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Clothes Make the (Wo)man: Marlene Dietrich and "Double Drag"

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SUMMARY. Dietrich, like Madonna, has been called gender-bending and androgynous, but Dietrich's on- and off-screen fluidity of gender identity, as reflected in her adoption of the "double drag," upsets the traditional dichotomy encoded more generally as that of male or female and more particularly as that of the butch or femme.

KEYWORDS. Dietrich, drag, gender roles, performance, subversion

She steps out on stage to sing, dressed in a man's suit, short blond hair brushed back from her face, legs apart, one hand on her hip, the other holding a monocle to her eye—for all the male garb, very much a woman. She looks into the camera—provocatively, seductively, erotically. Madonna on her 1990 *Blond Ambition* tour? Or Marlene Dietrich, who defined blond ambition 60 years earlier? Although it is Madonna who has been called "the virtual embodiment of Judith Butler's arguments in *Gender Trouble*" (Mistry) on the fluidity of gender roles and the subversiveness of drag, Dietrich performed that role well before *Gender Trouble* was ever written—or Madonna even born. In fact, through Dietrich's appropriation of gay male and lesbian fashion, combined with a femme sensibility, her on- and off-screen fluidity of gender identity upsets the dichotomy and tautology of the roles encoded by traditional gender identification as either male or female, as well as that of the traditional lesbian terminology of butch or femme.

Gender theorists—most famously Judith Butler—have argued that, rather than being imitations of heterosexual identities, butch and femme are parodies that expose the fictionality of heterosexual norms. At first glance it would seem that butch and femme simply reinscribe heterosexual notions of gender roles—something that Lillian Faderman takes as an historical given (167–174, 263–265). Instead, Butler argues, these performances expose as constructed an apparent heterosexual "original" that is in fact only a copy, there being no "original" gender roles at all: "The replication of heterosexual constructs in nonheterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original' . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original" (Butler, *Gender*

Trouble 41). Annika Thiem describes this as a “double mimesis,” explaining that “the ‘original’ is rendered original in a process . . . where the second mimetic duplication functions to disavow precisely the mimetic character. . . . The so-called copy, therefore, could not be [a] copy without the so-called original and the so-called original could not be [an] original without the copy.” This double mimesis underscores the instability of the very terms *butch* and *femme*, rendering both parodic.

But even as a parody of heterosexual norms, whether intentional or not, appearance plays a large part in a lesbian’s perceived role as butch or femme—or as something else. In Kristin Esterberg’s discussion of the importance of a distinctive look as crucial to a performance of lesbian identity in general and of butch–femme roles in particular, she quotes one woman who draws this connection between her sexual and emotional self-identity and her appearance:

The times I really tune in to being a lesbian *per se* are the times that I get caught up in the role. You know, when I see a woman in a shirt and tie and a leather jacket. And I go wild. Or the times that I put certain clothes on, and I am struck by the effect, you know, whether it makes me feel really butch or whether it makes me feel really fem[me]. I’m often struck by *feeling* a certain way, you know—a certain swagger when I walk, checking myself in the windows in my sunglasses and, you know, really cool . . . I’d say, “Yeah!” (qtd. in Esterberg 265; italics in original)

Clearly this woman would agree with Alisa Solomon’s observation that “[b]utch and femme are not just the costume, but they’re nothing without the costume” (273). In this (in)vested performance, most lesbians establish their own sense of social norms, whether or not they think of them as parody of heterosexual ones and hence as some sort of drag performance. In establishing her own norms, as neither solely butch nor only femme but constantly both, Dietrich was, in a sense, always in drag. She was known both on- and off-screen for her “mannish clothes,” although she soon discovered that what was acceptable onstage or on-screen was not so readily accepted off it; she regularly scandalized the American and European press in the 1930s by wearing pants in public (Bach 167, 174; Faderman 125; Riva 187, 206–207). While Dietrich preferred to wear a “man’s outfit of sports jacket, slouch hat, and tie” with trousers or (on rare occasions) a skirt (Riva 122) when offstage or off-screen, she was equally well known for her onstage gowns, so much so that years later the flamboyant Liberace compared his outfits to Dietrich’s by commenting, “For me to wear a simple tuxedo onstage would be like asking Marlene Dietrich to wear a housedress” (Thomas 243; qtd. in Garber 357).

Both forms of attire, then, were a kind of drag performance, for the public when she wore men’s clothing, for herself when she did not. Even more gender-bending, especially on-screen and onstage, was Dietrich’s sly mix of “male” and “female” styles and her subversion of gender roles to create what she often called an “interesting” effect. For all of Butler’s insistence on drag as a subversion of gender roles through its parodic imitation of those roles (*Gender Trouble* 174–175), she

goes on to admit, “Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (*Gender Trouble* 176–177). For drag in particular to continue to be disruptive and subversive, there must be something to disrupt and subvert in place first; without gender roles that are somehow already codified and understood, no drag—and no subversive parody—can occur.

That just such a theatrical and performative parody of gender roles is the very purpose of drag lies at the heart of Marjorie Garber’s argument. Garber sees drag as a “discourse of clothing and body parts” that critiques from within gay performance the whole stricture of structured roles as symbolized by clothing and accessories: “[S]ex-role referents within the sartorial system may be deliberately mixed or self-contradictory: an earring, lipstick, high heels, and so on, worn with traditionally ‘masculine’ clothing. Onstage, this method is called, significantly, ‘working with (feminine) pieces’—so that the artifactuality of the ‘feminine’ (or the ‘feminine piece’) is overtly acknowledged and brought to consciousness” (152). In some ways, this is precisely what Madonna attempts to communicate about the “masculine” in her videos and stage shows, and what Dietrich before her did by her adoption of both lesbian butch and gay men’s “pieces” while affecting a femme stance.

Like Madonna, Dietrich has been called “sexually ambiguous, androgynous” (Weiss 42), “genderless” (Riva 78), “a divinely campy androgyne” (McLellan 113). Dietrich, however, rejected any view of herself as androgynous. She complained to Eryk Hanut that her gay fans “have turned me into an androgynous Madonna. . . . Rubbish!” (44), and in the 1984 documentary *Marlene*, she went on a rant about those she considered to be masculinized women: “Don’t talk to me about women’s lib! I hate it. . . . If they were like men, they would have been born like men. So then they are women, so stay women. . . . It’s very nice to be a woman!” Despite this insistence on her own implied contentedness with being a woman, Dietrich, nevertheless, consistently engaged in what can only be called “double drag”: not androgynously devoid of masculinity and femininity, but constantly playing with those concepts, always fully feminine and fully masculine, and thus appealing to all audiences, gay and straight, female and male. “[S]he has sex but no particular gender,” Kenneth Tynan once described her. “Marlene lives in a sexual no man’s land—and no woman’s, either. She dedicates herself to looking, rather than to being, sexy. The art is in the seeming. The semblance is the image, and the image is the message. She is every man’s mistress and mother, every woman’s lover and aunt” (qtd. in Dietrich 255). And an image, a message, needs an audience. Donna Haraway (among others) has argued that, because the audience’s gaze is unidirectional, turning subjects into objects, the gaze is thus a masculinist form of knowledge. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, however, insists that it is only through a “mimetic identification” with the object that “the desiring subject [is brought] into being” at all (47). Similarly, Butler comments that gender and sexuality positions are always formed and assumed as “identifications” and that as such they are “phantasmatic” (*Bodies That Matter* 265). For Butler, fantasy provides the setting for desire, so the

subject emerges as the locus of desire, where “the ‘subject’ [is installed] in the position of both desire and its object” (*Bodies That Matter* 268). By “recall[ing] the heterosexual scene”—something Dietrich did in all her performances by way of her costumes, whether tuxedos or gowns, top hats or boas—“[i]n both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 157).

Long before Madonna, Dietrich embodied this “erotic significance” by incorporating classic elements of lesbian butch dress along with traditional elements of gay drag. Because Dietrich insisted on designing her own costumes, often drawing from what she had in her closet at home, she proudly took responsibility for her look in all her movies. Much of this look had its origins in the gay and lesbian “underworld” of 1920s Berlin, Paris, and New York. The tuxedos and top hats that became her trademark had long been the “uniform” for lesbians (or for those who wanted to imitate them) in the bars, ballrooms, and salons in those cities (Faderman 59, 66, 83; see also Benstock 180–181), and Dietrich frequently attended drag balls in Berlin dressed in a tuxedo made especially for her by her husband’s tailor (Riva 46; Martin 37–39, 41–42, 46). Other affectations of 1920s lesbian chic also made their way into Dietrich’s costumes, although for her they often had very personal connections, not only to the lesbian subculture she knew so well, but also to men she admired. For her audition for Joe May’s 1922 silent film *Tragödie der Liebe* (*Tragedy of Love*), she showed up sporting a monocle. This was to become her signature in her theater and film performances throughout the 1920s; a cast photograph from the play *Duell am Lido* (*Duel on the Lido*), performed in 1926, for example, shows her dressed in a silk vest and harem pants, monocle in her eye. The monocle began as an affectational accessory of the upper-class male dandy (Garber 153). By the 1920s, lesbians in Paris and Berlin had adopted it as part of their standard dress, along with the tuxedo (Garber 153; Martin 40; see also Benstock 307), and Dietrich was hardly the first to use it as a costume accessory in German film; Lil Dagover’s cabaret singer in Fritz Lang’s *Doktor Mabuse* (1922) also wore a monocle. For Dietrich, however, this particular monocle was not merely an emblem of masculine appropriation, although it was surely that as well, but a very personal symbol: the monocle she wore was her father’s, and she donned it not only because she wanted to look “provocative” (Dietrich 43), but also because it symbolized for her the role she wanted to play in her family, that of taking over “my father’s place—against my mother’s will” (Dietrich 37).

Having thus started to create an “image” that incorporated a certain style of dress—that of feminine attire with masculine accessories—Dietrich then firmly established that image in her breakthrough movie, the first German “talkie,” Josef von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*) (1930). Here the enduring visual image of the cabaret singer Lola Lola—designed by Dietrich herself, who thought Sternberg’s initial costumes were “stupid—uninteresting, boring—nothing to catch the eye” (qtd. in Riva 65)—is that of the garter belt and white satin top hat (see http://www.bombshells.com/gallery/dietrich/marlene_gallery.shtml). This combi-

nation was to become, as Dietrich herself acknowledged, “a symbol . . . for my personality” (Dietrich 57). Dietrich’s incorporation of the garter belt came not from standard feminine dress of the time nor even from that of the prostitutes she was supposedly mimicking, but directly from her experiences in Berlin with gay men in drag, for whom the garter was “obligatory” (Riva 46, 66). At the same time, the top hat was not only typical attire for a gentleman of that time, but also part of the lesbian haute couture subculture. Together, like the combination of monocle and harem pants, these two items were central to Dietrich’s double-drag act.

She built on this image for her next film, her first made in Hollywood, in which the top hat was joined by a tuxedo, both items coming straight out of Dietrich’s own closet (Riva 85, 101). Although on the surface *Morocco* (1930) seems to tell the stock story of a woman who gives up everything to follow her man—in this case tossing off her shoes and walking across the hot sands of the Sahara after him—that is not what the audience tends to remember from this movie. What sticks in the memory, and what has long appealed to lesbian audiences in particular (White 44–45), is the famous scene in which Dietrich, as nightclub singer Amy Jolly, comes onstage in a black tuxedo and top hat, that mark of a cross-dressing lesbian, a cigarette (Garber 155–157) in hand, to sing “Quand l’amour meurt,” a song written for a man. Even Dietrich admitted the power of this scene: “[T]hat’s an interesting scene,” she said, with typical understatement, more than 50 years later in the documentary made about her, *Marlene*.

What happens in this scene is considerably more than “interesting.” At the conclusion of her song, Jolly/Dietrich straddles a railing separating her from the audience, takes a swig of champagne from a man’s glass, and then removes a gardenia from a woman’s hair. Dietrich sniffs the flower and then impulsively kisses the woman on the lips. This is an action that Sue-Ellen Case might describe as “high camp” (304), acceptable to the audience because of its artificiality, for, as Susan Sontag has famously argued, “Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness” (290). Dietrich again breathes deeply from the flower and then tosses the bud to Gary Cooper’s Tom Brown, who puts the flower behind his right ear, exactly where the woman had originally worn it.¹ Echoing Butler, Garber comments, “The question of an ‘original’ or a ‘natural’ cultural category of gender semiotics is immediately put out of question. There is in the nightclub in *Morocco* nothing *but* gender parody” (338; italics in original).

But what makes this scene “interesting,” as Dietrich describes it—and one of the most enduring in cinema? It is not simply the audience’s introduction to Dietrich in drag, playing directly to a lesbian in-crowd by her both kissing the woman and inhaling the scent of her flower. What makes the scene interesting is Dietrich’s asserting her power, granted to her by her tuxedo (Weiss 35), over an entire audience, men and women, straight and gay. As Andrea Weiss points out, in transcending both class and gender by wearing a tuxedo—by combining butch clothing with femme performance—Dietrich thus renders herself attractive to both the men and the women in the audience, whether the nightclub’s audience or the

movie theater's (35). Nevertheless, the entire scene is performed in a way that makes light of its homoeroticism and thus allows the audience to quite literally laugh it off. As Case argues about butch-femme roles in theater performance, describing just the sort of camp moment that is presented as high art in this scene in *Morocco*: "The point is not to conflict reality with another reality, but to abandon the notion of reality through roles and their seductive atmosphere and lightly manipulate appearances. Surely, this is the atmosphere of camp, permeating the *mise en scène* with 'pure' artifice. In other words, a strategy of appearances replaces a claim to truth" (304). That the kiss—and the entire scene—is intended as camp and not to be taken seriously is punctuated by the laughter of the woman and of the audience. But for all its campiness, it is the sheer sexual power of this double-drag performance that provides one of the most enduring images of Dietrich, more than 60 years after it was filmed. Dietrich's studio photographs for *Morocco* are justifiably famous (see http://www.bombshells.com/gallery/dietrich/marlene_gallery.shtml). She strikes a very "male" pose, right hand in her trousers pocket, left hand holding a lighted cigarette, legs crossed in a distinctly "unladylike" manner, hat at a jaunty angle—but in the blonde hair tumbling from beneath the hat and the seductive directness of the gaze, a smile playing around her lips, Dietrich is all woman.

For the film *Blonde Venus* (1932), Dietrich built even further on the look she was developing for her own personal drag act. In *The Blue Angel*, that look had been symbolized by a garter and white top hat; in *Morocco*, by a black top hat and tails; now it became a white top hat and tails. At the beginning of the scene in which she appears dressed in that white tuxedo, Dietrich, as Helen Faraday, suggestively brushes her hand across the breast of a chorus girl before going onstage in Paris. Although the song she then sings ("I Couldn't Be Annoyed") is rather mediocre, the performance—and the outfit—are unforgettable. As in the scene in *Morocco* in which Dietrich kisses the woman, an action rendered harmless by her character's devil-may-care attitude, what made this scene in *Blonde Venus* acceptable to the audience, as Weiss points out (44), is that Dietrich's character, already declared an unfit mother and abandoned by her husband, is merely confirmed in her degeneracy by her cross-dressing. Nevertheless, the white tuxedo created such a durable image that Dietrich used it quite often in her stage show 20 years later.

Dietrich began that second career in 1953, coming full circle in a fashion, since she had started her career onstage as a cabaret singer. For the next 20 years she performed in nightclubs, first in Las Vegas and then on enormously successful world tours. By this time, she had already firmly established her public persona, not so different from her private one. On stage, flashy and revealing "nude dresses" (Bach 368–369; see Dietrich 228) in the first half of the show gave way in the second half to tuxedos so that she could sing "men's songs" such as "Lili Marlene," a soldier's song she had made famous in her USO shows during World War II. "If I have often appeared in tails," Dietrich writes in her autobiography, "it was for the reason that the best songs are written for men. . . . That's the reason I changed my costume with lightning speed and exchanged my dress for a tuxedo" (179; see also 244). This

change in outfit was very much calculated to appeal to both the men and the women in her audience, as her daughter Maria Riva makes clear: “In her glitter dress, she sang to men; in her tails, to women” (661). Like Madonna, who has continually satirized her own sartorial statements (Kellner 197), Dietrich often parodied her now-trademark tuxes for maximum dramatic effect (Riva 622, 696). Sometimes the tuxes were black, sometimes white; the pants sometimes became shorts; the stockings, fishnet. Small wonder, then, that Dietrich’s double mimesis—her copy of a copy—inspired a double drag of its own. Almost all drag queen acts, as Hanut observes, now include a “Dietrich.” Hanut continues: “Her appearance was brilliantly effective in assimilating her to the ‘third sex.’ And her sartorial reality has become a dramatic reality. Or an everyday reality, which is practically the same thing” (118).

Although disguised as campy drag, in every performance and every outfit, Dietrich exuded sexuality, what Sternberg called her “sensual appeal” (qtd. in Martin 68). It is that, more than any one costume and more even than all her costumes combined, for which she is known. Butler observes that “sexuality always exceeds any given performance, presentation, or narrative. . . . That which is excluded for a given gender presentation to ‘succeed’ may be precisely what is played out sexually, that is, an ‘inverted’ relation, as it were, between gender and gender presentation, and gender presentation and sexuality” (“Imitation” 315). Perhaps Dietrich’s affectational double drag accomplishes this in her own performances of gender, resulting in a sexuality that exerted the kind of power Colette observed resides in just this sort of performance by “a person of . . . dissimulated sex” (76).

For both Dietrich and her modern-day successor Madonna, the relationship among gender presentation, sexuality, and power is quite clear. When Garber comments about the “*empowered* images of Marlene Dietrich, or Madonna, in garter belt and bustier” (271; italics in original), she both connects the two performers and reinforces the contention that power emanates not only from their “male” garb but also from their “feminine pieces,” which both of them adopted and adapted from performances of gay male drag. Although Dietrich always denied that she was interested in power, Maria Riva’s biography of her mother is full of descriptions of the authority Dietrich wielded both on and off the screen. As for Madonna, riffing off of Dietrich’s shtick and as equally adept as her predecessor at adapting her style to bend gender, there is no question that her performances are assertive acts of power (Kellner 198–199; Garber 155) and of power redistribution. This can be seen particularly clearly in Madonna’s music video of “Express Yourself” (see <http://www.sindrismadonnapage.com/Welcome/Welcome.htm>) and its reenactment on her Blond Ambition tour, intentionally modeled on Dietrich’s enduring image and thus also in itself a kind of double drag (Martin 71): dressed in a double-breasted suit, monocle held to her eye, backed by two female singers also in pinstripes, Madonna “assertively claimed all possible gender space” (Garber 126). Dietrich did the same. Madonna’s double-drag performances acknowledge this legacy of power, especially in her music video “Vogue,” in which, Dietrich-like, she appropriated a gay male drag concept and turned it into haute couture.²

In their enduring performances of sartorial power, both Dietrich and Madonna seem to have furthered Butler's own project: "[P]ower," says Butler, "can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed. Indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence" (*Gender Trouble* 158). Whether she would admit to it or not, it was this sort of power—obtained through tux and top hat and through gown and garter—that Marlene Dietrich deployed.

NOTES

1. Writing to her husband, Dietrich admits to the suggestiveness of this gesture: "You know what *I* do in the tails? I go over to a pretty woman at a table and kiss her—on the mouth—then I take the gardenia she is wearing, put it under my nose, and in-ha-le it! Well . . . you know *how* and why I do it . . . like *that*. Good? Then I flick the flower to Cooper. The audiences go wild. Can you imagine if even Americans get that scene, what will happen once the film opens in Europe?" (qtd. in Riva 101; italics in original).

2. As recently as February 2001, Madonna's double-drag style from the 1980s was still having a profound effect on fashion: "This spring it's Madonna's masculine[-] meets[-]Monroe look from the Express Yourself video that's inspiring fashion. Just look at Gucci's current ads[,] which not only feature Kate Moss dressed in mannish trousers and shirt teamed with a corset, but show the super [model] striking a pose very similar to Madonna's famous voguing dance. To get the cross-dressing Marilyn Monroe look, go for pinstripe suits and masculine cut separates feminized by corsets and high heels" ("Express Yourself").

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