

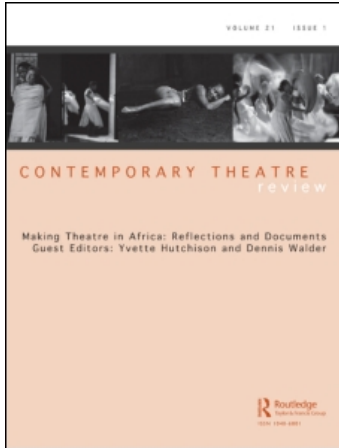
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Queer Kinship in the New York Underground: On the 'Life and Legend' of Jackie Curtis

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Queer Kinship in the New York Underground: On the ‘Life and Legend’ of Jackie Curtis

Giulia Palladini

There is a black-and-white picture of two men holding in their arms a glamorous bride in her white dress. She stands at the centre of the picture, her hair adorned with a white ribbon, a bright sky behind her curly hair. All three characters are smiling and seemingly looking beyond the camera, participating in an exposure offered to what one can imagine to be a broader wedding crowd surrounding the photographer. This picture was shot, one might guess, after the wedding vows were spoken, in the moment when souvenir photographs are usually shot, and witnessed by the group of guests in a spirit of cheerfulness, waiting their turn to be ‘immortalized’ in a picture for the wedding album. The gesture performed by the two male friends, therefore, might be taken to be both for the sake of the moment and for future amusement; for when, as it were, the bride will linger over her wedding pictures, and smile again remembering the happy moment, she will do so even though, or if it happens, she will no longer be in touch with those friends of her youth who were holding her up back then, in celebration.

In the picture, the bride holds one of her hands up, her fingers covered with rings, and brandishes a milk carton, showing it for the photograph. There are no clues as to what the milk carton is there for, and again one might guess that it stands as a souvenir of some sort for an activity which was going on behind the camera. Perhaps the milk added to the overall cheerfulness of the staged picture, or one might go so far as to imagine that the carton was part of a nuptial ritual prepared by friends (represented in the picture by the two men) for the newly wed bride.

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Indeed, such a guess wouldn't be too hasty, since it's quite common, even in most secularized cultures, that in wedding celebrations close friends organize jokes or tricks involving one or both spouses performing funny or symbolic actions, which figuratively cement the new-born couple, including, of course, actions involving sexual innuendo, to which a tacit agreement assures that even relatives in attendance give their consent.

Milk, indeed, has an ancient history in nuptial symbology, which might even be linked back to what is considered a seminal text on human love and the marriage relationship, not least on the powerful force of sexuality: *The Song of Songs*. 'Your lips are honey, honey and milk are under your tongue, your clothes holds the scent of Lebanon,'¹ the groom famously says to his woman in the biblical text, continuing, 'I've come into my garden, my sister, my bride, I have gathered my myrrh and my spices, I have eaten from the honeycomb, I have drunk the milk and the wine. Feast, friends, and drink, till you are drunk with love.'² And in the bride's response, milk is again invoked as a metaphor of appreciation and sensual attachment: 'My beloved is milk and wine, he towers above ten thousands His eyes like doves by the rivers of milk and plenty.'³ Milk stands here for fertility and prosperity, but also for taste, specifically the taste of each spouse's body, which henceforth - in the marriage liaison - will be available for full enjoyment. This (future) enjoyment is celebrated with friends, who are invited to 'feast and drink, till they are drunk with love'. In some Middle Eastern cultures, during the wedding ceremony friends provide the bride with a glass of milk, which she then offers to the groom before the first night.

This picture is drawn upon with a number of little stars in blue and red inks, framing the upper part of the image as a sort of posthumous festoon; or else as a theatrical drape standing over the heads of three actors. It might also be seen as a pencilled burst of stardust, since in fact the little stars are connected by curved ink lines, resembling clouds coming down in infantile fashion from the bright summer sky in the background. It might have been the bride herself who added the stars to the picture, while looking back at it in the years that followed, since it was collected among her other memorabilia.⁴ Or it might have been the photographer who wanted to add a graphic comment to the picture itself, enhancing its peculiar quality, before donating it to the bride. In any case, looking closer, one might notice that the bride has a little heart painted on her face, which seems to wink at the viewer almost as a foretaste of the graphic ornament which was to follow.

What was to follow, in fact, was the gist of that very picture: not a future of marital sexual intercourse, or one of honey and milk, but, rather, a future of wedding photographs. Even so, the milk, with its stratified symbology (no matter how consciously welcomed by the bride's friends), seems indeed a powerful metaphor for the nuptials of that particular bride, to whom this very article is devoted. A bride, as it were, who, at the same time, offered and drank her own milk carton, before what indeed could barely be called a first night. The name of the bride was Jackie Curtis, and the above-mentioned picture was taken on the occasion of *his* first wedding.

1. *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*, ed. by Ariel and Chana Bloch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 77.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

4. The picture is in the Jackie Curtis Estate, held by Joe Preston, Jackie Curtis's cousin and the legal executor of his archive.

From 1969 to 1984 Jackie Curtis performed as a bride in eight weddings around New York City. None of them was a celebration of an actual relationship with any of the men he chose to wed, nor did they involve the actual beginning of a common-law marriage. The series of weddings Curtis performed may be considered the most long-term performance project he conceived; at the same time, they are also an expression of peculiar forms of attachment, whose nature can be properly accounted for only by considering the context of Curtis's affective life, understood, specifically, in terms of a form of kinship that took shape in New York's underground scene.

Jackie Curtis not only appeared both as the creator and the main character of his weddings, he succeeded also in involving the New York underground community in a happening-like mode of participation. In other words, the social intimacy that hosted Curtis's bridal appearances exceeded the notion of the 'couple', while affirming at the same time the collective nature of the relationships and affects that sustained the affective significance of this performance gesture. The notion of kinship, in this case, then, is a useful way of thinking about how affective relationships in the New York underground scene of the 1960s informed artistic and social practices, not only functioning as confirmation of a common belonging but also extending themselves into the future of their actual disappearance as 'live presence'.

Therefore, before attempting at a closer reading of Curtis's wedding performances, I need to take a step back, to introduce both Jackie Curtis's persona (from his debut on the underground stage in the early 1960s to the *Village Voice* picture portraying him in bridal dress on 31 July 1969) and the social dynamic of affects in which his wedding project took place.

Practical Kinship and Queer *Habitus*

Since the early twentieth century we have learned to separate the notion of kinship from the paradigm of biological reproduction, and it is now generally accepted that the essential quality of kinship is the possibility of establishing alliances that enable reciprocal support and exchange among individuals.⁵ According to Pierre Bourdieu, forms of practical kinship are actively perceived and highly integrated into people's everyday lives, not least because the very existence of such connections depends upon their continual renewal.⁶ Bourdieu links the notion of practical kinship to Marcel Mauss' idea of *habitus*, which Mauss had developed as a way of speaking about the distinctively social nature of bodily dispositions, collectively elaborated and 'transmitted' not as abilities, but rather as 'faculties'. He considers *habitus* as 'a product of history' that 'produces individual and collective practices - more history It ensures the active presence of past experiences.'⁷ Bourdieu proposes to substitute the paradigm of biogenetic resemblance with a form of mimesis of bodies that are 'practically' kindred: the repetition of *habitus*, according to Bourdieu, produces *similar bodies*, in so far as it generates shared ways of acting, shared gestures, shared poses.

5. Classical references on the subject include: Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1909); and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Structures élémentaires de la parentèle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949).
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Droz: Genève, 1972).
7. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 54.

Elizabeth Freeman also considers kinship in terms of dependency, and suggests that the notion of kinship be considered as a set of ‘techniques of renewal’:

as a practice, kinship can also be viewed as the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time. The largest and most systematized example of kinship as a technique of renewal, of course, is the domestic labor that women are expected to do to transform the raw material of a worker’s wages into what he needs to labor for another day: a bed, food, clean clothes, etc. This kind of bodily renewal literally reproduces the labor force. But kinship also reproduces the cultural force insofar as it also recreates and recharges bodies toward ends other than labor, such as play, love, and even violence.⁸

Freeman also relates the idea of kinship to the notion of *belonging*, whose etymology incorporates an idea of proximity, of closeness.⁹ She then extends this connection, going so far as to suggest a further resonance for the term ‘belonging’, proposing a ‘false etymology’ (in which *belong* would contain the sense of ‘*being long*’), forcing the language to express both the social function of ‘belonging’ and its temporal dimension:

Longing to belong, being long: these things encompass not only the desire to impossibly extend our own individual existence or to preserve relationships that will invariably end, but also to have something queer extend its own time.¹⁰

I suggest that the quality of kinship experienced in the 1960s New York underground might be understood in precisely this way - that is, as a collection of ‘techniques of renewal’ entailing a duration and projected toward an extension, both in terms of social and artistic practices and in terms of affects.

The dynamics of social relations in the New York underground offer numerous features which might be usefully considered in terms of queer kinship. First of all, its social life was founded on a system of relationships radically other than those of the family, which mainstream society still understood as the base from which a life beyond the home could be experienced.¹¹ Second, the 1960s New York underground scene can clearly be read as a proper *habitat* (in Bourdieu’s sense) in which people produced bodily resemblances to one another, and expressed the affinities of these relations through forms of visibility rooted in the socially determined sharing of *habitus*. Rather than thinking of the New York underground as a community (in the traditional sense, in which it is imagined as a ‘given’ situation), it might rather be considered as the *performative invention* of a form of community, founded on collectively elaborated identities recognizable by means of a shared familiarity with specific images and behaviours. I would also argue that the notion of kinship played a central role in this performative process: participants in the New York underground scene engaged in behavioural patterns that literally reproduced the ‘elementary structures’ and rituals on which the

8. Elizabeth Freeman, ‘Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory’, in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies*, ed. by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2007), pp. 295–314 (p. 298).

9. ‘Even the term “belong”, so central to kinship’s basic function of determining who is connected to whom, suggests such literal proximity between bodies, for it comes from the Old English *gelang*, translated in the Oxford English Dictionary as “alongside”, or “at hand”’ (ibid., p. 298).

10. Ibid., p. 299.

11. This particular aspect of the 1960s New York downtown art scene (especially with reference to the major shift in the relation with the home and the family) has been stressed also in Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 33–80.

12. Ellen Stewart was the founder of La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, started in 1961 as Café La Mama, and still active today as a venue for international theatre in New York. In its long history, the La Mama theatre has been home to a number of downtown artists, most of whom engaged in a close relationship with Stewart, who was not only the producer of their work, but also a figure of reference and support. Especially in the early years, Stewart's apartment operated as an outgrowth of the theatre space itself, and often she would also nourish her associated artists, who, in addition, spent periods of time living there. For a detailed account on the history of La Mama, see: Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004) pp. 83–104; Cindy Rosenthal, 'La Mama of Us All', *The Drama Review*, 50.2 (Summer 2006), 12–51.
13. Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Film of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, 1 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), p. 13.
14. On the social relationships entailed (and literally exhibited) in Warhol's movies, see also Marc Siegel's reading of the network of relationships and appearances in the Warhol-based world as forms of 'cooperation', in Marc Siegel, 'Doing it for

very idea of family was traditionally based, but did so in ways such that those very same structures were also, and at the same time, contested and debunked.

It is not by chance, for instance, that the New York underground scene featured several reference figures for interconnected groups of people, who were routinely referred to as 'parent figures' by those artists gravitating towards them: Joe Cino, Ellen Stewart, Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, Diane di Prima, Al Carmines. All of those figures in fact performed for sustained periods the role of 'concierge' in relation to several 'homes', but did so in a context where the word 'concierge' was constantly renegotiated, along with the word 'home' itself. 'Home' was not a 'given' place, but rather an assumed one, adopted, as it were, for the purposes of making things happen. 'Home' became a way of asserting one's *be-longing*, to borrow Freeman's expression. If the normative domain of language determined the employment of labels like 'parent figures' (emblematic is, for instance, Ellen Stewart's moniker of 'Mama'),¹² in their actual behaviour, the function performed by those same figures with their assumed 'family' of artists featured none of the characteristics traditionally associated to what is thought as a 'parent role'.

The idea of 'family' is a recurrent feature of the dynamic of the Factory, and can be clearly detected especially in the project of Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* collection. Indeed, the social dynamic of the production and exhibition of the film portraits shot by Warhol between 1964 and 1966 discloses an intention to collect images and behaviours portraying a particular group of people: in the introductory essay of the *Screen Tests* catalogue *Raisonné*, Callie Angell refers to the overall project as a 'yearbook of the mid-1960s avant-garde',¹³ and the series of film frames appearing in the catalogue can itself be regarded as a geography of connections which also functions as an 'archive' for a specific domain of belonging. If the performative quality of the *Screen Tests* project entails an intimate relation to a given mode sociability,¹⁴ the succession of photographic portraits suggests the idea of considering the catalogue itself as a form of 'family album'.

Elizabeth Freeman also pinpoints aspects of the relationship between photography and kinship which might be worth recalling here. She suggests that

though the practice of group photography – often referred to as 'family photography' – is certainly saturated with and vital to a dominant ideology that kinship reveals itself in physical resemblance and codified loving gestures, it has also been key to documenting queer liaisons.¹⁵

Indeed, all the connections photography supposedly expresses as visual metonymies of reproduction can be read back reflexively, thus emphasizing that the very notion of kinship is itself elaborated through visual reproduction, in as much as 'all kinship may, indeed, be a matter of poses, gestures, performance'.¹⁶ The circulation of family photographs beyond the private sphere has been a way of suturing kin relations in the history of the modern, privatized family, and Freeman suggests that in

Andy', *Art Journal*, 62 (Spring 2003), 7-13.

15. Freeman, 'Queer Belongings', p. 308.
16. Ibid.

queer liaisons photographs function likewise as evidence of forms of attachments and loving gestures, but also as means of establishing new connections through time.

Following Freeman, then, I argue that it is precisely on the social basis of shared bodily connections and behaviours that photography worked in the New York underground scene as a visual expression both of a *habitus* and of 'techniques of renewal', which might be understood both as 'renewal of the present' or reconfirmation of a community, and also as a utopian projection toward a future where this kinship could extend as belonging, not through the production of children, but through the deposit of lasting possibilities for the future embodiment of what is given as a visual self-elaboration. This dynamic may also be understood as part and parcel of a more general debunking of traditional 'family' structures and rituals, operating, as it happens, by means of the performative *détournement* of their language. I propose to explore this further by going back to Jackie Curtis's wedding performance practice, which, in its exceptionality, raises further questions about kinship, belonging and the role of photographic images.

A Star is Born

In September 1967 at Bastiano's Theater in New York City a play opened entitled *Glamour, Glory and Gold: The Life and Legend of Nola Noonan, Goddess and Star*. The script had been written in 1965 by an eighteen-year-old boy from the Lower East Side named John Holder Jr., but it was signed Jackie Curtis. *Glamour, Glory and Gold* was the story of the rise and fall of the ambitious Nola Noonan, who makes her way to Sunset Boulevard through a long series of love affairs, which she exploits so as to advance herself 'up the ladder of success, wrong by wrong',¹⁷ in pursuit of a glamorous status that, once achieved, brings about her headlong decline through burn-out to destruction. Nola's story is one of a woman who is exploited by men, and who very early on quickly learns to exploit men in return by means of her powerful sex appeal. Therefore, even the tragic, brutal rape she recalls having gone through at the age of seven by a door-to-door salesman, in Nola's words immediately turns into a precocious (and grotesque) discovery of full sexual pleasure, as well as providing the possibility of leaving home and persuading the salesman to take her to Chicago, pursuing his dream of 'bringing back vaudeville' with her music performances.¹⁸ Shifting thereafter from man to man - from the salesman to a married politician, then to a mobster, and an officer of the law - Nola grew up as a stripper and burlesque performer, cultivating the dream of finally getting to 'Hollywood. While there is still a Hollywood.'¹⁹ Throughout the play she embodies every man's secret desires but actually only pursues her own - that of her metamorphosis into the Goddess that she believes she was born to be. After all, as she recalls before leaning on the proscenium and pretending to start a burlesque act, 'every goddess does stock',²⁰ and she eventually makes it to the 'big time' of pictures, to the point of being unable ever to leave it. The entire play is in fact a continuous blur between Nola's life and movie

17. Jackie Curtis, *Glamour, Glory and Gold: The Life and Legend of Nola Noonan, Goddess and Star*, unpublished script, the Jackie Curtis Estate, p. 12.

18. Ibid., p. 11.

19. Ibid., p. 26

20. Ibid., p. 31.

scenes (most of them resounding with interlocked quotations from famous movies), with Nola as author, spectator and actress of her own glamorous and disastrous destiny. The play closes with a campy, heartbreaking monologue of hers, performed to the accompaniment of the Warsaw Concerto (itself an explicit reference to Brian Desmond Hurst's *Dangerous Moonlight* of 1941), desperately calling on all the disappeared characters of the play, trying to figure out whether she is indeed living her life or playing, instead, in a 'terribly authentic' film set. Trying to figure out, after all, whether it's still possible to 'be a good girl, and even finish the picture'. But, indeed, 'what picture?'²¹

21. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

This narrative stood as a real *topos* in the American imagery: a story long told by Hollywood movies, a narrative which haunted Hollywood and its mythology. Many stars' biographies were in fact dramatic and scandalous stories of this kind, with their more morbid aspects often deeply interlocked with the experience of stardom.²² From the start of the American movie industry the fictionalized lives of stars had provided high-value material for advertising: they were publicized in fan magazines, became part of the movie launches, and helped attract a community of followers who were interested as much in the scandals and publicity surrounding the movies as they were in the movies themselves, a fact which the studios orchestrated as part of their commercial strategies.²³ An exemplary case is the movie *Cleopatra* (dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963), starring Liz Taylor in the title role: the entire movie production was publicized along with a detailed account of the star's divorce, as well as an account of her brand new relationship with Richard Burton, who – no surprise – in *Cleopatra* played the role of Marc Antony. Undoubtedly, Liz Taylor's numerous weddings and break-ups, constantly covered by the media, were crucial to the establishment of her *femme fatale* persona.

22. See Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (Phoenix: Associated Professional Service, 1965).

23. See Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, ed. by Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1998).

Glamour, Glory and Gold - the legend of the beautiful girl 'from the wrong side of the tracks' - was the New York scene's first encounter with Jackie Curtis's imagery, modelled on American movies of the 1940s, and nourished by spicy gossip columns about Hollywood stars' lives and behaviour. Curtis's mother, Anna Maria Uglialoro, from an Italian-American family, had moved to New York after her divorce, and raised her two children in her mother's house, which was located upstairs from Slugger Ann's Bar, the nightclub which Curtis's grandmother ran. Jackie's fandom was thus developed amid his grandmother Slugger Ann's glittering garments and in the smoky atmosphere of her New York club at Second Avenue and 12th Street.

This glamorous ideal had been right there, before the young boy's eyes, available for his worship, dramatization, desire, for a year before he adopted it for his own for the first time. At the time of the writing of *Glamour, Glory and Gold* the fabulous star-image that was later to be projected into the underground galaxy as Jackie Curtis's female drag persona was still unshaped, embryonic, hidden – but the development of Jackie Curtis's 'Life and Legend' was already under construction. The Goddess, first of all, had been named. And in the brave gesture of undertaking the ineffable Naming of the Deity, the young boy established himself as the Creator of his own religion, as the prime mover and founder of his own project of

glamorous divinity. Many cultures maintain the centrality of names in relation to the Divine: the names that God chooses for Himself and which are ascribed to Him are additional revelations of the who and what of God through which believers come to know the Deity. The divine Name has to be powerful and multi-layered, so that devotees can recognize it as a vehicle for the distinctive and extraordinary features of the Deity itself. The memory of the names of other gods and goddesses resonated simultaneously in the name that John Holder Jr. chose for himself when, as a boy, he started imagining his life-as-a-legend, his immeasurably self-conscious display of cross-gender identity. Jackie was of course the name of the first lady who had acquired genuine 'superstar' status in American pop culture, as portrayed by Warhol in his late 1950s coloured silkscreened paintings, and, later, in her grief over Kennedy's death, in the famous 1960s series. And just a few years earlier, the movie *Some like it Hot* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1959) had offered to mass audiences the unforgettable image of Tony Curtis in drag, as a character who would seduce Marilyn while 'passing' at the same time for a pretty female musician.

In perfect accordance, then, with the 'Stars as Gods' equation,²⁴ Jackie Curtis's name was born before the Jackie Curtis persona. And yet the name seems to convey with immediate efficacy the whole ambiguity of the public image he chose to build thereafter. 'A rose by another name *wouldn't* smell as sweet.' The ambiguous perfume of Jackie between the genders could be savoured from the very beginning in the choosing of his name. Gertrude Stein was right: 'a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. Loveliness extreme.'²⁵ Jackie Curtis was Jackie Curtis in his immediate appearance: his not-yet-imagined image stood there, in that very first dream of glamorous divinity in 1965.

Jackie Curtis's Images

Throughout his life, Jackie Curtis's use of drag was intimately related to the establishment of a public persona among the underground community of the 1960s and 1970s; this was a persona which not only transcended the boundaries of a specifically gendered drag image, but, in the practice of going back and forth in different disguises on and off stage, it established its own specific and exceptional features. I argue that the performative invention of Jackie Curtis's female drag queen was to be reinforced by the simultaneous presentation of his male drag counterpart, each of them being part of what we might call the 'ur-image' of Jackie Curtis which the underground community could recognize. In order to stress the kind of synthesis embodied in Jackie Curtis's appearance, it is necessary to cast light on two pivotal aspects of this process, each of which stand as basic elements in the orchestration of Curtis's public self-portrait: the centrality of his drag act as image-making gesture, and its belonging to a specific, historically and geographically determined social formation. This is exactly what I am proposing to consider in terms of its relationship to the idea of queer kinship.

From his first appearance in full female drag at a 1966 Halloween party, one of the main concerns of Curtis's performative self-display was the

24. First introduced in Edgar Morin, *The Stars* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 20-32.

25. Gertrude Stein, *Sacred Emily*, in *Geographies and Plays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 187.

26. Jack Smith, 'The Perfect Appositeness of Maria Montez', *Film Culture*, 27 (Winter 1962–1963), 28–36.
27. Candy Darling – birth name James Lawrence Slattery – was one of the most famous drag queens in the 1960s underground scene, and an outstanding Warhol Superstar. She was one of Jackie's best friends and performed in three of his plays: *Glamour, Glory and Gold* (1967), *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* (1969) and *Vain Victory: The Vicissitudes of the Damned* (1971). Tennessee Williams wrote for her and cast her in the role of Violet in the play *Small Craft Warnings*, which premiered in April 1972 at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre in New York. Candy was portrayed by several famous photographers, such as Francesco Scavullo, Robert Mapplethorpe, Richard Avedon and Peter Hujar. She died in 1974 of leukaemia (believed to be induced by illegal hormones she had taken for years). Lately director James Rasin realized a documentary film on Candy Darling, which premiered at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival: *Beautiful Darling: The Life and Times of Candy Darling, Andy Warhol Superstar* (JJay Productions, 2010). See also: *My Face for the World to See: The Diaries, Letters and Drawings of Candy Darling*, ed. by Jeremiah Newton, Francesca Passalacqua and D. E. Hardy (San Francisco: Hardy Marks Publications, 1977).

construction of his body as a visual image. To some extent, indeed, we could say that the entire life and career of Jackie Curtis pivots around the setting to work of visual images. If his experience of fandom, deeply rooted in pre-Stonewall gay culture, was, in fact, consistently mixed up with the consumption and collection of 1940s Hollywood glamour photographs, from all kinds of magazines and mainstream media, Curtis's achievement of the status of Superstar both within and beyond the Warhol-based underground scene was also systematically pursued by means of the production of an extensive body of pictures. The 'perfect appositeness'²⁶ of Jackie Curtis's star quality emerges from the series of exposures he continued to make throughout his life, intended not just as a side line or side effect of his artistic career, but rather as a central strategy that entered into a profitable exchange with his performances. The visual image of Curtis's drag was modelled on the aesthetic look he observed in Hollywood's manufactured icons: a larger-than-life kind of beauty, a cleverly orchestrated close-up mode, a layout of fashionable gestures. Even so, the shining surface of the body icon was liable to be overturned by the very attitude that produced it. The glamour ideal that Curtis embodied did not crystallize in a single, unique visual image – such as that, for instance, pursued in Candy Darling's 1950s blonde bombshell drag image²⁷ – but rather functioned as an ongoing inflection of the Diva type of fabulousness, and in so doing produced the conditions for its own transgression.

Throughout his performative invention, throughout his presentation of the persona through pictures, Jackie Curtis was not only red-haired, blond-haired, aggressive, sophisticated, bitchy, homely and funny, he was also a perfectly constructed image of a fashionable man. Alongside his obsession with golden-age Hollywood female beauty, Curtis maintained a constant attraction towards Hollywood's male stars, particularly the graceful and strong type of male persona conveyed by the filmic presentation of stars like James Dean (an ongoing idol for Curtis), Montgomery Clift or the early Marlon Brando. That is, a 1950s male type which, while giving off a tough masculine allure, also embodied a subtle, almost androgynous grace and vulnerability. Openly playing with the 'imitative structure of gender itself' that Judith Butler argues is always implicitly revealed by drag,²⁸ Jackie Curtis's male appearance was never John Holder Jr., nor did it attempt to be so: it was indeed always the ur-image of Jackie Curtis.

To capture the synthesis, though, that Jackie Curtis's name 'exhibited', there was a need for an attentive observer. And here it is necessary to stress the second pivotal feature of Curtis's persona-building process: the community that was to receive (and interact with) his ongoing performance between genders. By sharing a common artistic environment and lifestyle, the underground community developed a strong referential system, capable of reproducing on a small scale a dynamic of stardom and recognizability, with an internal order of roles and performative specialties. From the play *Glamour, Glory and Gold* up to his death in 1985, Jackie was active in the New York downtown art scene in a number of respects, developing a career through many different productions in different media.

28. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 137.
29. See, for instance, Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Senelick's book also features a picture of Curtis mis-captioned as 'Candy Darling'.
30. In Marranca and Dasgupta's introduction to their collection of plays entitled *Theatre of the Ridiculous* (including works by Jack Smith, Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam and Kenneth Bernard), Curtis's name only appears in a list (an arguable one, in fact) of artists to which the editors ascribe the label 'ridiculous'. See *Theatre of the Ridiculous*, ed. by Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979; 1998), p. xiv.
31. It must be acknowledged that lately Craig Highberger (Jackie's long-term friend and associate) has realized a documentary on Curtis's persona, entitled *Superstar in a Housedress: The Life and Legend of Jackie Curtis* (2005). The movie is an important contribution which offers an account of the multifaceted aspects of Curtis's as an artistic figure, and stands as a remarkable archival gesture, in so far as it collects together a number of interviews, footage

Author of a remarkable number of plays staged on the Off-Off Broadway scene (mostly, but not all, by the Play-House of the Ridiculous), he also performed as an actor in both stage and film productions and became known as one of the prominent Warhol Superstars of the 1970s. Furthermore, he composed a number of poems and journal articles, and a script for a television soap opera, which was never broadcast. Curtis's multifaceted artistic production has been on the whole substantially overlooked in scholarly contributions on the New York underground, and his presence has been acknowledged only as a token role in the widely explored Warhol-based world, as well as in most accounts on the Off-Off-Broadway theatre. A possible reason for this oversight might be identified in the scattered forms of Jackie's work: although he experimented with his own artistic vision in a number of ways, Jackie's figure was never fully articulated as a unique 'professional identity'. Indeed, Curtis seems to have evaded such categorization throughout his life, aiming instead to open up his creativity to as many platforms as he could access. On the other hand, the lack of scholarship on Jackie Curtis might also be explained by the limited circulation of his work: his plays have never been fully published, and most of them are still hard to approach, as the manuscripts are fully covered by handwritten notes (they are difficult to decipher also due to the large amount of drugs taken by the artist when composing them), and they are hardly identifiable as 'ultimate versions'. Even when some of these plays have been referred to by scholars who have explored drag and cross-gendered performance texts, they have been usually dismissed as little else than amateurish 'put-on', and considered scarcely original in their contribution to a distinctive style of playwriting, as opposed to the more elegant productions of New York playwrights such as Charles Ludlam,²⁹ or the most famous Play-House of the Ridiculous-associated authors Ronald Tavel or Kenneth Bernard.³⁰

Curiously, though, the interest in Jackie's artistic life remains vivid in the memory of most 1960s New York underground artists, who openly acknowledge the great influence of his work on the developments of both theatre-making and social performativity. This contribution is explained, in most accounts of people who have worked with Curtis, precisely in terms of the kaleidoscopic quality of his artistic persona, involving a slippery personality whose complexity certainly exceeded the famous frame of Andy Warhol's Factory.³¹

However, Jackie's entrance into Warhol's world (a target the boy had systematically pursued) was immediately registered and literally made part of his image. In December 1968 (just two months after the debut of *Flesh*, the first Warhol-Morrissey movie starring Jackie, in very androgynous drag), Curtis tattooed the name label 'Andy' on his shoulder. The pop gesture of brand-naming his own skin was at the same time a cunning promotional strategy for himself (to be brand-named 'Andy Warhol' in late 1960s/1970s New York was a way of opening numerous doors) as well as a specific declension of his own image. Unsurprisingly, many photographs from this period portray Jackie exhibiting the tattoo, as if through this detail one could temporally locate the picture in the star's career.

material from Jackie's plays and from the movies he starred in, and large collections of photographs, most of which were shot by Highberger himself through the years he has known Curtis (some of these photographs also illustrate this article, thanks to the Highbergers permission). *Superstar in a Housedress* certainly fills a gap in the knowledge and circulation of Jackie Curtis's work and seems to contribute to (and engage in a dialogue with) an overall blossoming of important documentary films released in the last decade, all focusing on more or less marginal figures of the 1960s underground scene, such as the above-mentioned James Rainsin's *Beautiful Darling*, Vincent Fremont and Shelly Dunn's *Pie in the Sky: The Brigid Berlin Story* (2000), Mary Jordan's *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* (2006).

32. Several recollections by Jackie's friends and associates address Jackie's imprecise and idiosyncratic drag style, as well as his periods of scarce personal hygiene - for instance, in the above-mentioned documentary *Superstar in a Housedress*.
33. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *The Partisan Review*, 31 (Fall 1964), 515-531; this article also appears in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).
34. See Jill Dolan, 'Women's Theatre

Observing the series of Jackie's pictures collected in the Jackie Curtis Estate, it seems as though the star was offering several pointers to his 'real' life to observers: the obsession with fan magazines, the imprecision of his drag outfit (Jackie often posed unshaved, with torn pantyhose or greasy wigs, and he is said to have been very scruffy, even if the overall image was constructed as glamorous),³² the association with partners currently involved in his artistic enterprises (i.e. Holly Woodlawn, Ron Link, Penny Arcade, Patti Smith, etc.), the homage to his current favourite movies. Photographs circulated among friends, were published in underground magazines, hung from the wall of clubs and venues in the scene (for instance, Max's Kansas City, La Mama, the Factory, the Chelsea Hotel). Jackie Curtis's biography was thus systematically exposed in order to orchestrate the dramatization of his persona's 'Life and Legend'. The main materials for this 'drama' were Curtis's obsessions, mixed up with a strong camp humour; the main attraction was his gender, continuously renegotiated in a dynamic swing of becoming states. All his artistic works (from his film and stage productions to his scripts and poems) were thought of as so many pieces of a puzzle which could be assembled to compose a unique picture: a life-performance. The project begins to sound like a realization of Oscar Wilde's idea that 'one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art', an idea that Wilde had presented as one of his key *Phrases & Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, and which Susan Sontag was later to choose as one of the epigraphs for her 1964 'Notes on "Camp"'.³³

Jackie's life-performance seems to articulate itself as a kind of theatre play, beginning with his early 1960s dream of glamour and followed by his subsequent rise as an underground star on the New York circuit. In this play, then, the time would eventually come for a 'big scene', one of those scenes a star leaves to posterity and for which the star will always be remembered. It would have to be a remarkable scene, like Marlon Brando's 'Hey Stella!' scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1951); or, even more precisely, like Gloria Swanson's unforgettable monologue in front of Cecil B. De Mille, before fading out in her Salome pose. The 'big scene' of Jackie Curtis's life-performance was to be the wedding scene.

The Womanless Wedding: Camp Parody and Ritual Practice

As Jill Dolan has pointed out, traditional drama is based on the concept of oppositional genders, hence the convention of placing the heterosexual wedding as the finale of classical plays functions as a powerful statement of the reconciliation of opposites, supporting the heteronormativity upon which society is assumed to be founded.³⁴ This is of course only possible because of the way in which the wedding ceremony itself already clearly functions, within the extra-theatrical society at large, as a central celebration for the structure of the society in question, and one which has developed its own specific and powerful symbology, which has, in turn, endured in spite of the secularization of the ritual. Susan Stewart writes:

Program ATA:
Creating a Feminist
Forum', *Women and
Performance*, 1.2
(1984), 5-13.



Image 1 Jackie as a bride with a milk carton (courtesy of Joe Preston – The Estate of Jackie Curtis).

The wedding as marriage ritual marks the transformation of the self from physical body to a network of social and property relations, from play to production, from circularity to linearity. Of all bourgeois rituals, it is the most significant, the most emblematic of class relations; and perhaps this is why, at least since Renaissance, it has been the ritual most commonly chosen for exaggeration within the realm of imaginary. A lived tableau, the wedding commonly forms the closure of Renaissance comedies. Out of the grotesque antics of the characters comes the wedding scene, which puts proportions at the center stage; the grotesque is forced into the margins of closure.³⁵

In its symbology, the wedding ritual brings about a convergence between the complex tie embedding the couple and their society, a system that seeks to guarantee its perpetuation (through sexual reproduction) and an economy that channels most of its resources through the family structure. The wedding ritual is therefore an event of absolute 'seriousness' for the maintenance of the prevailing social contract, even if this 'seriousness' is often glossed over with the seemingly frivolous celebration of love in the very form of the wedding.

The performative exaggeration of the wedding outlined by Stewart goes back to ancient times and might perhaps persuasively be linked to carnivalesque culture.³⁶ I am thinking especially of the practice of *mock weddings*, clearly born within the *charivari* tradition, and widespread in particular in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe.³⁷ Brought to the

35. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 117-118.

36. On this issue, see Michail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

37. On *charivari*, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 97-123.

38. On the influence of the English mock-weddings tradition on American culture, see Senelick, *The Changing Room*, pp. 350–359.

39. See also Craig Thompson Friend, 'The Womanless Wedding: Masculinity, Cross Dressing and Gender Inversions in the Modern South', in *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction*, ed. by Craig T. Friend (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), pp. 219–245.

40. On festivity and 'state of exception' in carnivalesque culture (in which the womanless wedding is rooted), see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

41. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 119.

42. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 280.

43. Elizabeth Freeman, 'Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations', *New Literary History*, 3 (2000), 727–744 (p. 728).

United States and Canada with European colonization,³⁸ the practice of mock weddings was soon incorporated into American folk tradition. In this context, the practice of the *womanless wedding* was particularly successful, and is of particular relevance when thinking about the genealogy of Jackie Curtis wedding-performances.

The womanless wedding was a celebration which took place especially in small, rural towns,³⁹ and which involved the entire population in setting up a fake wedding ceremony in which all the 'female roles' were played by men. It seems that cross-dressing in this kind of practice was not connected to participants' sexuality: on the contrary, men 'played' the female roles precisely because the practice was clearly located in the state of exception of festivity.⁴⁰ Therefore, the social function of womanless weddings appears to be the same as that of the final wedding scene in the traditional drama, reconfirming order and appropriately harmonious relations between genders in society. Basically, the cross-dressing element was treated in a similar way to the final 'unmasking' in nineteenth-century female-impersonator shows: at the end of the show the actor would take off his wig in front of the audience, bringing affairs back to the 'norm' for the reassurance of heterosexual spectators.

Although womanless weddings started to die out during the twentieth century, there are still examples of them taking place both before and after the Second World War in Pennsylvania. Significantly, in these latest developments of the practice, men dressed as women (performing as brides, flower girls, female guests), wearing long dresses and straw hats evocative of turn-of-the-century styles of women's clothing, instead of those of contemporary women. Commenting on this, Stewart suggests:

It might be argued that just as the Victorian chair is more likely than a modern one to be a signifier of 'chairness' in the dollhouse, so this antiquated style of dress is more likely to be a signifier of the feminine in the womanless wedding.⁴¹

Stewart's comment invites a cross-reference to Susan Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp"', where Sontag states that '[c]amp sees everything in quotation marks', so that 'it's not a lamp, but "a lamp"; not a woman but "a woman"'.⁴² In this respect, the emphasis on a stereotyped model of femininity points to the inherently camp dynamic at work in the womanless wedding, a practice which plays with the artificiality of the feminine, even if it involves no conscious effort to question normative assumptions about gender or to critique or de-structure the traditional notion of marriage. Second, this habit of wearing old-fashioned women's clothes brings us back to the etymology of the term 'drag', which, as Elizabeth Freeman points out, bears a whole set of associations with 'retrogression, delay and the pull of the past upon the present'.⁴³ In this respect, the twentieth-century development of the womanless wedding suggests a gradual shift of this practice into the form of a proper *drag wedding*. One might consider this shift in relation to a similar transformation of the notion of feminine in the wider society: in the 1940s-1950s, the very idea of 'feminine' was still epitomized by the figure of the long dress and the straw hat, even as 'actual women' were

enacting a substantial transformation of public behaviour and a powerful re-negotiation of their assigned roles in society.

In this respect, it makes sense to note a passage from Warhol's writings which appears in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* at the very point at which he is commenting on his 1971 *Women in Revolt* film, starring Jackie Curtis, Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn as three Women's Liberationists:

Among other things, drag queens are living testimony to the way women used to be, the way some people still want them to be, and the way some women still actually want to be. Drag queens are living archives of ideal movie star womanhood. They perform a documentary service, usually consecrating their lives to keeping the glittering alternative alive and available for (not-too-close) inspection It's hard work to look like the complete opposite of what nature made you and then to be an imitation woman of what was only a fantasy woman in the first place. When they took the movie stars and stuck them in the kitchen, they weren't movie stars any more - they were just like you and me. Drag queens are the reminders that some stars still aren't just like you and me.⁴⁴

The 1972 New York première of *Women in Revolt* at a movie house on East 59th Street was picketed by a group from the (actual) Women's Lib, and at the time, the movie was harshly criticized for making a mockery of sexual revolution. Not only did the film portray its three protagonists as naively involved in what was significantly called the PIGs movement (Politically Involved Girls),⁴⁵ but one of the main points of the movie was the impossibility of the three women reconciling their urge for political engagement in the women's cause with their emotional and sexual needs (or their inability to do so). Overall, the movie was contested as a merciless parody of women's bodies and desires, which appeared all the more offensive as it was performed by male actors 'pretending' to pass as women. To play with Joan Riviere's famous title, in Andy Warhol's movie it was Women's Lib, not just womanliness, which came out as a masquerade.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the same comment of Warhol's we earlier referred to discloses a peculiar use of drag as a demystifying device, one which we might interestingly connect to a shift in understandings of the politics of drag within later feminist thought. On close examination, the re-enactment of an old-fashioned star femininity clearly expresses the artificiality of 'what was only a fantasy woman in the first place', but also points toward what Judith Butler called the 'melancholy of gender'.⁴⁷ Considering the drag image as an archive of 'ideal movie star womanhood' also entails consideration of the temporal quality of the cross-dressing gesture, bringing into play the question of the time-lag between what is normatively conceived to be 'standard womanhood' (always nostalgically projected into the past and into the untouchability of the screen) and 'contemporary womanhood' (taken to be that same standard simply brought up to date). But the figure of the ideal movie star brings into the picture issues of attachment directly connected to a process of gender formation as experienced personally by the generation

44. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harvest Books, 1977), pp. 54–55.

45. In the pre-release reports, *Women in Revolt* was referred to under other titles as *Sex* (a possible homage to Mae West), *Andy Warhol's PIGs*, and *Andy Warhol's Women*. Some scholars have detected in the ironic acronyms a reference to the SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men), the radical feminist organization founded by Valerie Solanas, who had shot Warhol only two years before the movie was released. On *Women in Revolt*, see Maurice Yacowar, *The Films of Paul Morrissey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 55–61.

46. Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 10 (1929), 303–313.

47. Judith Butler, 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification', in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 132–166.

of gay men who came of age in the 1960s (like Jackie, Candy and Holly), and ingrained in a specific *habitus* of film-going and mutual self-recognition. Such a process seems to bear out Butler's positing of gender formation as always already fundamentally melancholic, as it features a primary renunciation of a desire for a same-sex partner, which later develops as the melancholic assumption of the body one renounces as one's own.⁴⁸

48. Ibid.

There is no evidence of Jackie Curtis being aware of the womanless wedding tradition, nor is it possible to establish a continuity between his wedding performances and such a legacy existing in the United States. But it is nonetheless worth recalling that such a practice existed in American culture and, moreover, that it had once been widespread, especially in small towns. The womanless wedding was an event involving the whole community, and despite its inherent carnivalesque normativity, it also functioned as a camp festival reaffirming the community itself. One might perhaps argue that the womanless wedding functioned as a camp ritual practice.

The Bride Project

The image of the bride in a white dress is of course an iconographically powerful assertion of the bright promise of a future of love based on the heterosexual couple. Besides displaying a heteronormative relationship model, it also presents the constructed Beauty of kinship imagery, celebrating the shining preciousness of the female in the newly married couple. In the wedding itself the bride is clearly the Star: she is the main character walking in triumph to the altar, winning the admiring looks of the assembled company; it is she who carries the floral bouquet, and it is she who unveils her face at the very last minute, purposefully delaying the exhibition of her beauty. While the groom's suit is usually just a minor variation on the regular male suit, the bride's dress is traditionally granted a far greater margin of exaggeration. Sumptuousness, a major feature of the wedding in terms of status, also finds in the image of the bride its privileged site of exhibition.

Such sumptuousness, according to Roland Barthes, is deeply ingrained in the whole representational function of a grand marriage.⁴⁹ The spectacular symbology Barthes described as one of his 1957 *Mythologies* is not too far from that inherited by Jackie's imagery: it should come as no surprise that Barthes begins his text about *le grand mariage* by addressing the media reverberation of celebrity weddings:

What a lot of marrying going on in our illustrated papers: grand marriages (Marshall Juin's son and the daughter of an Inspector of the Fisc, the daughter of the Duc de Castries and Baron de Vitrolles), marriages for love (Miss Europe '53 and her childhood sweetheart), projected star marriages (Marlon Brando and Josiane Mariani). Naturally all these marriages are not apprehended at the same time, for their mythological virtue is not the same.⁵⁰

49. Roland Barthes *The Eiffel Tower, and Other Mythologies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

50. Ibid., p. 23.

While in Curtis's everyday life, marriage as *ménage* or as the foundation of a family unit was basically lacking, a recurring image in the illustrated papers he collected was that of the wedding, given as the immediate depiction of marriage. His own notion of 'marriage', we might therefore suggest, was modelled more on the images of the lives and love affairs of stars than it was on an actual experience of married relationships. But 'a Star's marriage (to another star)' - wrote Barthes - 'is almost never presented except in its future aspect. What it develops is the virtually pure myth of the Couple . . . Conjugalinity is therefore at the limit of superfluous, relegated without precautions to a problematic future'.⁵¹

In Jackie's weddings, we might suggest, conjugalinity is beyond superfluous. The future projection, that is, is disavowed from the start; the groom himself appears negligible. The ceremony is by no stretch of the imagination the promise of a future married couplehood, for instead the couple is 'consummated' in the wedding performance itself. The ceremonies were thus events systematically arranged to enhance attention and visibility for Jackie Curtis as a star, and for the artistic outcomes of his career. Ultimately, they functioned as what Richard Dyer has called a 'vehicle',⁵² a pivotal element in the construction of a star, 'important as much for what conventions [it] set[s] up as for how [it] develop[s] them, for their ingredients as for their realisation', providing 'continuity of iconography, visual style and structure'⁵³ to the figure of the star. Just like the Hollywood stars whose biographies he followed in the gossip columns of fan magazines, Curtis intended the weddings as the juicy events of the 'Life and Legend', attracting press and audience attention by means of their fabulousness. In this respect, the first wedding is exemplary.

The ceremony took place on 21 July 1969, on a rooftop at 211 East Eleventh Street in New York City. The choice of groom was part of a clever promotional strategy: Eric Emerson, well-known Superstar, had made his way into the New York underground hall of fame through his seductive dancing during the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, and his rise reached its climax in the famous self-love sequence in *Chelsea Girls* (Warhol, 1966). Furthermore, in 1969 he was working as a waiter at Max's Kansas City, a position of absolute social visibility.⁵⁴

At the time of the ceremony, however, with everything in place and guests gathered on the rooftop, Eric didn't show up. Jackie therefore sought a stand-in groom, and a porn producer ('Stanley Sweetheart') who was on the rooftop among the guests performed the role in the ceremony. Apart from this minor detail, the ceremony turned out to be a great success: Holly Woodlawn and Ruby Lynn Rainer, two of Curtis's ongoing associate performers, stood as the bridesmaids; the Larry Rivers jazz band played for the ceremony, and Andy Warhol shot pictures of the whole event (not the only occasion that this happened). Melba LaRose Jr., former interpreter for Nola Noonan in the first run of the play (the title role was later performed by Jackie herself), was also a prominent presence at the event. The wedding party had been planned at Max's Kansas City, to coincide with the launch party for Warhol's *Blue Movie*, which opened the same night at the New Andy Warhol Garrick Theatre.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

52. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), p. 62.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

54. On Max's Kansas City and the social dynamic of celebrities, see Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin (Ed.), *High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max's Kansas City* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1998).



Image 2 Jackie Curtis in female drag, photo by Roy Blakey (courtesy of Joe Preston – The Estate of Jackie Curtis).

Accordingly, the wedding crowd reached the restaurant, where Eric (who was working) attempted to apologize to Jackie for having failed to appear at the ceremony; Jackie, in her shining wedding garment, promptly replied: 'Yes I know, Eric. But I have a show to do now - my reception.'⁵⁵

55. Cited by Steven Watson in Highberger, *Superstar in a House*, p. 39.

56. Dotson Reader, 'Twilight of a Tribe: The Wedding That Wasn't', *Village Voice*, 42 (31 July 1969).

The event had the media resonance to which Jackie aspired: the following week, it was covered by the press and a major article appeared on the first page of the *Village Voice*.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the article appeared alongside news related to one of the most significant events of that 1969 New York summer: the development of the Gay Liberation Front, that had emerged and grown in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots, which had happened only a month before and just a few blocks from the rooftop where Jackie's wedding was held. The combination is worth noticing: on the one hand, Jackie's wedding might suggest a continuity with the claims for gay rights being made by the movement inflamed after Stonewall, and could be considered as openly aligned with the 'coming out' of the movement itself. However, closer observation discloses divergences in tactics and procedures between Jackie's performance and those of the Gay Liberation Front.

Curtis's wedding performances made no claim for gay marriage rights, and neither did they openly contest the form of heteronormative nuptial symbology. On the contrary, they played on the given language of normative culture, and employed its own codes as the parameters for a performative *détournement*. By sticking as closely as possible to the normative wedding model, Jackie's wedding performances thus function as modes of 'disidentification'. In José Muñoz's definition of the concept:

Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification.⁵⁷

57. José Muñoz, 'The White to Be Angry', *Social Text*, 15.52/53 (Fall-Winter 1997), 80-103.

Founded on Althusserian terminology, Muñoz's notion of disidentification suggests that recycling images and objects already charged with ideological power might be considered as a practice of tactical 'reformatting', which can be employed by minoritarian subjects in order to challenge ideological power from within. I suggest that Jackie's employment of wedding symbology might usefully be read as a mode of disidentification, in so far as it debunks the ideological interpellation of the wedding by overturning its very 'naturalness', that which ideology seeks to produce as a characteristic of all its institutions.

First of all, of course, the bride was a man. And, in any case, the drag persona Jackie was developing at the time was not even identifiable with a decisively female appearance, but existed in a complex dynamic of interplay between gender positions which also involved the putting on of 'male drag'. Beyond the wedding performances, from 1969 up to his



Image 3 Jackie Curtis and Dorian Grey, photo by Nadine Zolar (courtesy of Joe Preston – The Estate of Jackie Curtis).

death in 1985, Jackie's persona continued to operate in this dynamic state, and for long periods he totally dismissed female drag, and lived and performed only in male drag. He even went as far as to spread rumours of his imminent marriage with actress Sandy Dennis. In any case, he never made a wedding performance featuring himself as the groom, while the 'bride project' continued to exist even when Jackie had abandoned female drag in his everyday life.

Second, in detaching the notion of wedding from that of marriage, Jackie emphasized the inherent artificiality of the nuptial celebration as the immediate and natural representation of a ‘future of love’. The wedding ceremony traditionally communicates, as part of its symbology, a powerful temporal projection, which is assumed to mirror the standard model of couplehood in society: the flower girls are ‘little brides’, embodying an apparently inevitable future in which they will grow up to be brides; the newly married couple performs a public kiss in front of the audience, marking their entrance in a domain of ‘active sexuality’ which the state apparatus allows and attests, on condition that this sexuality is expressed within the married couple and for the purpose of the sexual reproduction on which the future nuclear family will be founded - a nuclear family which will accordingly be the foundation for the further continuation of the social order. In Jackie’s weddings such a temporal projection is denied, and on the contrary, the focus is on the ‘event’ itself of the wedding. Returning to Barthes’ account, we could state that Jackie’s weddings are apprehended in their ‘event-nature’ because of their very ‘mythological virtue’: as for every Star, conjugality is ‘a possibility given as assured insofar as its importance is marginal, subject to that very general convention which insists that publicly marriage is always the “natural” finality of coupling. What counts, under the guarantee of a hypothetical marriage, is to make acceptable the couple’s carnal reality.’⁵⁸ In this respect, Jackie’s use of bridal imagery in the underground was a means of affirming a ‘carnal reality’, at the same time as making himself visible and adorable.

58. Barthes, *Eiffel Tower*, p. 25.

59. Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 4–5.

Furthermore, separating weddings from the idea of marriage – as Elizabeth Freeman suggests⁵⁹ – discloses their performative nature as forms of ‘social intimacy’, attesting to the function of such forms as sites of recognition and for the display of a whole range of relationships and ways of belonging that might turn out to be radically different from heteronormative ones. Jackie Curtis’s weddings involved the underground community as both witness and participant in the ritual-like practice, in so doing functioning precisely as a ‘rite of confirmation’ of its modes of social belonging. The weddings – which took place in different New York sites (i.e. rooftops, clubs, public spaces) – were first of all parties, attended by the community in the continuum of its leisure time. Second, given the presence of underground press and photographers, largely encouraged by Curtis, they were occasions of visibility and publicity for the ongoing exposure-oriented attitude of the members of the group. But most significantly, the weddings performed a network of relationships and roles that clearly exceeded the occasion, encompassing the life and artistic performances happening at that particular time. In this respect, it is relevant to recall once more the tradition of the womanless wedding, which, as we observed, was meant to confirm the belonging-together of a specific community, and to confirm roles within a given society. In the case of the New York underground scene, then, Jackie’s image was confirmed in its ongoing cross-gender dynamism, founded on a shared familiarity with the modes of appearance and *habitus* practised in the everyday life of an ‘urban tribe’, what one might well call ‘practical kinship’. That is, the powerfully evocative symbology of the

60. Reader, 'Twilight of a Tribe'.

wedding was on the one hand detached from its normative ideological mission, and on the other employed to confirm a specific and non-normative politics of relations and affects.

The 1969 *Village Voice* article dedicated to Jackie's first wedding was entitled *Twilight of a Tribe: The Wedding That Wasn't*.⁶⁰ The reporter Dotson Reader tauntingly reported on the event, presenting it as a failure: according to Reader, the non-participation of Emerson made it 'the wedding that wasn't'. The journalist suggested that the nuptial dream of the drag queen Jackie Curtis – whose existence was supposedly allowed only by margins of visibility granted by the 1960s pop/underground galaxy – was miserably crushed, revealing 'the illusion' behind the dream. Overall the article seems to have wanted to bear witness to 'the end of an era' – that of the Warhol 1960s – a time when every drag queen was allowed her nuptial dream performance. The *Voice* article was clearly misleading; but it's worth noticing that its sarcastic and somehow reactionary emphasis, although it failed to grasp the meaning of the event, nonetheless pinpointed one of its key features. The word 'tribe' employed in the title underscores the collective nature of the wedding performance, which was absolutely essential to Jackie's performative operation. It is significant, then, that while the *Village Voice* readily understood the significance of the Gay Liberation Front, it clearly misunderstood the inherent dynamic of queer kinship at work in Jackie's performance, which clearly had no need of the 'chosen' groom in order to be enacted.

Throughout the 1970s this 'tribe' went through a long process of transformation, involving the departure of some members, the death of others, the mainstream success of still others. Over this time Jackie's weddings functioned as a sort of barometer of the mood of the 'tribe'. All the guests gathered for the performance/ceremonies between 1969 and 1985 did so in order to celebrate an ongoing image, the image of Jackie-as-a-bride. The bride was thus the Star of the event she had herself orchestrated, a star who performed as an ongoing quotation of herself. Each wedding performance involved new guests, each event welcomed new grooms, performing the role formerly taken by Emerson/Sweet-heart. Every wedding was followed, after a short period, by the announcement of a 'divorce', in order to make room for a new groom/event.

Through the years other grooms would also function as publicity stunts for Jackie. Lance Loud, who wed Jackie on 9 June 1973, would appear a few months later in the first reality show ever produced on American television, *An American Family*, which aired on PBS. Based on the life of the Louds, a Californian family, the second episode of the TV show follows the mother on her trip to New York, where she visits her eldest son Lance, who had moved to the city in order to start a career as a writer. Loud, who later became a satiric columnist, was living at the time at the Chelsea Hotel and actively participating in the gay subculture of the time: the episode was clearly an attempt to offer a glimpse of the 'New York underground' to a mass TV audience, at that moment in the early seventies when it had started to become a trendy attraction. During the episode (shot in September), Loud took his mother on a 'tour' of

New York, culminating in an evening attending a show at La Mama; the show in question was *Vain Victory: The Vicissitudes of the Damned*, written and performed by Jackie Curtis. Although the TV cameras caught just a small fragment of the show, Jackie had achieved his objective of gaining access to the small screen, a goal he had systematically pursued throughout the seventies.

Likewise, the 1972 wedding with Hiram Keller (celebrated on Valentine's Day) also contributed to Jackie's image in another domain. Having starred in Federico Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969), and appearing frequently in the illustrated pages of journals like *Afterdark*, Keller was a major gay sex symbol of the time. Although there was never a relationship of love between Jackie and Keller, Jackie's connecting his image to Keller's can still be defined as a publicity stunt genuinely comparable to those orchestrated by the Hollywood studios: 'rumours' about the Curtis-Keller liason were purposefully spread by Jackie to the press long before the wedding,⁶¹ and to no one's surprise the event was widely covered, especially by the gay newspapers. On 1 May 1972 Jackie succeeded in hitting the cover page of *Gay Power*, which published a sepia-toned Lee Black Childers photograph in which Jackie posed as a 1930s diva.⁶²

In 1970 the Yugoslav director Dusan Makavejev shot scenes with Jackie Curtis for the movie *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (released in 1971). Constructed as a juxtaposition between blocks of fictional and documentary materials shot between Belgrade and New York, Makavejev's movie is a radical investigation of what Jonathan Rosenbaum calls 'the politics of sexuality, but also the sexuality of politics',⁶³ and takes as its starting point the work of the controversial Austrian psychologist Wilhelm Reich. Although the fictional segment of the movie follows the narrative of Milena, a young Slav girl who starts claiming the need for

61. See for instance, Tom E. Brown, 'The Love Life of Jackie Curtis', *Interview*, 4 July 1971, p. 26.

62. See Vichi Richman, 'An Interview with Jackie Curtis Part I: "Even Garbo Rearranged Her Jewels!"', *Gay Power*, 1 May 1972, p. 16; 'An Interview with Jackie Curtis Part II: I Started as a Baby!', *Gay Power*, 15 May 1972, pp. 17-18.

63. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *WR, Sex and the Art of Radical Juxtaposition*, 18 June 2007, Criterion DVD collection booklet (<http://www.criterion.com>) [accessed 13 December 2010].



Image 4 Jackie as a boy, photo by Craig Highberger, 1973 (courtesy of Craig Highberger).

64. I am here referring mainly to oral accounts of Jackie Curtis's associates whom I had the chance to talk to in New York, such as Ruby Lynn Rayner and Ellen Stewart. I think it is also significant to report the following anecdote provided by Lee Black Childers: 'Once Jackie was confronted at a party by one of those intense revolutionaries that were so numerous and vociferous in the late sixties. Wild-eyed, frizzy-haired, and with little droplets of California hearty burgundy spraying as she talked, he pulled at her dress, pointed at the glitter on her eyelids, and shouted, "What do you think you're doing? Do you realize there's a revolution on?" Jackie looked at him and replied, "I do more revolution just walking down the street every day than you do with all your leaflets and pamphlets and crap"' (Lee Black Childers, in Sewall-Ruskin, *High on Rebellion*, p. 145).
65. Douglas Crimp, 'Mario Montez, For Shame', in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. by Stephen Barber and David L. Clark (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 57–70. See also Douglas Crimp, 'Getting the Warhol We Deserve: Cultural Studies and Queer Culture', *Invisible Culture*, 1 (1999) (http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue1/crimp/crimp.html) [accessed 16 March 2009].
66. Crimp, 'Mario Montez, For Shame', p. 58.

sexual liberation in the context of Soviet-style communism (which Makavejev portrays, in a sarcastic Freudian allegory, as based around the phallic figure of Stalin), the movie constantly alternated this story with documentary footage shot in the United States. Part of this material follows the legacy of Reich's late 1930s experiments on 'orgone', the mysterious life energy produced by orgasm (which was the radical development of Reich's study of the contribution of orgasm to physical and mental health, carried out in the United States before he was prosecuted and died in 1957), while another part is made up of encounters with several New York characters, all somehow involved in the countercultural scene of the time. In addition to Jackie Curtis, the movie features the poet and musician Tuli Kupferberg, the feminist artist and activist Betty Dodson, the artist Nancy Godfrey, and the 'Screw' editor Jim Buckley. Makavejev shot Curtis in female drag, as she walks in Times Square along with Eric Emerson eating an ice cream, and later talks about her love life, mentioning, in the process, the 'wedding' with Emerson, whom, she said, she had agreed to marry because she didn't want to be a girl who was never proposed to.

While I don't wish to embark on a close examination of the complex dialectics explored by Makavejev's movie, I would still like to suggest that Jackie's presence in *WR* (precisely contemporary to *Women in Revolt*) appears itself to function dialectically in relation to various major ideological discourses: not only those employed by heteronormative structures of state power, but also those entailed in some of the more dogmatic approaches of contemporary progressive political movements. In as much as his 1969 wedding ceremony was not aligned with the agenda of the post-Stonewall Gay Liberation Front (actually Jackie is said to have been criticized by gay activists for not being openly involved in political activism),⁶⁴ his drag persona emerges from the landscape of *WR* as an opening towards a complex approach to the politics of sexuality, suggesting ways in which a queer persona might be assimilated into an all-American mythology. This possibility surfaces most clearly especially when related to a scene of the movie in which Tuli Kupferberg clearly makes sexual innuendoes around weapons and talks about capitalistic ownership in American society. While Jackie is portrayed as an underground female in her dark outfit and scruffy hair, the Fugs founder Kupferberg plays with guns and talks about American private property, suggesting a complex relationship between American mainstream imagery and the countercultural domain, and offering clues to a rather ambiguous sexual politics already at work in the culture of the United States.

In this respect, as Douglas Crimp's project, provisionally called 'Queer before Gay',⁶⁵ argues, I am suggesting that New York City queer culture of the 1960s developed several 'ways of making queer differences and singularities visible',⁶⁶ and that while these contributed to creating the urban utopianism which allowed the Stonewall riots to take place, they were founded more on a body politics than on a political agenda of claims for gay life. In other words, Curtis's employment of openly camp strategies of visibility resists or at least stands to one side of the critical discourses of 1970s gay rights in so far as it cannot be framed as a

demand for legitimacy. Instead it entails a powerful display of actual queer embodiment, involving a set of affects and relationships rooted in the everyday life of individuals, already capable of sustaining themselves over time, and in so doing projecting their memory into a future potentiality, without the formal mechanisms that might be afforded by legitimacy.⁶⁷

67. My reading of Jackie's wedding performances in relation to the 1960s queer culture finds an interesting point of dialogue with the conceptualization of 'camp effects' developed by Dominic Johnson in relationship to Jack Smith's work, where Johnson suggests that his argument 'entails reading camp effects as hieroglyphs', in order to show how 'camp practices might retain the thought of some other form of meeting, a precarious speaking, tongues glancing across the surfaces of words, and thoughts, and skins' (Dominic Johnson, 'The Wound Kept Open: Jack Smith, Queer Performance and Cultural Failure', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 17.1 (March 2007), 3-18 (p. 6).

Photographic Images/Memory Images

In moving towards a conclusion, I wish to turn again to the ways in which photography operates as a medium through which the performative invention of queer kinship and its community is achieved. In so doing, I aim to show how the practice of Jackie's weddings can



Image 5 Jackie as a bride with two friends in 1969. In the background on the left, Jackie's maid of honor, the actress Ruby Lynn Rayner (courtesy of Joe Preston – The Estate of Jackie Curtis).



Image 6 Jackie as a bride in “Frances Farmer drag”, with the groom Gary Majchrzak and Jackie’s aunt Josephine Preston, May 1984 (courtesy of Joe Preston – The Estate of Jackie Curtis).

be regarded as an exemplary deposit, as something left behind which speaks of both the actuality of queer kinship dynamics and the possibility for their future reactivation - first of all, as images made out of memory.

Siegfried Kracauer begins his reflections on photography by arguing that ‘memory images are at odds with photographic representation’,⁶⁸ since the spatial or temporal continuum that photography retains is unable to convey the fragmentary nature of memory. According to Kracauer, images held in the memory retain ‘what is given only insofar as it has significance’;⁶⁹ this significance is made visible by means of ‘traits’, recollected by a ‘liberated consciousness’ based upon what the subject once perceived as ‘true’ in relation to an image:

The image in which these traits appear is distinguished from all other memory images, for unlike the latter it preserves not a multitude of opaque recollections but elements that touch upon what has been recognized as true. All memory images are bound to be reduced to this type of image, which might rightly be called the last image, since it alone preserves the unforgettable. The last image of a person is his actual *history* How a person represents this history does not depend purely on his or her natural constitution or on the pseudo-coherence of his or her individuality; thus, only fragments of these assets are included in his or her history. This history is like a *monogram* that condenses the name into a single graphic figure which is meaningful as an ornament In authentic fairy tales, the imagination has intuitively deposited typical monograms. In a photograph, a person’s history is buried under a layer of snow.⁷⁰

68. Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Photography’, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47–64 (p. 50).

69. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

The history of the person photographed, that is, can't be presented by the image the photograph depicts, since the person is fixed in a present time and space, and what appears ends up being only a block of features subtracted from that history. In other words, the very objecthood of the photograph makes the person visible but missing many of their attributes, and is therefore liable to reification, and, then, as a result, is forgotten.

Developing the argument further, Kracauer notes two different sorts of photographic images, and their relationship with the viewer's memory: these are the photograph of 'the film diva', and that of 'the grandmother'. According to Kracauer, everybody recognizes the image of the diva because she looks just as she did on the screen. The grandmother, on the contrary, is a subject which the viewer 'knows' in a different way, and one where she can therefore distinguish between the image depicted and that produced in her own imagination: in other words, the recognition of the likeness satisfies the desire to create a historical continuum between the image we are looking at and the person we know. 'Were it not for the oral tradition, the image alone would not have sufficed to reconstruct the grandmother.'⁷¹ That is, memory conjures up the image of a person we know and detaches it from a mere representation, of a kind that cannot be reduced to a photographic image; but the photograph can also foster an 'appearance' that extends beyond the affective recollection, making visible elements of the supposedly 'known' that had previously escaped attention. In this respect, Kracauer does not dismiss photography for its inability to convey 'significance', but rather reads its function in relation to the labour of history itself: in photography's limited surface and spatial coherence the history of an object cannot be presented, but a disintegrated unit can be conjured up, capable of being retrieved from the snow by memory and reconstituted in the drive to establish a historical continuum.

How might such an approach to photography contribute to a consideration of photographs from Jackie Curtis's archive, and especially those from the wedding performances? In these photographs, Curtis appears as a recognizable image – that of a Star – whose representation points to specific forms of presentness. She 'looks like' we might see him in other photographs, or in movies and stage pictures. On the other hand, even for me – a viewer who never met Curtis, looking at those images forty years later – the multitude of details and information about his 'Life and Legend' inevitably conjures up a range of additional associations, which come together to offer me the *history* of this person in the form of a *monogram*. This monogram might well be an ornament, if we consider Jackie Curtis's name in relation to the 'masquerade' of both Curtis's femininity and masculinity. In any case, what makes Jackie Curtis's 'ur-image' visible – to me, for instance, as I write this article – is the existence of a collective memory in which it remains attached to events and records which photographs alone do not retain. Just like 'the grandmother', Jackie's image could not be recollected had not the oral tradition of the New York underground scene 'passed it on'.

71. Ibid., p. 48.

72. Muñoz, 'The White to Be Angry', p. 83.

73. Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*.

74. Freeman, 'Queer Belongings', p. 298.

75. Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, p. 54.

76. Kracauer, 'Photography', p. 50.

Jackie's bridal image, then, is, on the one hand, a perfectly composed image of 'the diva', and recognizable as such by a viewer who saw Curtis's female drag on the screen. At the same time, its encoding in the standard language of 'stardom' was equally relevant as a means of 'disidentification', in so far as Jackie could be 'tactically recognized'⁷² in a shared politics of representations and affects. Such a politics constitutes the primarily affective basis for the memorial recollection of Curtis's traits, making the image much more like that of 'the grandmother'. This is what allows his monogram to resurface in the continuum of history.

My reading of the 1960s/1970s New York underground as a distinctive form of queer kinship found points of departure in Bourdieu's notion of 'practical kinship'⁷³ and in Freeman's account of the 'techniques of renewal'⁷⁴ engendered in specific forms of attachment. In both those formulations, the development of relationships depends upon the production of *habitus*, entailing physical proximity and a temporal quality of be-longing. Indeed, the notion of *habitus* Bourdieu developed from Mauss is that of 'a product of history',⁷⁵ which is liable to produce more history, composed of both individual and collective practices, embedded in a shared familiarity. In Jackie's wedding photographs such a dynamic can be seen to produce distinctive forms of 'mimesis', in as much as photographic representation discloses the artificiality of kinship postures. The wedding guests assume the roles of loving relatives, and all the normative gestures encoded in the wedding ceremony are enacted for the camera. These images are, in one respect, wholly artificial, since they pretend to depict a fake ritual, where there is no couple to affirm, and no marriage to witness. On the other hand, the affective relationships between participants are 'real', or better than that, in Kracauer words, they have a 'significance'⁷⁶: the postures and gestures were 'made for camera' just as much as in any family photograph, but in a way that exceeds the power of conventional family photographs, they serve as memoranda for a future 'renewal' of the assembled 'community'. Even if the labour of kinship – entailing assistance, care, reciprocal support – cannot be made visible in photographs, the wedding guests nonetheless appear in Curtis's wedding photographs 'in drag' – dragging in both a shared past and a possibility for future embodiment.

Along with the photographs, scripts and memorabilia collected in Curtis's archive, there is also a collection of poems, entitled 'Wild Orchids', put together by Curtis in 1983. Among those poems, one is named 'Husband Number Six: Peter Groby'. Rather than a declaration of love for an individual, it might stand as a possible manifesto for Jackie's wedding performances:

Love is an astonishing thing, even in art. It can do what no amount of culture, criticism or intellect can do, namely, connect the most widely divergent poles, bring together what is oldest and what is newest. It transcends time by relating everything to itself

as a center. It alone gives certainty, it alone is right
because it has no interest in being right.

He had loved and in loving found himself. Yet most men
love in order to lose themselves.

Everything in the world can be imitated or forged,
everything but love. Love can be neither stolen nor
imitated; it lives only in the hearts that are able
to give themselves wholly. It is the source of all art.
To be loved is not happiness.

Every man loves himself.
To love: That is happiness.⁷⁷

77. Jackie Curtis, *Husband Number Six: Peter Groby*, in Jackie Curtis, *Wild Orchids* (Corte Madera: Accent Editions, 1983).

78. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142–148 (p. 147).

As Roland Barthes wrote, a few years after his observations on the *grand marriage*, 'a code cannot be destroyed, only "played off"'.⁷⁸ Jackie Curtis's wedding performances between 1969 and 1984 constituted a collective performance, which 'played off' both stardom and kinship codes. In both cases an affective attachment – a form of love, indeed - is crucial to the 'normative' symbology, but an inherent quality of resistance is expressed by means of asserting an underground star system, and a system of queer liaisons understood and experienced as 'kinship'.

Before fading out in her Salome pose in the movie *Sunset Boulevard*, Gloria Swanson/Norma Desmond gives her unforgettable big scene, in front of the Hollywood technicians and director, expressing her attachment to her 'habitat' and her desperate desire to make it last:

You don't know how much I have missed all of you, and I promise I will never desert you again, because after *Salome* we will make another picture, and another picture. You see, this is my life. It will always be. There's nothing else. Just us, and the cameras, and those wonderful people out there in the dark. All right, Mr. De Mille I'm ready for my close-up.

Like Gloria Swanson (who was the main inspiration for his invention of Nola Noonan), Jackie Curtis orchestrated his life as a performance through which he projected a future revival of his own big scene, a future renewal of his queer, collective love. It's easy to imagine Curtis pronouncing the very same words, while posing in her wedding dress and gazing out at both present guests and 'future viewer', before fading away into the surface of her many photographs.