionally expressive performances, such as in *The War Zone* (Roth 1999), or *Julia* (Zonca 2008); and there are films in which Swinton plays her affect both ways, *I am Love* (Guardagnino 2009) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Ramsay 2011); neither is Swinton the only female performer of flat affect within the history of cinema—Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian 1933) would be one of a number of predecessors. For striking parallels between Garbo’s and Swinton’s “lost-in-thought” look, see Simon Annand’s 1989 photograph of Swinton before playing Mozart in the Pushkin play: *Mozart and Salieri* (1897): <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/mar/14/photography-simon-annand-best-shot> (accessed 8 September 2014). See also *Female Masculinities* (1998), in which Judith Halberstam claims that Swinton plays Orlando as a “melancholic anti-hero ... almost as in homage to Garbo” in *Queen Christina* (213).

¹² Like a spoof countering the “Stroop effect”, the difference between the three clones is made legible by this very literal chromatic tagging. In psychology, the Stroop effect is named after John Ridley Stroop who published a paper in 1935 demonstrating interference in the reaction time of a task by showing that if the name of a colour is printed in a different ink from that colour (such as if the word blue is printed in red ink) people will take longer to identify it correctly than if it is printed in an identical colour (such as if the word blue is printed in blue ink); see Stroop (1935).

¹³ For a fuller account, see Stacey (2010).

Fig. 1 Ruby (Tilda Swinton) as the ‘*femme fatale*’ with flat affect in the film *Teknolust*. Film still © Lynn Hershman Leeson

cultural senses is reimagined as potential transferrable vitality. In contrast to her Hollywood predecessors, Swinton is the conductor of affect, not its originator or its essential embodiment.

As Ruby, Swinton is the *femme fatale* (see Fig. 1) responsible for sperm retrieval (Y chromosome top-ups are required because of the triplets’ exclusively feminine origins) and she does what is necessary to get what she wants from men. Mechanically delivering lines from these old movies to seduce random males and collect their semen (anyone will do), she recycles decontextualised one-liners from her night-time 1950s role models. Borrowing from Elizabeth Taylor as Helen Ellswirth, in *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (Brooks 1954) and Kim Novak as Molly in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Preminger 1955), her naïve, affectless deadpan works like a charm on her “victims”: “Don’t let the celebration ever end”; or: “You’re looking good tonight, Frankie, you’ve got natural rhythm” (see Figs. 2 and 3). As one man after another becomes Ruby’s unsuspecting donor, stereotypes of masculine heterosexual willingness become a comic pastiche: an imitation aware of its own imitative form (Dyer 2006).

In these scenes, heterosexual femininity *as genre* governs the rules of exchange so explicitly as to draw attention to themselves as conventions. The bizarre absence of context for Ruby’s borrowed one-liners matters less to the success of her chance encounters than does her legibility as a desirable and sexually available woman. Swinton’s performance of heterosexual seduction as banal comic

Fig. 2 Helen Ellswirth (Elizabeth Taylor) Charles Wills (Van Johnson) in *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1954) are screened across Ruby (Tilda Swinton) as she sleeps in the film *Teknolust*. Film still © Lynn Hershman Leeson

Fig. 3 A close-up of Molly (Kim Novak) in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) is screened across Ruby (Tilda Swinton) as she sleeps in the film *Teknolust*. Film still © Lynn Hershman Leeson

repetition reverses the generic expectation of femininity as the embodiment of romantic intensity, performing instead a flatness of affect that contradicts the centrality of feminine emotional legibility to the place of the woman in the history of the cinema. If Swinton’s detached delivery as manipulative seductress matches her Noir-ish surface glamour, it also undercuts the conventional affective presence of Hollywood’s romantic leads on the screen. The successful sexual outcomes of Ruby’s affectless performances of the lines of bygone celluloid heroines become all the more comic in the context of her triplet origin—itself so obviously also a type of copying.

Turning heterosexual seduction into generic “data” literalises the idea of Hollywood as the dream machine and the carefully labelled jars of semen “donations” that line the kitchen cupboard reverse the notches-on-the-bedpost mentality of male sexual acquisition. Heterosexuality as convention thus moves from screen to cloned body and back again as the techniques of imitation and mimicry proliferate. The flatness of Swinton’s style of delivery extends genetic copying into a comment on the predictable course of heterosexual romantic encounters. Feminine affect becomes historical as its encodings are rendered literal through genetic as well as cinematic modes of copying. The artifice of femininity (of having to make it up or copy an idea of it) becomes a technical accomplishment in the bodily absorption of the props of seductive masquerade. Feeding men the random lines they most desire to hear by sampling the Hollywood archive, Ruby turns the art of seduction into a banal, tongue-in-cheek citation, as she delivers her lines through “styles of underperformed emotion” (Berlant 2015: this issue). Importantly, this underperformance works dialogically in relation to its opposite: the melodramatic and romantic historical precedents of the figure of the woman as the site of affective intensity, depth and legibility. Thus, Swinton’s embodiment of flat affect works relationally as a conversation with histories of femininity that travel from Hollywood cinema into the genres of our everyday life and back again. The ground of those repetitions and approximations is both a deeply structured cultural landscape and horizon of unexpected possibilities (potentialities) yet to be fully articulated. If Swinton’s playful temporal multiplicities in *Teknolust* literalise the relational dynamics of her genres of affect, then I propose to take the explicitness here as indicative of something present in how her flatness works more generally (if less tangibly). This dialogue with dated genres of feminine affect is not merely about Swinton becoming the embodiment of gender’s temporal drag, but it also indicates her capacity to generate readings of her transcendence of time. In *Teknolust*, female desire becomes a commodity absorbable across temporal boundaries, a resource for the survival of the cloned mix of human and non-human that Swinton embodies.

My focus here on Ruby’s modes of seduction in *Teknolust* serves to set the scene for a wider discussion of how Swinton’s repertoire reworks the temporalities of particular genres of

Fig. 4 Tilda Swinton plays all three colour-coded clones (Ruby the red one, Marine the blue one and Olive the green one) in the film *Teknolust*. Film still © Lynn Hershman Leeson

feminine affect that have become so central to our emotional landscapes since the cinema began, as Berlant outlines in *The Female Complaint* (2008b). A study of how genre simultaneously conventionalises and individualises affective attachments through its structures of repetition, Berlant chronicles our investments in the melodramatic and the romantic, even as we produce critical reflections upon their historical appeal.

Similarly crossing over between classical feminine idealisations and the loosening of their hold on our psyches, Swinton's multiple personae in *Teknolust* play upon her off-screen reputation for improvisational styles of performance and gender experimentation. Appearing on screen as three different versions of the same figure, distinguished by the red-green-blue (RGB) video signal, Swinton undercuts the fetishised singularity of film idols whilst enacting yet another narrative of her own ingenious self-invention (see Fig. 4). This paradox is condensed in the repetition of Ruby's successful but affectless seductions, which play the power of feminine desirability to its greatest effect. And, as Rosetta Stone, the nerdy female scientist who literally "made the clones up" from her own DNA, Swinton amplifies the circuits of artifice that give genetic echo to cinematic masquerade.¹⁴ Holding the tension between these two feminine archetypes—the affective depth of the romantic heroine and the surface beauty of the idealised object of heterosexual desire—Swinton's pastiche comments more broadly on the double binding femininities of twentieth-century mediated cultures.

II

Just as Berlant's critical practice has travelled between the popular genres of feminine affect and their more experimental counterparts, so Swinton's work has crossed over between these worlds, taking her styles of performing flat affect with her. As she has moved between art films and gallery performances into more popular cinema and back again, her trajectories have woven very particular textures. According to feminist art historian Amelia Jones, it is precisely this range of fields that defines Swinton's work. Writing about her 1995 collaboration with Cornelia Parker in *The Maybe*, Jones argues that "Swinton's work is informed by her particular relationship to performance, as someone active in working with artists to produce experimental

¹⁴ For debates on masquerade, see Fletcher (1988), Schingler (1995), Doane (1991) and Stacey (1994, 2010).

film” (2012, p. 470).¹⁵ Swinton lies apparently sleeping, as visitors watch her in a transparent glass box four foot off the ground. Half modern durational fairy-tale (sleeping beauty), half medical museum specimen (the living corpse), Swinton’s containment both in box and sleep offers spectators what we might call her “partial retreat” (Berlant 2015: this issue), invoking an intimate distance as we pause and wonder if she will be stirred into wakefulness. For Jones (2012), *The Maybe* is indicative of Swinton’s cross-arts collaborations that have come to define the style of her artistic presence:

A unique figure in art and film worlds, she crosses over art making, acting in feature films, modelling, ... and collaborating with experimental directors and artists (in addition to Derek Jarman, she has worked with Lynn Hershman, Sally Potter, Isaac Julien, Doug Aitken and others). (470)

From the mid-1980s onwards, Swinton has collaborated with a number of independent and queer filmmakers.¹⁶ One central feature which marks out Swinton’s crossing over between independent cinema and more popular film is the ways in which she has carried with her very distinctive styles of performance, including, importantly, her capacity to embody a certain flatness of affect.

Berlant’s writing brings to the study of Swinton’s work a reading of flat affect as a response (however indirect) to the sentimentalised affective ground mobilised so successfully within political discourse through cultural forms.¹⁷ Berlant’s argument maps a dynamic between these political and aesthetic practices not through the logic of analogy or teleology but rather as a way to read them as correspondences structured by particular historical conjunctures. To situate Swinton’s enigmatic presence within the underperformance of affect of this generation of artistic practitioners is to tell a political story of crossing between cultural spaces, which place affect and its legibility within the styles of intervention that have persisted in this

¹⁵ Conceived as a memorial to Derek Jarman, who had recently died, and devised in collaboration with Cornelia Parker, *The Maybe* was first performed at the Serpentine in London in 4–10 September 1995. In this original version of the piece, Swinton is surrounded by other cased exhibits, such as “Queen Victoria’s stocking, John Wesley’s spurs, a quill belonging to Charles Dickens, and the lap rug and pillow from Freud’s couch. ... The sleeping woman was neatly labelled ‘Matilda Swinton, 1960’” (Nixon 2006, pp. 63–64). There have been two subsequent performances: one at the Museo Barracco in Rome in 1996 and the other at MOMA in 2013. The latter, *The Maybe (Reprise)*, took place from 23 March onwards on seven non-consecutive days, which were not pre-announced, and was labelled: “Tilda Swinton, Scottish, born 1960. Living artist, glass, steel, mattress, pillow, linen, water and spectacles. Courtesy of the artist.”

¹⁶ Swinton’s work with independent directors include the following: Jarman (*Caravaggio* [1986], *The Last of England* [1987], *War Requiem* [1989], *The Garden* [1990] and *Edward II* [1991]), with Potter (*Orlando* [1992]), Susan Streitfeld (*Female Perversions* [1996]), with Hershman Leeson (*Conceiving Ada* [1997], *Teknolust* [2002] and *Strange Culture* [2007]), with Jim Jarmusch (*The Limits of Control* [2009] and *Only Lovers Left Alive* [2013]) and with Isaac Julien and Bernard Rose (*Derek* [2008]). Swinton has often also been one of the producers of the films in which she appears (including for example, *Stephanie Daley* (Broucher 2007), *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, *Thumbsucker* (Mills 2005) and *I Am Love*). She has also become increasingly visible in more popular cinema, especially since *The Beach* (Boyle 2000) and the *Narnia* films (2005–2010), though she has continued to be associated with “bit parts” and cameo parts: for example, as Valerie in *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002), as Elizabeth Abbott in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Fincher 2008) and, most recently, as Dr Shrink-Rom in *The Zero Theorem* (Gilliam 2013) and as Madame D in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson 2014). Swinton also appeared as Elke, a woman in a hospital bed, in Joanna Scanlan, Jo Brand and Vicki Pepperdine’s TV series, *Getting On* (2012).

¹⁷ Berlant’s challenge to political discourse has focused in particular on how the Right has so successfully mobilised sentimentality (see Berlant 1997); but her readings of the politics of affect have also challenged feminism’s own tendencies to privilege genres of confession and testimony (see Berlant 2000). Most recently (Berlant 2011), her arguments about the “cruelty of optimism” speak to the restructuring (or rather de-structuring) of genres of everyday affect that might be seen to characterise the new instabilities of what many refer to through the short-hand category: “neo-liberalism”; for an introduction to this concept, see Harvey (2007).

historical period. The “politics of culture” becomes a phrase to designate less the political context of specific cultural forms than to diagnose the shared ground of the fantasies that appear to organise subjects into social categories through genres of affiliation and attachment.

My approach in this article has been shaped by recent debates in queer and feminist theory about affect, about temporality and narrative, and about modes of reading and being read in which, for me, Berlant’s insistence upon thinking about the present as historical has been central.¹⁸ In “Thinking About Feeling Historical” (2008a), Berlant proposes that we rethink “the sensing of history, and of the historic” by tracking “affective intensities politically” in a way that does not “presume their status as dramatic”, but rather, “imagines the affectivity of the social in registers alongside melodrama” (Berlant 2008a, p.4). At these moments, she argues, our sense of the present feels historical: we are “living in a stretched out ‘now’ that is at once both intimate and estranged” (Berlant 2008a, p.5). In other words, the present begins to feel historical to us (we sense it as a temporality) when its affective register changes and cannot be accommodated through current genres of sociality. Extending these arguments about what she calls the “historical present” in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant suggests that the present appears to us as historical when we become unable to respond to something through our existing affective genres. The particularities of the present, she suggests, become most legible when our lives fail to make sense through prevailing idioms, and when the tightness of cultural conventions no longer holds our worlds in place. Thus, our sense of the historical present as a temporality becomes most visible when it fails to live up to its promises (in which we had invested so much, psychically and economically). One important index for this sense is the pressure such failures put on the everyday genres of melodramatic sociality that can no longer make time intangible. To read Swinton through the frame of the historical present means engaging with the ways in which this particular shade in her emotional palette (flattened affect) unmakes and remakes more conventionalised femininities, especially as articulated through popular genres in which the woman’s interiority is so frequently the register of legible affective intensity.

Swinton’s performance styles and modes of embodiment on the screen (and also off it) repeatedly present just such a “stretched out ‘now’ that is both intimate and estranged”. By registering affect in ways that make its presence in the female body historical, her work places this “stretched out ‘now’” in dialogue (sometimes indirectly, and other times quite explicitly) with that cluster of conventions that have comprised femininity. One early example of Swinton’s capacity to stretch out the temporality of the present through her modes of embodying affect is a scene in *War Requiem* (Jarman 1989 [music composed and conducted by Benjamin Britten]) in which she performs “the Nurse” registering and deregistering a rapidly shifting range of feelings for its full five-minute duration. A close-up on Swinton’s face and upper body shows the accompanying physical ebbs and flows of her changing skin tones, facial expressions and hand gestures. Intensifying into a deeper sense of interiority as her eyes close and palms grasp her head, barely visible edits move us through a range of paler and pinker hues of her white skin. As she begins to respond to the rhythm and flow of the music with half-gestures, her eyes open again. The stream of affects edges around more palpable emotions but never lingers. Here Swinton’s body, plaited hair not quite finished and white linen clothing sliding off one shoulder, becomes the register of the impossibility of translating the horrors of

¹⁸ There is now a considerable body of work on time and affect in queer and feminist theory; for some of the key readings in addition to Berlant’s own contributions, see Grosz (1995, 2005), Cvetkovich (2003, 2012), Edelman (2004), Halberstam (2005), Love (2007) and Freeman (2010). Much of this work is reviewed in Wiegman (2014).

war into a legible emotional palette. It is not flatness but the production of a sense of interiority that is in the balance here, as the female body becomes a site of improvised affective depth.

Swinton’s more general association with Jarman’s artistic practices intent on reframing conventional histories of sexuality, such as *Caravaggio* (1986), *The Last of England* (1988) and *Edward II* (1991), contribute to her reputation as a figure whose presence belongs to the project of contesting historical narratives and the traditional chronologies and teleologies that have anchored them. In her article in this issue, Berlant turns her attention to this sense of “the present, seen as an unfolding, historically-saturated moment coming together and apart at the seams” in the work of queer and independent cultural producers since the mid-1980s as manifested through “styles of underperformed emotion, flat affect and diffused yet animated gesture”.¹⁹ Running across this work, she argues, we find:

Worlds and events that would have been expected conventionally to feature amplified subjectivity, relationality, social existence, and confidence about what makes an event significant instead appear mutedly, in motions and tones that could indicate a range of registers *from trauma-related psychic dissociation and punk antiauthoritarianism to ordinary dissipated, distracted, or loosely-quilted consciousness.*’ (italics added).

It is not merely that we find here atmospheres of muted affect, but that these registers reshape scenarios conventionally defined by melodramatic aesthetics. Importantly, for Berlant’s ongoing concerns with sentimentalised cultural forms, this expressive reticence “forces into the foreground the problem of understanding the mediations of affect historically”, because, she argues, “it induces and refers to a general atmosphere of non-transparency, heterogeneous causality, and withheld or uneven accessibility” (Berlant 2015: this issue). Berlant reads the aesthetic registers of the work of this generation of artists, writers, performers and filmmakers as “a kind of casualization of emotion” (this issue), pointing either to “something stuck, neutral, or withheld in relationality” (this issue). As she puts it, there is “a space of recessive action [that] can be a defense and a scene of appeal for help in shifting the way things are ... it can involve a performative insistence that the connective encounter is unfinished...” (this issue). Flatness, for Berlant, is a structure of “unfeeling” that belongs to a historical archive, pointing “back prior to the twentieth century European and American modernists with whom it is usually associated: from Gertrude Stein and Buster Keaton to Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock” (this issue), and taking its current shape across a long list of associated styles and moods in cinema, literature, art and installation video which “stage a crisis in the register of making any claim on the world—political or intimate—as such” (this issue). The aesthetic mood running across this work speaks to the problem of how to apprehend and respond to the affective genres organising our current situation and its multiple historical derivations. In short, Berlant suggests, our sense of the current moment might be summed up as: “we no longer know it when we feel it” (this issue).

But how can we, as critics, read “styles of underperformed emotion, flat affect and diffused yet animated gesture” (this issue), or make claims about a performance characterised not by an aesthetic of expression, but by a “reticent aesthetic” (this issue)? As Berlant puts it: “underperformativity, a scene of flat or flattened affect performing its recession from melodramatic norms, foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading” (this issue). For Berlant, as for Raymond Williams (1977), these “hovering atmospheres” are “sensed rather than known or enacted ... beneath the surface of explicit life ... held but inexplicit knowledge” (this issue). If the present “becomes historical” through the surfacing of affective disturbance, how might we understand Swinton’s performance of flat affect as

¹⁹ I offer this account of Berlant’s article in this issue for those reading my article outside the context of the special issue on Berlant’s work to which it belongs.

belonging to the historical present? What exactly are we “reading” here—is it her performance style, her connections with other characters, her placement within the *mise-en-scène*, or her status as a point of identification or its absence? As Berlant puts it, this raises the question of “how we might resist the methodological pressure not to overread the body that’s unforthcoming” (this issue)? How can we read something that is distinctive by its absence? We risk reading into instead of out of, reading in a way that is just too paranoid, as Sedgwick Kosofsky (1997) famously cautioned.

Flatness cannot be straightforwardly understood as the opposite of affective presence or fullness, as Berlant’s conceptual elaborations make clear. To claim that flat affect is the reverse of emotional intensity, of infectious feelings or of palpable sensations, would miss the ways in which the flatness refers to the expectations designated by previous histories of generic conventions. Thus, if affect is that which registers on the body and shows us we are subject to others and they to us, as a sense of something that makes us feel present to each other, then flat affect is the absence of such a sensual registering, where convention has led us to anticipate its presence. Flat affect is a kind of mood whose contours are drawn through the normative valuing of emotional expressivity, especially in its feminised forms in which love and pathos, for example, are privileged over aggression and violence. In other words, it always registers comparatively. To write of flattened affect is to capture something vital about the fullness of muted moments and about the sensation of numbness. Played against the generic grain of feminine expressivity, flattened affect resonates not so much as repressed emotion or restrained feeling but as an unavailability within the aesthetic norms of dialogical exchange.

III

So what is it about Swinton’s persona in particular that makes her so apparently well tuned to an association with this particular “hovering atmosphere” (Berlant 2015: this issue)? Swinton’s performances of flat affect have produced a broad but distinctive repertoire of styles of screen presence where expressiveness would have been the conventional generic expectation. Swinton’s refusal of anticipated feminine affect sometimes works to ironic and comic effect: her posthuman functional seductions in *Teknolust*; her “cold-bitch” wife and lover in *Burn After Reading* (Coen and Coen 2008). At other times, the absence of an appropriate sense of compassion or responsiveness to others contradicts femininity’s more conventional empathetic promise: her distracted, unresponsive mother in the face of her son’s difficulties in *Thumbsucker* (Mills 2005); her emotional detachment as a sign of the problem and its traumatic consequences in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Ramsay 2011); and her absurd insensitivity to the pain of exploitation of the lower-class workers in *Snowpiercer* (Bong 2013). And, importantly, Swinton’s flatness is often achieved relationally, by delegating feelings to others (Berlant 2015: this issue),²⁰ as in *Female Perversions* (Streitfeld 1996) where her efforts to maintain the self-control of a successful professional are locked into a dynamic with her kleptomaniac sister who repeatedly falls apart both privately and publicly.

Swinton has also turned flattened affect into something of a quality with which her own reputation as a style icon has become associated, the most striking example being her exquisitely poised maternal control matching the *mise-en-scène* of opulent formality and bourgeois precision at the opening birthday lunch for the family patriarch in *I Am Love* (Guardagnino 2009), or “the blonde” who becomes the enigmatic sign of feminine stylishness, randomly appearing and disappearing in

²⁰ Berlant is referring here to Slavoj Žižek’s notion of “interpassivity”: (Berlant 2015: this issue). For an account of “the interpassive subject”, see Žižek (n.d.), <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-interpassive-subject/> (accessed 9 September 2014).

The Limits of Control (Jarmusch 2009). Swinton even brings a luscious stylishness to the moment of affectless embodiment as the corpse in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson 2014).²¹

If many of Swinton’s flattened performances produce an apparent lack of conventionally feminine empathy, in *The Deep End* (McGehee and Siegel 2001), her maternal devotion to her son, Beau, is articulated as an extended capacity to contain the intensities of a series of melodramatic events with serious consequences. Here Swinton both enacts the self-sacrifice expected of the protagonist of the 1940s and 1950s maternal melodrama and reinvents her through flattened atmospheres in tension with our generic expectations. Some of this tension is introduced through the Noir-ish elements, which combine with melodrama in Joan Bennett’s performance of the mother in the original upon which this film is based, *The Reckless Moment* (Orphüls 1949). Extending Bennett’s styles of maternal restraint into a performance of affective containment, *The Deep End* builds its narrative tension around the intensity of watching Swinton’s withheld or interrupted reactivity: the more unforthcoming she is to those around her, the more we read the poignancy of her flat affect.

I focus briefly on this aspect of the film here to elaborate how this set of shifts is enacted in one of Swinton’s most sustained and accomplished performances of flattened affect. In *The Deep End*, flattening becomes the protective absorptions of a wife and mother (Margaret Hall) on behalf of her family. These loyalties deepen to match the film’s title, which also names the gay night-club in Reno where her son’s under-age drinking and “lowlife” homosexual liaison begin, leading subsequently to violence, manslaughter and blackmail. With two other children, a live-in father-in-law and an absent husband, the costs of her self-sacrifice barely register through legible signs of emotional expression at first. We speculate about her inner processes, looking into her fixed, almost blank, facial expressions in the many lingering shots of her waiting, thinking, wondering and sometimes remembering: as she sits on the edge of the lake anticipating her son’s return; as she hesitates before deleting an email sharing her concerns with her husband; as she looks out over the lake in the early morning before discovering the body of her son’s dead lover (Darby Reese) at the water’s edge; or as she lies in bed wondering how to get the money for the blackmailers. Once the cover-up of manslaughter and blackmail has begun, her flatness registers with increasing poignancy, especially in the reaction shots of her silence when her family quizzes her about her absence following her disposal of Reese’s dead body. Not making her anxiety or her son’s secrets legible to others around her as they go about their domestic tasks and routines (her young son washing out his fish tank, her father-in-law cleaning his teeth) is both her burden and her triumph, as the mistress of flat affect attempts to master the flow and sequence of the narrative events, alone and against all the odds. The only one who understands her dilemmas is Alec Spera (Goran Višnjić), one of the blackmailers, with whom she becomes increasingly intimate, as she draws him into her everyday domestic world of care, which eventually wins out over low-life corruption and crime.

Spectatorship hovers on the edge of its conventional pleasures: we share Margaret’s narrative knowledge and point-of-view, and yet are refused and yet refusing the satisfaction of her emotional legibility, as her interiority remains largely enigmatic. At regular intervals, the accumulation of her affect achieves brief expression but these moments are either interrupted or superseded. The female protagonist of a narrative whose familiar maternal self-sacrifice and pathos hold us in anticipation of shared emotional intensities, Swinton’s performance borrows from her styles of unavailability, associated with her previous work with independent film makers, such as Jarman and Potter. The *mise-en-scène* is dominated by the colour blue: the moonlight on

²¹ In her important study of the body of the dead woman in the history of art (1992), Bronfen argues that the female corpse always signifies more than itself, carrying the weight of unconscious associations between femininity, otherness and death.

the lake; Beau's bedroom décor; his lover's sports car; underwater shots at the pool; the background scenery in her daughter's performance of *Swan Lake*; the painted wooden tiles on the outside of the house in the closing shots. Swinton's followers cannot but be reminded of her participation in Jarman's (1993) film *Blue*.²² Anticipating her later performance of maternal dissociation in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Swinton's refusal to be defeated by a rejecting son registers less as articulated rage and more as persistent demonstrations of practical loyalty.²³

The flat blue surface of the lake, on whose shores the family lives and at the bottom of which the dead homosexual lover's body is found, echo Swinton's own enduring capacity for flatness. But the surface is also the key to duplicity here, as the image proves increasingly unreliable: shots of natural beauty at the lakeside are haunted by the violence hidden deep within it; scenes of domestic harmony pull against the strain of the repressions they necessitate; and the illegibility of the mother's face hides incommensurate desires and demands. And in classic Noir style, images of reflecting surfaces and hidden depths pervade throughout; Swinton is framed in windows and doors that trap and contain her, and her image is refracted in mirrors and glass surfaces that capture her growing sense of duplicity. If we clutch at the flickers of momentary transparency that indicate anger, frustration, urgency and even desire, these only briefly intrude upon a performance of maternal containment and deception intent on its purpose. The film's title promises a depth that swiftly becomes a deceit once the corpse has been concealed at the bottom of the lake; as we anticipate its discovery, we are also drawn into a sense of depth behind Swinton's affective containments. Reading and misreading surfaces produces our curiosity: we know what is hidden in the lake but not in the heart of the protagonist. The *mise-en-scène* promises the revelation of hidden desires as Swinton covers the tracks for those around her. It is not that the aesthetic of the entire narrative is pervaded by flatness but rather that Swinton's exceptional delivery of this underperformed maternal femininity brings its historical counterpart into the frame, as she inhabits and then moves firmly away from its conventions. Containing the pathos of the melodrama through the Noir intrigue, Swinton becomes the embodiment of how surfaces generate the desire for hidden depths.

In many ways loyal to the original, whose combination of Noir and melodrama also played the tension between restraint and expression through the maternal figure, *The Deep End* extends this dynamic by lingering on and intensifying Swinton's performance of containment as an act of maternal protectiveness. For Kenneth Turan (2004), Swinton as Margaret keeping everything "under tight control" is the film's greatest asset: "if you're going to reinvent melodrama for modern times, there's no one you'd rather have on your side". As Turan argues, Swinton's performance is both "emotion-less and emotion-laden" (26). Here we feel Swinton stretching in both directions, back into the iconic repertoire of late-1940s maternal melodrama and yet holding us in the temporality of the historical present, as she reconfigures its aesthetic conventions in dialogue with these previous modes.

Whilst *The Deep End* offers us a focus for Swinton's management of genres of feminine affect across the whole narrative, her performance of flatness is more often present in *scenarios* in which she steps out of the rules of heterosexual engagement. These moments are organised around the disruption of conventional generic encounters: the ruthless betrayal of a betrothed, in the match that (Orlando announces directly to camera) "would never have worked" in *Orlando* (Potter 1992); the heterosexual pick-up moment in which "Joyce the scientist" (Swinton plays two characters called Joyce in the film) is more engaged by her newspaper than by a stranger's chat-up lines in *Possible Worlds* (Lepage 2000); the "beginning of the affair" moment in which Swinton announces the strict rules upon which it may proceed

²² For a discussion of how the past might be heard in the present through the sonic in *Blue*, see Khalip (2010).

²³ For an interesting analysis of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as a contemporary reworking of the maternal melodrama, see Thornham (2013).

(“never to look at me during the day, always part before sunrise, and never say ‘I love you’”) in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Fincher 2008); and the “post-coital” moment of instruction for her lover (George Clooney) to divorce his wife (Elizabeth Marvel)—“I have made myself loud and clear”—in *Burn After Reading*. Whilst the style and mood of these films vary considerably, as does their placement on the popular-independent cinema axis along which Swinton has travelled increasingly easily, these scenarios are distinguished by her delivery of a flattened affect that parodies the generic organisation of heterosexual scenarios.

One example, organised around precisely how the scenario is governed by gendered affective convention, is Swinton’s performance of Karen Crowder in *Michael Clayton* (Gilroy 2007). Here, rehearsed control of affective register is a desired mode to enable a professional woman to cross over and hold her own in a conventionally masculine sphere. In her first appearance in the film, the problem with having too much affect is combined with a brief and enigmatic introduction to her character. Sandwiched between the final line of the introductory scene (“where the fuck is Karen Crowder?”) and the voices of the (possibly Chinese) gamblers whom we have yet to see which open the following scene, Swinton inhabits the enclosed space of a small washroom (that space so often associated with the disturbance of a desired privacy). Less than thirty seconds long, these scenes establish Swinton’s character through a series of unanswered questions: who is she; why has she locked herself in the washroom; why is her breath heavy, almost panting; what has caused the large amount of sweat staining the underarms of her tidy pink blouse (sex perhaps, or, increasingly likely, some kind of panic attack?); why is the tap running; how is she going to (re-)enter the workspace where her absence has been noted; why is she so necessary to the group assembling there at this moment? Swinton almost swoons against the washroom wall, registering the visible traces of her unfeminine sweating by touching her skin inside her blouse. As the water continues to pour down the drain in the sink, and she fails to compose herself sufficiently to exit, there is a cut to a close-up shot of valuables in baskets, held safe for the poker players in the following scene.

Two versions of affectless masculine exchange bookend Swinton’s struggle to control her body’s excessive responses: the head of the assembling corporate meeting trumps the mock-reading of his next move by the female journalist on the cell phone, playing that back against her with his own superior knowledge of her newspaper’s deadline; and the men around the poker table play a game which champions inscrutability. Between masculine corporate authority and poker-faced risk and adventure, we see physical signs of strain undoing the professional woman, even as she is named as the missing link. Betrayed by the legibility of her body—the sweat-drenched armpit both a marker of feminine leakage and of masculine profusion—it is the stain of the sweat that threatens to expose her unsuitability for a place at the table with the men.²⁴ If Roland Barthes’ (1973) claim that sweat in film is a sign of “moral feeling”, evidence on the screen that “everyone is debating something with himself” (p. 27), belongs to a very different cinematic moment,²⁵ it is no less apposite here, for Karen Crowder, as we see later, needs to convince herself (especially her body it seems) of her own convictions. The power play of reading and being read, and of convincing others of your readings over theirs, is the name of the game in this film. Two markers of otherness here (the excessive woman, the inscrutable Chinese gamblers) establish the narrative problem of holding your nerve, and of containing your affect. As it turns out—lives depend on it.

²⁴ On the femininity of the leaky body, see Shildrik (1997).

²⁵ Roland Barthes is writing about sweat in *Julius Caesar* (Makiewicz 1953); to give the full quotation: “evidently sweat here is an attribute with a purpose... sweat is a sign. Of what? Of moral feeling? Everyone is sweating because everyone is debating something with himself” (1973, p. 27).

The next scene in which Swinton appears, now much deeper into the controversial corporate law suit narrative that has now been established, cuts between a media interview about her new position within the company defending the corporation and her private rehearsal of her answers alone at home as she prepares for the day ahead. Aligning the right register of affect in her facial expressions, voice and breath (brief but sincere smiles and short but heartfelt moments of warmth) is the task that needs repeated rehearsal here. These practised expressions of authenticity are almost but not quite audio-matched to the visual cuts to the filmed interview at work, but their repetition and slight misfire on the cut reiterates her over-investment in getting her performance of herself correct in front of the camera. This staging of rehearsed approximation puts a strain on the achievement of the required feminine poise that is so clearly her goal. In other words, Karen Crowder badly needs less affect and, above all, more control over its appropriate bodily display. Unlike her masculine counterpart, Michael Clayton (George Clooney), whose power and knowledge match his exceptional capacity for self-control, Swinton's affective presence on the screen is repeatedly tested. Working in opposition to Clayton's enviable composure, Swinton's performance is underscored by her off-screen reputation for just such a quality.

This editing between scenes of public and private versions of Karen Crowder's affective delivery is repeated in reverse in the scene of her final speech defending her corrupt corporate client at the formal hearing towards the end of the film. In this scene, the voice-over of her compellingly delivered case is the audio constant, as we cut between the hearing itself and shots of her, again at home in her bedroom alone, dressing for her important day at work. This repetition opens up the possibility for the spectator to fill the gap and imagine the necessary rehearsals that preceded such a polished performance. The insincerity introduced by this audio-visual reversed rhyming only underlines what the narrative has already revealed to be her murderously ruthless ambition and desire for success. But more important than the confirmation of this narrative strand is the contrast we are about to experience between Swinton's achievement of persuasive composure in the legal hearing, and her loss of it when Clayton reappears (having been presumed dead) to trump her with a final one-upmanship that leads to her undoing. Thus, the power struggles over controlling affect become the film's register for a battle between truth and lies and between corruption and injustice. Swinton's undoing here puts pressure on her previous mastery of affect, halting the assumed match between affective control and winning the game (a performance for which she was awarded the 2008 Oscar for Best Supporting Actress).

My discussion in this section has focused on how, by embodying a muted affective aesthetic or by rehearsing the production of its register in the face and on the body, Swinton places centre stage the history of cinematic femininity as a cluster of stylised conventions, as something which has to keep being made up, worked on, approximated, achieved and reinvented. In her work discussed so far, Swinton's performance of flatness is played as a marker of her intimate knowledge of its opposites: she both embodies those femininities and signifies the imaginative spaces beyond them. Recasting the maternal melodrama in *The Deep End* or the female corporate villain in *Michael Clayton*, Swinton has been closely associated with unknotting the tie between femininity and genres of emotional presence and legibility. It as if she is trying something on, which could fit, and which would look great on her if she wore it, but, as in the organising gesture of *The Impossible Wardrobe*, she holds outfits up against herself as she shows their finery to the audience, but she does not have to wear the clothes themselves for us to enjoy the pleasures and recognise the associated gestures: as if a

fashion show, and as if a model, she appears at one remove from us and yet is intensely physically present.²⁶

IV

Having tracked some of Swinton’s styles of underperformed feminine sentimentality, in the rest of this article I turn to a discussion of how affect is flattened through her repertoire of gender shifting, which has come to function citationally with reference to its own history. This aspect of Swinton’s work belongs to the generational mood described so astutely by Berlant, speaking directly to feminist and queer concerns to dislocate gendered normativities. Whether in the gender switching that she has continued to mobilise since *Orlando* (for example, as Gabriel in *Constantine* (Lawrence 2005), and with David Bowie in his music video *The Stars (Are Out Tonight)* [2013]) or in her off-screen androgynous appearances as style icon and fashion model (for example, as the face of the Pringle of Scotland menswear line and in Tim Walker’s 2011 photographs discussed below), Swinton’s persona has become associated with her love of crossing conventionalised gendered boundaries.²⁷

One obvious question is whether Swinton’s flat affect comes with the territory of what she borrows from masculinity, since it is so easy to think of male actors who have perfected the underperformance of emotional registers in the history of cinema (Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Cary Grant, Marlon Brando, James Dean). Flat affect could simply be read as merely a “masculine masquerade”. But this misses the continuing presence of femininity in Swinton’s embodiment of flatness; for even when she cross-dresses in *Orlando*, as Gabriel in *Constantine* and in Walker’s photographs, only a partial passing is intended. What we are presented with is a woman expertly crossing conventionalised genres of gender, not one seeking to be read “as a man”, but one with a familiarity of, and identification with, masculinity and the subtleties of its embodied gestures and affects. Passing, a much-debated intentionality in the history of literary and cinematic narrative, is not quite the appropriate frame for what Swinton does with gendered flatness.²⁸ Hers is more a “female masculinity” (Halberstam 1998) with an imaginative mobility than a desire to be read as having made gender settle somewhere. If we were to argue that “Tilda Swinton” is passing, what do we think she would be passing *as* exactly, apart from another version of herself?

To read a consolidated masculinity out of the flat affect of a figure whose endless self-inventions have been compared to those of a “chameleon” is to overlook the dialogue with *femininity as genre* Swinton continues to deliver at these moments.²⁹ But unlike the animal,

²⁶ “The Impossible Wardrobe” (29 September–1 October 2012) was a performance piece, organised by the director of Musée Galliera Olivier Saillard and presented at Palais de Tokyo in the context of *Festival d’Automne à Paris*. In this piece, Tilda Swinton wore a plain robe and white gloves and walked on the runway, holding up articles of clothing from the historic archives of the Galliera, which, due to the rules of conservation, can never be worn. The clothes she displayed to the audience through gesture and movement included the following: a coat with military filigree, which belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte, and a Paco Rabanne chain-mail mini-dress once worn by Brigitte Bardot. For further details, see: <https://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exhibition/performances/olivier-saillard-tilda-swinton>.

²⁷ For a discussion of Swinton in the context of subversive beauty ideals in contemporary fashion, see Mackinney-Valentin (2013).

²⁸ Whereas cross-dressing may or may not be read as carrying the intention of gender disguise, passing has referred to the desire to be read in ways that contradict one’s biological designation of one of two “sexes”; for the problem with this kind of distinction between sex and gender, see Butler (1990) and on passing, see Butler (1993).

²⁹ This is one of the most common terms to describe Swinton’s mutating styles; see for example, <http://perezhillon.com/cocoperez/2011-05-19-tilda-swinton-for-pringle-of-scotland-fall-2011-ad> and <http://www.bbook.com/tilda-swintons-reign> (accessed 17 October 2014).

which adapts to the tones and textures of its environment, Swinton almost effects the reverse: standing to one side of the generic contexts of her production, she draws them towards her only to formalise their conventionality through her shifting embodiments of them. It is not that our sense of her *inessentialism* is produced through her mutational adaptation to her surroundings; rather, her capacity to generate yet another incarnation of herself pushes against the claims of generic imperatives to speak the eternal truth of gender.

Swinton's embodiments of gender as affective genre have a long history³⁰: before her well-known performance of Orlando in 1992, she explored the androgyny of creative genius as Mozart in 1989, and, in one of her earliest theatrical appearances, she performed over a dozen different characters (both male and female) in the monologue *Man to Man* (text by Manfred Karge) in 1987.³¹ As the widow who experiences fifty years of German history by assuming her deceased husband's identity in Weimar Germany,³² Swinton's cross-dressing does not seek to deceive the audience through disguise, but rather, is an embodiment of the nuances of how the difference gender is imagined to make registers as a presence in a performance.³³ Potter has claimed that it was Swinton's capacity to switch between male and female characters (especially her "profound subtlety in taking on male body language") that inspired their collaboration on her film *Orlando*.³⁴ Written and directed by Potter, adapted from Virginia Woolf's 1928 *Orlando: A Biography* written for Vita Sackville-West, the film is built around Swinton's exceptional capacity to turn gender fluctuation into a simultaneity. For Swinton, the aim here was "not to examine an occluded gender, but the idea of limitlessness through immortality" (Swinton in West and West 1993, p. 18).³⁵ Staged as a series of exquisite tableaux encounters, the film moves from 1600 to the "present day" with a self-referencing formality that extends Orlando's switch from male to female to the arbitrariness of the rules and rituals that have given gender its history.³⁶ Produced in the style of a series of still life paintings that seem to have been given cinematic licence to move, the symmetry and poise of the luscious *mise-en-scène* throughout the film produce an aesthetic of affective detachment amidst sensual opulence. One is at once both thrilled and dispassionate.

Anachronistic from the start, Orlando's temporal drag turns the conventionality of how "sex" becomes "gender" into a given. As gender shifts without apparent significance but with full material implications, sexual desires proliferate beyond the usual dualisms. If the opening voice-over introduces the hesitant Orlando through a gender performative, "He—for there can be no doubt of his sex, despite the feminine appearance that every young man of the time aspires to...", it is followed by more extravagant impersonations, as Elizabeth I's arrival by boat at her evening court is accompanied by Jimmy Somerville's castrato performance praising Quentin Crisp as the fair Queen of England. The flow of ambiguities across these three figures stages gender as a series of queer impostures: Swinton as a woman playing a young nervous, boyish aspiring poet; Somerville as a lavishly adorned soprano (immediately recognisable in

³⁰ See her interview with West and West (1993).

³¹ *Man to man* was personae include a "smooth-talking would-be Clark Gable or a coquettish Snow White lookalike nicknamed Püppchen", *ICA*, <https://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/man-man> (accessed 12 August 2014).

³² *Ibid*.

³³ Written by East German dramatist Manfred Karge, *Man to Man* was premiered by Traverse Theatre at the Edinburgh Festival in 1987 and moved to the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1988 and was adapted in 1992 as a film by John Maybury (who had worked with Swinton and Jarman previously).

³⁴ *ICA* website, para. 3, <https://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/man-man> (accessed 12 August 2014).

³⁵ For archival documents related to the adaptation, production and reception of Potter's *Orlando*, see Sp-ark: *The Sally Potter Archive*, <http://www.sp-ark.org/index.php> (accessed 22 August 2014).

³⁶ For critical debates on the film, see Ciecko (1998), Degli-Esposti (1996), Fowler (2009), Imre (2003), Mayer (2009) and Pidduck (1997); for a discussion of how the music, also composed by Potter, generates ambiguity, see Martin (2011); and for an interview with Potter which situates *Orlando* in the wider context of her work, see Ehrenstein and Potter (1993).

Fig. 5 Orlando (Tilda Swinton) and Sasha (Charlotte Valandrey) in the film *Orlando*. Photo by Liam Longman © Adventure Pictures Ltd

the early 1990s as the gay lead singer of Bronski Beat); Crisp, famous as cross-dressing gay icon in the decades following the publication of his memoir *The Naked Civil Servant* in 1968, is in full regalia as the all-powerful but ageing female colonial Monarch. When Orlando is named Queen Elizabeth’s “mascot” with the gift of a garter, attached to his young leg by her own fair hands, and when she later summons him to her bed to tuck into it a royal property bequest, on condition he should not “fade”, “wither” or “grow old”, the bedroom etiquette between the chosen boy and the “old Queen” parodies norms of gendered conduct, amplifying sexual connotations across these aestheticised encounters. The monarch’s prerogative to invite intimate touching between youth and age is framed within the luscious glow of the royal bed.

These early scenes establish the film’s preoccupations with the historical claims that have put gender and sexual identifications in place. Swinton’s performance of flatness mixes a masculine sense of entitlement with English acquisitiveness, as Orlando’s seduction of the visiting Russian “Princess Sasha” (Charlotte Valandrey) proves to be a quest for love that fully expects to be fulfilled (see Fig. 5). As the episodic structure moves across several centuries, tracing Englishness through colonialism, modernity and masculine adventure narratives, “he” becomes “she” and the pastiche of convention is rehearsed in reverse (see Fig. 6). As “Lady Orlando”, Swinton embodies the requirements of the age with formal precision, until she can’t breathe anymore and runs through the maze of time in search of “liberty” and “love”. In Swinton’s performance of more than one but less than two genders, she faces the limits and frustrations of the one when she inhabits the other, establishing not only the conventionality of how “to do gender” but also the necessary imbrication of femininity within masculinity, and vice versa, in its fantasy and material formations. The flatness of her performance, which pervades the reflexive stylisation of the film’s diegesis, extends into Swinton’s particular capacity to embody both Orlandos as forms of gender impersonation, or as Swinton has put it: “We are dealing with a state of grace ... I am trying to fight off the term androgyny ... it’s just a state of limitlessness, so that Orlando at every stage is both and neither” (in West and West 1993, p. 20). Playing gender clichés through the architectures of framing and *mise-en-scène*, Swinton’s crossing over here turns the temporality of gender into a formal question of aesthetic presence.

As Swinton’s comment exemplifies, the insufficiency of vocabulary here is striking. If *trans* as a term seems etymologically to capture Swinton’s trademark “crossing over”, its implied intentional passing misses the mark. *Gamine* suggests an attractively boyish urchin but the waif-like vulnerability of Audrey Hepburn (the classic gamine figure in cinema) would understate Swinton’s self-possession. *Drag* refers to the cross-dressing in question but

Fig. 6 Orlando (Tilda Swinton) in the film *Orlando*. Photo by Liam Longman © Adventure Pictures Ltd

Swinton's manly gestures and movements do not extend to other physiological markers of masculinity, such as facial hair or visible muscles. *Queer* allegiances and affiliations in all kinds of directions³⁷ have made Swinton an emblem of queer cultures. As B. Ruby Rich (2013) puts it in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*: "The great Tilda Swinton ... her presence limns the New Queer Cinema's evolution all the way back to her performances with and for Derek Jarman and her incarnation as Orlando, and on through her gender-transgressive roles" (xii). But to read Swinton's transgressions as *queer*, or even *genderqueer*, only begins to capture her specifically self-stylised boyish femininity that crosses in and out of queer cultures.

The concept of *tomboy* captures something of the youthfulness of Swinton's style but its gender in-betweenness is marked by a discourse structured by the normative narrative closures of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004): the tomboy is always designated a "passing phase" on the treacherous path to mature femininity (as Freud [1993] put it, and as Potter's *Orlando* parodies). As Robbie Duschinsky (2015 [forthcoming]) argues of "Laure" (Zoé Héran), the protagonist of the film *Tomboy* (Sciamma 2011), her "use of masculine signifiers to circumvent gender exclusion is not perceived as problematic when understood as childhood play, as not yet speaking of the inner truth of the subject's sexual and gender identity" (forthcoming).³⁸ The tomboy can be the one who "raids some of the signifiers of dominant masculinity" prior to the imperatives of compulsory heterosexuality, according to Duschinsky, but it frames the subject within a discourse of childhood innocence (forthcoming). Contra James Kincaid (1992) on childhood innocence as a "hollowing out" or "purifying" process that enables children to be presented as "empty slate[s]" and thus as "candidates for being filled with, amongst other things, desire", making them "not any the less erotic but more" (175), Duschinsky claims that blankness is "unmarked training in heteronormativity, alongside class and race norms" (in press). The effect of "unmarked training" might be considered in relation to Swinton, and is perhaps most pertinent to her youthful versions of Orlando as the site for the projections of the desires of others; but to read Swinton the tomboy as an "empty slate", inviting adult projections, is to ignore how her embodiments of flatness are encoded as a stylish and desirable knowingness about how to do and undo masculinity and femininity, whose ingenuity is itself to be admired.

³⁷ For example, Swinton's protest in Russia in 2013 against legal discrimination against lesbian and gay relationships. A much-circulated photograph taken on 4 July 2013 can be seen at *The Advocate*, <http://www.advocate.com/politics/2013/07/06/actress-tilda-swinton-poses-rainbow-flag-front-moscow-kremlin> (accessed 12 August 2014).

³⁸ Duschinsky, forthcoming in *Diogenes*.

Androgyny is one of the most widely used terms to describe Swinton. Given how deeply unfashionable androgyny as a sign of retro-feminism had become by the end of the 1980s, her continued celebration as androgynous style icon might seem surprising. But instead of relegating her to a rather outmoded bygone era of sexual politics, Swinton’s gender ambiguities have worked as part of her “alien” capacity to scramble time, or, it is often claimed, to transcend it. Swinton’s embodiment of flat affect belongs to a particular quality of her persona widely recognised by critics and audiences alike—her “otherworldliness”. In her own expressions of affinity with Bowie, she employs such analogies. For example, in her ‘Dear Dave’ speech opening the “David Bowie Is” exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), Swinton addresses him directly: “The reliable mortal amongst immortal shapes you have thrown. The freak as the great unifier, the alien as the best company.” And she continues: “I was a freak like you and even looked a little like you ... Gingery, boney pinkey whitey person with the liquid mercury collar bone on the cover of *Aladdin Sane*. Young moonage daydreamer, planetary kin, a close imaginary cousin, a companion of choice” (Swinton 2013).³⁹ This identification with Bowie’s androgynous body as an alien presence is one that places their shared undoing of gender and sexual conventionalities firmly in the realm of the otherworldly.

Similarly, in interviews and press coverage, directors and audiences alike refer to this quality:

With her vividly otherworldly and almost extra-terrestrial screen presence, Swinton is perfectly cast in this elegant, if over-determined and slightly desiccated piece of cinema. (Bradshaw 2010)⁴⁰

There’s something about Tilda—enigmatic, androgynous, ethereal, and alien in the best way—we can’t seem to quite put our finger on it, nor get enough of it.

(Black Book review of *The Maybe*)⁴¹

At the Oscar ceremony she appeared brazenly pasty, unsustained by rouge and bronzer, a white waif in an ocean of spray-tanned limbs and bobbing plastic torsos. Her asymmetrical dress exposed an ivory arm. ... On television, she looked like a fabulous alien. In person, people must have stopped and stared’ (Alex Kuczynski, 2008 *New York Times*, Style Magazine, p. 88, quoted in Jan M. Broekman, 2009 p. 52)⁴²

Designer Zac Posen: Swinton “has an elegant, alien-like quality.” (Lee 2013, para. 3) *Snowpiercer* director Bong Joon-Ho: “Perhaps you’re an alien who landed in Scotland ... not just a regular alien, but a guardian angel.” (Lee 2013)⁴³

As these comments and reviews demonstrate, it is Swinton’s capacity to cross over between human and extra-terrestrial qualities, to bring the one into the other, and to move the one in and out of the other, that make her so compelling. Swinton’s much commented-upon quality of not appearing fully human is exemplified in Gabriel in *Constantine*, as the White Witch in the *Narnia* films (2005–2010), as vampire lover in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jarmusch 2013) and as the corpse of Madame D in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. In these examples, the whiteness of Swinton’s flesh seems to resist the imprint of time, as angel, witch, vampire and corpse (and, of course, clone in *Teknolust*) imply a recession from the historical into the celestial, the magical, the eternal and the deathly sublime. The paleness of her whiteness suggests a vitality sourced from elsewhere. Her

³⁹ For Swinton’s speech at the V&A, see <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/b/blog/va-network/tilda-swintons-dinner-speech-opening-david-bowie?sf10717152=1>> (last accessed 17 October 2014).

⁴⁰ Para 1 <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/apr/08/i-am-love-review>.

⁴¹ <http://www.bbook.com/unique-creatures-tilda-swinton-sleeping-beauty-otherworldly-actor-loving-activist/> 14/03/14 accessed.

⁴² Jan M. Broekman (2009) Face to face. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 22(1), 45–49.

⁴³ Para 5 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tilda-swinton-honored-by-nycs-653772>.

flatness may contain potency (clairvoyant insight, pure evil, gothic charm, immortal love, eternal beauty) but it also signifies a lack of fully human connection and its consequent heterosexual imperative of 'reproductive futurism' (Edelman 2004).

This sense of Swinton's otherworldliness brings the strangeness of time into the frame, as she somehow embodies the "more than": she is more than human, more than worldly, more than female; and she appears to belong to more than the present. Repeatedly designated the transcendent one, the realisation of utopian potential or belonging to another time and place (in a "slightly desiccated piece of cinema"), Swinton is read as somehow beyond conventional human temporal registers. She is the one who is on her way to, or has just arrived from, somewhere else. In short, she always seems more than herself, a beyond-the-self-ness that usually belongs to others.

Both alien and guardian angel, Swinton's ethereal screen presence appears to unfix time or place her beyond human temporal registers. She makes the present feel historical by charging it with an embodiment of gender that holds the lost promise of androgyny and yet reanimates it with the pleasures of potentiality and transformation: her endless reinvention of herself—that sense of her capacity to return—crosses not only gendered boundaries but also drags the past into the present with a knowingness that reanimates it *as* the present. Not transcending time, as some of these critical vocabularies might suggest, as much as making it present, Swinton's otherworldly femininities bring the history of its conventionality into the frame. And, just as Jarman's work made History strangely present, so Swinton congeals History so intensely in an image (and *as* image) that it appears otherworldly, as she gives it a tangible aesthetic presence.

If gender is a fabrication, is androgyny a temporal drag on the genres of "femininity as intensified affect" that no longer deliver their promise? Read in this way, the datedness of androgyny becomes a resource for the ways in which Swinton's persona pulls on incarnations of the past. Androgyny has the double signification of having both masculine and feminine characteristics and having neither—being able to make "the difference" appear and disappear—but it is also a term with its own specific history, as Lisa Rado argues in relation to debates about Virginia Woolf's discussion of creativity and the androgynous imagination in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which she wrote just before *Orlando* (Berlant 2015: this issue). At the time Woolf was writing of how both masculine and feminine elements were vital to creativity (and of the "third sex" imagination), Rado argues, the Bloomsbury group of which she was a part would have been aware of the work of Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter claiming these as physiological, as well as psychological, qualities that would be particularly common in hermaphrodites and homosexuals (150). In this context, androgyny becomes a term not of universal transcendence or blending, but a sexual indeterminacy embedded in the particular imaginative landscapes of modernism and its legacies (Berlant 2015: this issue).

Naming her self-professed style icons as Claude Cahun⁴⁴ and David Bowie, Swinton places herself within a genealogy of androgynous figures. As she puts it in a magazine interview: "Cahun looked at the limitlessness of an androgynous gesture, which I've always been interested in" (Solway 2011).⁴⁵ In the portfolio of photographs of Swinton by Tim Walker, in *W* magazine in 2011, the "mood board" included Greta Garbo, Cahun and Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).⁴⁶ The series includes a number of stark photographs of an angular-faced Swinton, either apparently bald or with white greased-back hair. In the only

⁴⁴ Claude Cahun (1894–1954) was a French surrealist artist, photographer and writer known for her androgynous and cross-dressing self-stylisations.

⁴⁵ Para 4 <http://www.wmagazine.com/fashion/2011/08/tilda-swinton-cover-story-fashion#ixzz1SDXkhGm4> (accessed 29 July 2014).

⁴⁶ <http://www.wmagazine.com/people/celebrities/2010/08/tilda-swinton-tim-walker-cover-story-ss/photos/slide/all> (accessed 29 July 2014).

close-up, traces of a doubled hairline and facial contours turn her airbrushed look into a composite white mask, as Cahun is echoed in the minimalist contours of these androgynous figurations. The seeming indifference of fashion photography’s facial expressions turn gender into a surface self-invention, as something that might only go skin-deep.

Swinton’s more general capacity for self-invention, so often emptied out of its affective legibility, registers a confidence to self-signify that arguably draws on the cultural capital of patrician upbringing. With an aristocratic Anglo-Scottish background, boarding school and Cambridge University education, and a military family, Swinton’s association with emotional repression might be connected with a particular historical legacy. As she puts it, speaking of *Orlando*: “This is a very personal film for me... I have grown up witnessing in my three brothers the disparate sense of confusion about how to live in the world for oneself and not for the people who have been or are coming” (in West and West 1993, p. 21). The class inflections of Swinton’s temporal drag carry over into privilege and into her identification with the handsomeness of her father, a former military commander of the Queen’s Household Division. In one interview, she recalls her fascination with the paraphernalia of his various uniforms: “From childhood, I remember more about his black patent, gold livery, scarlet-striped legs, and medal ribbons than I do of my mother’s evening dresses... I would rather be handsome, as he is, for an hour than pretty for a week” (Solway 2011).⁴⁷ Read in this context, her tall, upright slenderness and often sharply defined couture evoke *handsome* as an apposite adjective to capture the transfer of this slightly dated patrician aspiration. Echoes of Swinton’s own handsome court couture as the young Orlando serving Queen Elizabeth I turn the temporal drag of courtly cross-dressing into a kinship affiliation of apparently timeless appeal. This is not to reduce Swinton’s capacity for underperforming affect to a mere extension of a privileged “habitus” ingrained from birth, but to indicate, as she herself does above, the match between this patrician training ground and some of the more bohemian manifestations of experimental flatness of which Berlant writes.

Integral to Swinton’s identification with Bowie is the paleness of her whiteness, made much of in both her film and modelling work: her chalky hues match her vampiric elegance in *Only Lovers Left Alive* and give her kimono-clad, dark silky-haired *femme fatale* in *Teknolust* an inscrutability that becomes a somewhat orientalist flatness. The combination of her whiteness with her thinness in a Tim Walker photograph series accompanying the article “Planet Tilda” in *W* (Solway 2011) invokes iconographies with a host of historical associations. In these photographs, Swinton’s pale face and swept-back blonde hair echo the look of Bowie’s “Thin White Duke” persona featured on the cover (and mentioned in the title track) of *Station to Station* released in 1976. Claiming that the Duke persona was one of “a would-be romantic with no emotion at all”,⁴⁸ Bowie embraced a particular retro-European sophistication: the stylised whiteness controversial for its perceived political resonances, the fetishised thinness (and sleeplessness) for its association with his high cocaine intake at the time. Photograph 2 in this series shows Swinton’s face in close-up as composite through which her airbrushed white skin and swept-back short blonde hair become part of its aesthetic of artificiality and assemblage; photograph 13 features Swinton in medium shot in an all-white tuxedo, with the same affectless gaze; and photograph 6 mixes black tux jacket with slit skirt to reveal Swinton’s gartered leg in a cabaret-style pose. Swinton’s (and Bowie’s) otherworldliness

⁴⁷ Para 7 <http://www.wmagazine.com/fashion/features/2011/08/tilda-swinton-cover-story-fashion/> (accessed 12 August, 2014).

⁴⁸ See O’Hagan (2013), <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/feb/16/david-bowie-guide-retrospective-show> (accessed 12 August 2014).

aestheticises their thin whiteness and vice versa.⁴⁹ A number of photographs in this series draw on cyborg iconographies to move Swinton's ambiguity and artificiality into a science fiction *mise-en-scène*, more associated with Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg 1976).⁵⁰ Running across these images is a characteristically flattened affect evident both in the traces of digital manipulation and in the homage to Bowie's repertoire of pastiche that draws a sense of the queered temporalities of past and future into the present.⁵¹

Claiming to have been "orbiting Bowie" ever since she saw *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Swinton's androgynous identifications with him have continued to circulate.⁵² In fact, a number of blogs currently claim that Bowie and Swinton are indeed the same person.⁵³ The temporal drag (Berlant 2015: this issue) of this gender flux was recently evident in her speech at the opening of the Bowie retrospective at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013, which not only played on their physical resemblance (slim, boyish, sculptured), but also on their capacity for self-fashioning and reinvention, including, importantly, as previous blended versions of themselves and each other, whom they meet in the music video *The Stars (Are Out Tonight)*. Her speech was a poetic letter to Bowie in which she writes:

*The image of that gingery boney pinky whitey person on the cover with the liquid mercury collar bone was—for one particular young moonage daydreamer—the image of planetary kin, of a close imaginary cousin and companion of choice (2013).*⁵⁴

Swinton's kinship with Bowie is reported to have begun at the age of 12 when she was "a square sort of kid in a Round Pond sort of childhood". This moment takes us back to the time of Bowie's album *Aladdin Sane* (1973), when androgyny had yet to become so fashionable, however briefly, for feminists.⁵⁵

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Androgyny, however, like all other concepts of gender and sexuality touched on here, fails to capture Swinton's modes of embodying flat affect. In concluding, I consider Swinton through

⁴⁹ In arguing that the flattened affect of whiteness can run counter to the normativities of women's expressivity, we should not overlook the moments in the history of narrative cinema in which this role is delegated by the white woman to her more "expressive" black counterpart. As Richard Dyer has noted in relation to *Jezebel* (William Wyler 1938), as the protagonist Julie (Bette Davis) learns behaviour appropriate to her position as a white woman, she "no longer expresses feeling, she 'lives' through Zette" her black maid (Theresa Harris) to whom the film delegates the physical articulation of her mistresses heightened emotions (1988, p. 58). See also Dyer (1997) and Berlant's chapter on *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) in *The Female Complaint* (2008, pp. 107–144).

⁵⁰ Bowie's associations with other worldliness can be traced through "Space Oddity" (1969), "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars" (1972) and "Scary Monsters and Supercreeps" (1980).

⁵¹ <http://www.wmagazine.com/people/celebrities/2010/08/tilda-swinton-tim-walker-cover-story-ss/photos/slide/2> (accessed 8 September 2014).

⁵² <http://www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com/2011/07/11/tilda-swinton-for-w-magazine-august-2011> (accessed 8 September 2014).

⁵³ For example: the "Tilda Stardust" blog entirely dedicated to the speculation: <http://tildastardust.tumblr.com/>; Hawking 2013 giving ten reasons why Bowie and Swinton are the same person: <http://flavorwire.com/373593/10-reasons-why-david-bowie-and-tilda-swinton-are-actually-the-same-person/>; and Yapater 2012 summarising the "Tilda Stardust" blog: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/conspiracy-are-tilda-swinton-and-david-bowie-the#n235w8> (accessed 22 August, 2014).

⁵⁴ Para 4 <http://www.wmagazine.com/fashion/features/2011/08/tilda-swinton-cover-story-fashion/> (accessed 12 August, 2014).

⁵⁵ For feminist debates about androgyny, see Heilbrun (1973), Rado (1997) and Kaivola (1999). See also a special issue of *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal* on androgyny (1974), (2)2: 139–271.

the more general concept “off-gender”, borrowed from Svetlana Boym’s reading of the “off-modern”. As Boym elaborates:

“Off modern” is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. ...

The off-modern project ... is a performance-in-progress, a rehearsal of possible forms and common places... It explores interstices, disjunctures, and gaps in the present in order to co-create the future.

The “off” in “off modern” designates both the belonging to the critical project of modernity and its edgy excess. (2010, para. 2)

To be off-gender would be less the in-between-ness of androgyny and more the capacity to move across, to embody the mobility of temporal flux. Swinton’s persona has mobilised the temporal drag of a retro-1980s androgyny, established in *Orlando* and morphed this into a contemporary off-gender flux, which has continued (perhaps more so than in her films) in her self-fashioning as a style icon.

Swinton’s stylised crossing over enacts an “off-gender” temporal drag in her cultural twinning with Bowie, a long-standing affair, most recently manifested as retro-pastiche in his music video: *The Stars (Are Out Tonight)*. The inter-generational incarnations of Swinton and Bowie shift time frames, finding and losing genres and meeting past versions of themselves, each other and polymorphous combinations of the two.⁵⁶ A pastiche on their own stylised stardom and celebrity status, historical citations circulate as unthreatening monsters morph into desirable icons. In this digital phantasmagoria, narcissism becomes voyeurism becomes fetishism, as the tour of generic potentiality unfolds: haunting lesbian vampires of eternal youthfulness meet middle-aged bourgeois heterosexual couple doing a regular supermarket shop; androgynous singer leads a band of slim certainties, as white desirability becomes a familiar kick-back of dated personifications; a ghoulish visitor kisses David Bowie on the lips in his sleep; a young butch band leader draws ageing pop star into the synch of the song, as their touching is mirrored in their incarnations of each other; lesbian eroticism permeates the bedroom, and the housewife with the “nice life” loses her perm to a boyish couture that releases her desires and turns her into a crazy woman who chases her husband with a carving knife; slender androgynous bodies writhe in pleasure, alone and together, becoming indistinguishable from each other; the butch-femme couple are transposed into the sofa comforts of married life, as Swinton and Bowie desire and/or become mirrored images of their former selves, or each other; and, as the two couples shift temporal identifications, the four figures turn a shared gaze directly to camera. Self-spectatorship here becomes a private celebrity relation on display. The utopian potentials of stardom flatten out the subject as bearer of subjectivity, reshaping it into a screening of both fetish and flux.

If the stars *are* “out” tonight, this music video animates the histories congealed in the image repertoires of Swinton and Bowie, two figures known for both breaking the mould and their citational capacities. Androgynous, bisexual, trans, tomboy, gamine, handsome, queer—as citations combine and morph—they meet each other and their former personae, as off-gender flux becomes generic history. Pastiche plays imitation back to impersonation as parody gives pleasure to those enough in the know to recognise the referents.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the play with white narcissism in this music video, see Dixon (2013).

Periodised styles of architecture, couture, automobiles, music, desire and intimacy have exchange value in this *mise-en-scène* of gendered and sexualised transpositions, circulating fleetingly across these post-generic landscapes. Haunting and predictive, the present is never present to itself, only a series of transient possibilities drawn from past eras.

The Stars (Are Out Tonight) speaks back to *Orlando*'s self-referentiality across the mutating personae of Bowie and Swinton's off-gender incarnations. There is pleasure in the flatness of these repetitions—memories of how these transgressions belong to past historical conjunctures, and recognition of how generating shared gender inventions can break the mould. It is not merely the speed and styles of audio-visual editing and framing that provide the thrill of these mutational flows, but a sense that the fractured narratives that generate gender can be put together and taken apart by the rules of the game. Repetitions and recognitions involve us in the loss and return of these two players whose gendered improvisations have shifted the historical legacies that might have otherwise kept us all more confined.

In her work discussed throughout this article, Swinton's post-generic flatness is a transmission of disturbance to the conventional aesthetic registers that define its distinction. Muted emotional tones bring time into the frame by referencing the absent presence of "the affect which is not one". Failing to produce the appropriately feminine responsive atmospheres, such moments simultaneously call them forth in the anticipations they generate: our familiarity with the generic expectations refused provides flatness with its historical antinomies in the moment of reading. We are held by a sense of apprehension promised by the fictional and dramatic norms of expressivity. Whether thrilling or banal, the contradiction of these aesthetic conventions, as Berlant claims, can inaugurate a sense of the temporality of the present, making time feel tangible—its historicity becomes apparent as an opportunity for generic reinvention.

Swinton's off-gender flux pushes against the widely held claims that her otherworldliness and gender ambiguities somehow make her seem "timeless". To the contrary, this combination makes her seem timely, a timeliness that is uncanny. It is precisely her crossing over, her mutability and her insubstantiality that bring time into the frame. Her androgynous body, that pale sexualised manifestation of pre-queer 1980s dreams of being both and neither, halts our assumptions about what has receded from view and what can be read in plain flatness. Disturbing the relation of decadence and transcendence, this embodiment poses the question of what constitutes presence in the present in a saturated relay of mediations. So intensely condensed in the image, the histories she embodies may seem otherworldly precisely when she transfers them into the present. When Swinton moves off-gender, she elaborates the drama of losing genre and rehearses the potentialities of a present before we have attached to it. Unfaithful to the rules of both cinema and sexuality, Swinton's disturbances demand our participation. Flat affect leaves a vacuum that we try and fill with context. Swinton's capacity to embody this off-gender flux brings us up against the passage of time itself. The mutability of gender becomes visible, as the present becomes legible as historical.

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