iText 5: Cabaret, Women, Bourbon, Morphine

iTexts 1 to 6 are a compilation of related texts accompanying the exhibition iPod Killed the Videostar

Thematically, the preoccupation with movie stardom of the early cinema era and underground cabaret divas of the 1920,s and 1930's is something that the stars of the 1980's New Wave and post-punk bands readily transferred to their seminal video works. This is a theme that has reoccurred in different and more complex ways in contemporary artistic and performance practice more recently.

An obvious connection was present in the nature of the stardom of first Pop Video Era itself. Both the first pop video stars and early screen divas and cabaret stars were about highly stylized, controlled identities and personas; one in photographs and on celluloid, the other on Umatic tape. There was great fuss surrounding Ridley Scott's retro dystopian future of "Blade Runner" (1984), for example. But it fundamentally realized (on a huge budget with the full weight of the Hollywood machine behind it) what clusters of wannabe stylists and young bands had been achieving 'on the cheap' for a number of years.

Furthermore, the existence of the current predominant monoculture, also provides the backdrop for what resistance remains; either in rebellious response to the predominant pop music cultures, or in offering other strategies for nostalgia.

The 1980's (a.k.a. 'the eighties') itself is potentially one of these strategies. On one hand the mainstream culture has up until recently shown a preoccupation with 1950's and 1960's like mass identities; teenybopper-Brittany-to-go, manufactured boy bands etc
cool kids may have offered 'the eighties' as the counterargument; 'the eighties' with its flair for dramatic individualism. Now that this thread has mainstreamed it has inevitably become yet another retro fashion, devoid of its initial subcultural re-emergence; become more Howard Jones than Howard Devoto.

However, in more complex and thought-provoking popular cultural offerings and work by artists, one of the current themes of preoccupation, as in the 1980's is the realm of early cinema and cabaret.

By its very nature, this is a thread that intrinsically involves a reflection on the issues of 'live' versus 'digital' personas. Though here, this aspect is contextualised within a more specific frame of reference.

At a time when the technology promises to make it easy to make something looking like a professional film, instead, a number of artists have chosen to use those very technologies to make things that explore the DIY nature of early film or preceding cabaret and live art movements. They often seem to explore the crossover points between live states of expression and their residue as media objects.

HK119 aka Heidi Kilpelainen is an artist and performer who exemplifies a trope of contemporary practitioners. Finnish-born Heidi has lived and worked in London for almost two decades. After a brief stab at pop stardom during the original Pop Video Era, Heidi has progressed in a circular route in that, via training and working as a conceptual visual artist, means she now bridges both the art world and the music industry. In addition to her various performances and video works being shown in prestigious visual arts spaces, she is also signed to One Little Indian Records, the label on which she has recently released an album.

In effect, there are few distinctions between the separate identities that this background information implies; artist, performance artist, pop star, cabaretier
side, it has not been Heidi's process to develop 'products' for each of these different sectors and audiences, but a process of creative expression that crosses over and connects with her primary concerns as an artist. It is the individual sectors that have decided that aspects of her output have a place in their markets rather than vice versa.

HK119's work exists primarily as music, performance and video. Drawing on her fascination with Constructicvism, trashy pop star fame, cult sci-fi and the use of music, image and performance as a means of communication, she produces performances and video works primarily through a hand-crafted, DIY process.

Video works often have the form of something like a pop video: Heidi appears on screen actually 'singing' a song that she has written and recorded herself with costumes and sets she has made herself. The technology she uses to create the work is certainly not unsophisticated: reasonably recent commercially available digital technologies. But, the sets, make-up and costumes -often using cheap or found discarded materials- give visible dual meanings. On one hand, this is the work of one person working alone, literally in her bedroom, making a private world out of things that have no immediate economic value. Yet, using her craft - least of all her musical and singing crafts- these are transformed into lush, rich visual worlds. The woman working alone in her bedroom is transformed into a powerful and commanding diva.

Although the performances and installations tend to highlight the references to Constructivism, Construcvist performance art -Meyehold, Piscator and Mayakovsky- seems to jostle past Tatlin and Malevich to the front of the queue. And. in the video work, we are immediately given associations with early cinema and perhaps, more particularly, early European cinema's representation of 'the diva' or 'the vamp', something that is deeply entwined with the craze for cabaret within the cultures that also saw booming cinema industries in the 1920's.

There is an apocryphal story that tells of the first two men to arrive after the Wright brothers first put the Kittyhawk in the air. The first was from the Ministry of Defense and asked, "Can you put guns on it?" The second was a shady burlesque entrepreneur who asked, "Can you put a nude girl on it?". The fable is often used in teaching about technological history; that the tendency to exploit a new technology for military or sexual purposes is often at the forefront.

Certainly, computing, digital technologies and the Internet are often used as examples of the phenomenon. As, of course was early cinema in as much as it was allowed, at least in the case of sex.

The general tendency of early cinema was to point a camera at anything that an audience might be interested (in paying) to watch. However, soon the race to find things that were really good to film to assure public (commercial) interest became sophisticated. So much so, in fact, that commercially successful movie studios sprung up practically all over the world within a short space of time, often morphing out of existing related industries.

The frontrunners had initially been able to exploit the erotic and pornographic potential of the new medium. But, as with most new technologies, legislation and moral attitudes soon moved in to contain the ability - of the professionalised studios at least- to produce overtly sexual material. Other crazes, preferably those that still managed to contain some sexual promise, had to be sourced.

German studios such as the legendary UFA were quick to recognize that the booming cabaret industry could be poached to bring its popular audiences into the expanding number of cinemas springing up throughout the country. Even in the 1920s, the sexy, saucy, disheveled world of the Weimar nightclub and cabaret scene was strongly associated with Berlin. It could be good for business not to only drag in the surprisingly broad local audience, but potentially form a strong export product. Singers, performers and cabaretiers were coaxed -very very little coaxing- into making celluloid debuts.

The problem of course, was one of personas. Funny and weird men could make an easy transition into popular character actors; they could even be palmed off on the public as leading men or be loved for their comic antics. But, women posed a problem. Even in the earliest days of attempting to construct narrative films, the film industry had developed a template for leading ladies, a sickly sweet, very pretty template. And the simple truth was that many of the great women stars of cabaret were not pretty. Certainly not in the way that the sickly sweet cinema template demanded.

Diffidently against the grain of a male-controlled notion of beauty, many of the women artists who had made the cabaret and nightclub their domain were badly behaved, 'unladylike' and in control of their own personas. Artists like Valeska Gert and Grit & Ina van Elben would not toe the line. If they were beautiful -as a number were- they

were beautiful in a ferocious way and if they were plain -as others were- they had often made that into something that brought them the love of the public who shared their rather private late night world.

How this translated into the burgeoning cinema context is probably best seen in the film now synonymous with cabaret at the time, von Sternberg's famous, "The Blue Angel" (1930). A film that firmly cemented Marlene Dietrich's legendary diva status the film is certainly interesting as an example of how women need not conform to the stereotype of a leading female star. Von Sternberg's film showed that an actress in a mainstream European film could usurp the role of the leading lady and hold a new kind of status -that of a variation on 'the vamp'- getting away with reasonably shocking attire and behaviour for the time. All of this was allowed by virtue of the film's setting, the cabaret. Lola's shocking behaviour was partly accepted (and privately admired by men and women) because it was expected of a mere cabaretier.

Of course, Dietrich was an actress playing a cabaratier. Or at least that's how she might have been understood by urban audiences of the day familiar with the who's who of the cabaret scene. On screen with Dietrich in a supporting role, barely noted by the contemporary audience except for the cognoscenti is Rosa Valetti.

Rosa Valetti, to the audience of the day would have been immediately recognizable as 'the real thing'. An old trouper of the cabaret scene with a track record of opening and running her own venues, Valetti was definitely a local hero, a celebrity in her own right and one of the charismatic women who refused to behave passively. In addition to building her reputation as a cabaret star, she had also worked as an actress in experimental and popular theatre and was in the original cast of Brecht's 'Threepenny Opera'. She was, bluntly, a bigger star than Dietrich at the time. (Incidently, she threw a star style hissy fit and refused to sing the 'filthy songs' she was cast to sing in 'The Threepenny Opera'. Somewhat ironic that von Sternberg cast her in 'The Blue Angel' to bring a credible cabaret crudeness to the film...)

In one of the key films associated with Marlene Dietrich's rise to world fame, Valetti is relegated to a character role by both the director and history. There is a certain irony in this inversion. 'The Blue Angel' is seen as one of the definitive cinema representations of German cabaret in the 1920's -though it was actually made in 1930- and is often offered as a 'source' material' for anyone examining cabaret culture.

Yet, in this representation of cabaret, the beautiful face and sexy legs move to the centre of attention, typical of the way in which cinema sought to combine its template for leading ladies with the possibility of introducing a little sex into the mix. Valetti was the star of a performance realm that was partly so special because beauty was not conformist and women like Valetti were able to offer personas that were accepted by the audience as being witty, sexy, clever. Yet in 'The Blue Angel' she barely registers. The new technology, directed by the male gaze, retells the story of cabaret in which the unique features of cabaret and its history are denied.

In the video work of HK119, there is a strong sense of connection with the 1980s; the simple desire to be the star of one's own video. But there is also the layer of wisdom of one who may still be driven by these simple desires, but views them from a position of someone who already took that ride the first time. There are also the connecting strands between the 1980's, early film and preceding art movements, perhaps popular in the 1980's because of their association with a desire to make a new way of life out of whatever resources were available.

However, the strand that connects her work with a number of other contemporary artists working with video is the authorship and control that current technologies allow. Unlike the fates of cabaret stars entering the world of film or even the way in which pop videos were made in the 1980's, the current technologies allow an artist to produce a product to whatever level of 'professionalism' he or she may choose. In reality, with reasonably little capital investment or at fairly competitive rates, an individual with time and technical skill can take control of his or her screen persona. Of course, this does not alter the greater power structures that control mass media, distribution and marketing. But it does mean that it is possible to produce

something that is a reasonable facsimile of - or reaction against- the overall qualities of commercially available products.

Like HK119, a number of artists who have chosen to develop a personal digital identity or persona are women. Certainly, the representations of women in predominant mass culture are ripe for a response. But, viewing this trend as a simple feminist riposte would be to diminish it. It is facile to assume that its primary audience is the male-controlled media that churns out dominant representations. In many cases, it might be far more likely that these women artists are equally speaking to other women, finding their personal position in the aftermath of post-feminism. This fluid state has left many more women confident in qualifying how the menu of options for being a woman in a contemporary society relates to them; taking their own personal stand.

Similarly, this is not to say that their work is about gender, but rather that digital technologies have enabled artists to take control of personal representations of personas in order that issues implicit in those personas -such as gender- are not entirely up to someone else to define.

But it is also interesting to note that the cabaret trope, even during the 1980's Pop Video Era seemed particularly attractive women artists who might be described as 'leftfield' or not totally complying with gender stereotypes. In the cases of Lene Lovich and Nina Hagen, perhaps two of the most memorable in this oeuvre, the connection with cabaret has less to do with the specifc music they produced -both were very much trying to assail the male fortress of rock music when they started out in the late 1970's- and more to do with the personas they presented. And as they progressed into the 1980's, both seemed more interested in exploring perfromance personas rather than merely presenting themselves as rock muscians. At the other end of the spectrum, Hermine Dermoriane, whose musical performances grew directly out of her invovlement in experiemental film and theatre and insider postion in the avant-garde circles of 1970's London.

Another example of this current wave is the work of Planning To Rock a.k.a. Janine Rostron. Like HK119, PTR's practice straddles the worlds of performance, music and video. Like HK119, PTR stays in the driving seat at all times throughout the journey. Her practice, however, seems to set its gaze more specifically on contemporary urban pop culture and how that relates to personal identity, including how the body and its clothing codes plays a role in defining identity.

Janine was brought up in the north of England by a mother whose own prog rock and 'kraut rock' music tastes in the 1970's are an influence on the work. At its most simple level, Janine produces works that might be described as the bastard offspring of prog rock and hip hop. Of course, this does little to convey the subtleties within her work, but it might give a flavour of the disparate sources she draws upon to construct it. Her work can be partly read as a process of coming to a statement of personal identity by creating interesting juxtapositions of culturally loaded imagery. The heraldic elements and musical structures are there that denote 1970's art rock's fascination with early music and the medieval period. The hip hop structures, visual language and graffiti-filled urban landscapes of the Berlin in which she lives are also there. They can be read in these simple terms.

But, they can also be understood in a more complex way, somehow more specifically once the issue of the artist's gender is apparent. There is a deep self-effacing humour in her work; something that is quintessentially English.

The international markets have been quick to coin the idea of 'English humour', often used as an indication of one's sophistication outside of English culture: "Oh, I prefer English comedy programmes."

The reality is that ,the programmes to which non-British fans usually refer are often male-dominated and within the realm of the most mainstream of products within its own culture. "Monty Python's Flying Circus" and "Fawlity Towers" may have done wonders as export products but, in the 1980's, a new type of comedy force emerged in the UK.

The quite, faintly absurd and typically self-effacing humour of a new generation of women comics made it onto television. Often strongly connected with the traditional

domains of women   domestic, certain professions etc- wrtier/performers like Victoria Wood and Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders rose to prominence, working with what critics would call 'high information humour'; humour that relied heavily on the viewer grasping complex cultural meanings from limited and apparently unimportant words; products names for domestic cleaning materials, particular social societies and organizations or even geographical place names.

At the time, this was a radical departure. Male comedians still favoured the exhibitionistic absurd heroics of the Python tradition. One need only look to the contemporaneous example of "The Young Ones". In hindsight its legacy appears to be less gender specific; at least in terms of male/female, though sexuality is possibly the connecting strand. For example, the kind of 'high information humour' inherent in more recent export successes such as 'Little Britain' or 'The League of Gentlemen' owes much to this movement of the 1980's.

This new kind of 'high information humour' meant that television comedians were freed from the need to explain or provide exposition for an audience in the same way that it had before. The male-dominated revolution in popular humour forms of the 1960's freed the performer from the need to make sense. But the female-led shift in the 1980's meant that performers were freed from a need to explain in order to make sense.

Imagery and the way in which Janine Rostron presents herself, her styling and clothing, embeds this kind of humour within a visual and musical form rather than narrative drama. The appropriation of hip-hop iconography by a northern English lass is not amusing because she believes that we understand it as authentic, but because she knows that we might share in her ambivalence at accepting it as authentic. And, if we have insights into the culture, we understand the absurdity implicit in the frequent similar appropriations in contemporary society that appear to lack insight. Similarly, the insight of her relationship to prog rock and its visual culture has less to do with us accepting her a some medieval maiden singing ancient pretty ballads, and more to do with her insight into the disparity between genuine desire and ultimate result.

The English women of the 1970's who identified strongly with the damsels littering prog rock mythologies are amusing and ultimately very human not because of their success in nearing this ideal, but because their persistence in trying nonetheless, despite the realities of who they were. Janine's humour pokes fun at herself and her ancestors, but this is not surgeon's humour. Painfully honest in its gaze at times, certainly, but ultimately respectful and warm in recognizing the complex and real desires of which people are made.

Another layer is also present. Almost a parallel to the wider narrative of the woman as cabaret performer, English culture has its own structures for accomodating female performers opertating outside the mainstream. Perhaps linked to the English tradition of 'eccentricity', popular music has always allowed a certain deviation from the norm if presented with enough conviction and personal vision. Over the years, these spaces have been occupied by a small number of individual women doing there own thing. Not distinctly cabaret in tone, they have simply created their own product. In many cases, such as with the 1980's suburban siren, Danielle Dax, this may have resulted in a specific cult following. In other cases, though, the fundamentally nutty sensibility has not meant that they are confined to cult fame. One only need think of Kate Bush to see how weirdness can have a broad audience appeal.
Planning To Rock does connect with these tradtions of crazy English ladies. But an added dimension is the lack of po-faced expectation that humour and eccentricity should never meet.

By contrast, Hannah Holland's representations of female personas do not involve turning these digital technologies on herself, but on others. Working in a far more constrained context of commercial film making, she most usually makes her statements within commissioned work; pop videos and short films commissioned through the formal media structures of production companies.

Yet, here too, the strand linking women's identity and that of the cabaretier or live

performer is evident. This even transcends deeply different works. For example, in the pop video of 'Slow Road' by De Lempika, all of the speedy cutting and overt digital wizardry of the pop video that we have come to expect is denied. Yes, it's used, but as a means of quietly enhancing the central motif rather than as a language in itself. Instead we are offered a still cabaret diva; a seductive close-up dripping in live performance iconography. This is cabaret via the smoky lens of 1970's Biba. The name of the group itself is enough to make an association with Weimar period lesbian glamour. But the way in which the camera is used -the collusion with all the meanings of 'the close up'- definitely makes it clear that the assumption that only a male controlled camera has the right to present a woman as a seductive, sensual, sexual object of desire is an outdated notion.

By contrast, the commissioned documentary works of Goldfrapp's recent tours uses a much more familiar 'rockumentary' language. However, again the motif of the cabaretier, the showwoman, is brought to the fore, a connection being made with the performance persona of Alison Goldfrapp. If the De Lempika video offers a woman cabaretier as a sensual sex object, then the Goldfrapp works seek to find the heroic in the female cabaretier. Alison Goldfrapp in all her camp, glamour glory is a female knight leading her glittered-headed horses into battle against stadiums full of potentially hostile fans. The woman, fizzing in a cloud of sequins and mad blond hair dares to take control of the rock stadium, the ultimate domain of crotch-thrusting, guitar-busting 1970's male rock legends.

The work of HK 119 and Planning To Rock make statements of personal identity in how they present themselves, including their construction of gender. But there is a sense that Hannah Hollland's works do so through a process of reflection; studying and amplifying the connections between herself and the women she films.

Jonny Woo is not a woman. But this is not a reason for him to not insist on maintaining control of his personas; keeping a tight reign on the cameras. A number of women have seemed to use new technologies to take control of presenting their personas, possibly because they wanted to contextualise their personas in a way in which one of the issues, namely gender, remained in their own hands. In the case of Jonny Woo's work, it may have had less to do with biological gender and more to do with the identity of sexuality, an issue that takes us neatly back to cabaret.

One of the most notable features of cabaret in the 1920's,was its opportunity to offer an environment for exploration and expression for marginalized or disempowered individuals and groups. This is definitely one of the characteristics of it that is prominent in the popular consciousness today.

This aspect of being the playground of the disrespected is an important feature of its development. In fact, the link between a lack of external social power and cabaret is almost a defining one. Some historians have noted, for example, that perhaps one of the reasons that cabaret rose so stridently to prominence in Germany in the early twentieth century was because the respectable sectors of society who readily conformed to the social mores of the day were happy to collude with accepting outrageous expression in cabarets as a means of tacit identification with resistance.

At the time cabaret swept through Germany as a popular form, the Wilhemine regime remained far more controlling and repressive than many other European governments. Doctors, lawyers and businessmen would no doubt have been very disapproving of fey homosexuals, sexually strident women and masculine dykes should such unsavoury characters have emerged onto Unten den Linden in broad daylight. But, knowing that they at least were taking the piss out of the Kaiser and his regime might be a welcome expression of discontent. The Kaiser and his cronies, after all, also determined what doctors, lawyers and businessmen could read in the newspaper or see at the theatre and how laws would be administered,

Given the Kaiser's repression, it is rather surprising what managed to be achieved in the grubby tingel tangels and late night venues. Songs about child murderers, whores and pimps. Raunchy dance routines and political satire. The open display of still criminal lifestyles

The milieu of the cabaret and its legacy, via the subsequent forms of various gay

underground movements, resonate strongly in Jonny Woo's practice. One of the performers in the midst of London's rejuvenated performed arts underground, his practice has encompassed most of the available options. Veering at times in the rent-a-freak direction of Leigh Bowery (yes, that was him rolling around on the table at the Louis Vuitton party!) he is as likely to stage some guerilla lypsynch action in a grungy trendy nighclub as he is to turn to more serious structured works in venues such as Bistroteque- that have become centres of the cabaret/burlesque/live art activity in London's art-ridden east end.

Often working together with Peter Podworski his live performance work is very much about exploring the low-end, apparently ridiculous forms of theatricality. Their work uses performance to explore some of the desires and drives behind low-rent performance forms. Often, though, these become transformed. Cleverness arrives and things are turned around in order to reveal unexpected depths.

This is very evident in the video work collaborations with Peter Podworski. The low-end performance form is the starting point for the work. What could be more tacky and frankly, gay, than lip-synching? But very quickly, through the choices of music and the manipulation of another cheap performance strategy glamour make-up- something completely different emerges. We are brought to a point of new meanings that are immediately entertaining and, in some cases, surprisingly shocking.

For example, the cheap visual pun that drives the work "Squatty Roo" is at once disarming, but does not ultimately prevent it from being a challenging work. The viewer is constantly placed in a position of confusion that means that humour and being offended have to jostle for place. The mechanism itself has resonance with 20th century cabaret forms in which performers wanting to show strident resistance to the mainstream culture, also had to find strategies for overcoming legal and structural barriers to what they wanted to say. Furthermore, they also needed to ensure that they kept their audience that included those who may not have shared their views or identity- on board. There, as here, humour proved a powerful vehicle for being able to talk about what was taboo.

There are other ways too that such works by some of these artists associate themselves intentionally or otherwise- with cabaret as a form.

In terms of content, the work of HK 119 and Jonny Woo & Peter Podworksi share the tendency of earlier cabaret songs and performances to speak about unsavoury things, socially problematic things in defiance of prevailing moral attitudes. HK 119's songs refer to cannibalism, consumerism and damaging behaviour not from a stance of offering a solution, but from recognizing our own involvement with these things, just as the Jonny Woo & Peter Podworski works revel in a destructive camp at what are fundamentally serious issues. These features relate strongly to the 'culture of despair' evident in the content of Weimar cabaret. For example, songs and acts detailed the lives of whores, nymphomaniacs, condemned soldiers and child murderers with occasionally alarming ambivalence, and certainly a transgressive social viewpoint. HK 119's songs do not offer a cheap political solution to the problems of Globalism, but merely highlight our guilty and nonetheless pleasurable complicity in it. Jonny Woo and Peter Podworski's insinuations about contemporary gay identity offer no attempt to make it respectable, or even attractive, but instead seem to revel in its ridiculous constructs.

It is a commonly held position by certain cultural historians that the 'culture of despair' that manifested itself in the arts of the Weimar republic as a nihilistic response to the prevailing economic and political situation at the time; to seemingly insurmountable problems. Similarly, the 'gutter glamour' of the pop video culture of the late 1980's that embraced cabaret and early cinema motifs might also be understood in a kind of depression at the apparent stalemate of the contemporaneous superpower race. Following this strand of thinking, perhaps one of the ways that we can understand the revival of the cabaret strand is disbelief in the official versions and the cheap counterarguments of more recent global political structures and problems.

In its vox pop politics of the 1990's, MTV broadcast messages telling us that if we weren't part of the solution, we were part of the problem. Perhaps, like the Weimar cabaret practitioners, some artists are

throwing back the language of the predominant media born of the post Pop Video Era. They seem more able to accept that whilst we are all part of the problem, the sound bite political solutions currently on offer are less likely to work. Nihilstic, perhaps, but they seem to prefer to document what they can feel with commitment rather than sign up to any particular political position identifiable as a mass movement.

However, if the content and thematic of these works seem to link them with the 1980's re-emergence of cabaret and early cinema interests, then there is a way in which their structure separates them or offers a critique of the Pop Video Era's digital representations. On a simplistic level, it is as if, like Brecht, they have decided to impose an alienation effect on the audience.

The digital dreams of the 1980's in which bands and performers constructed identities for themselves drawing on the mythologies of cabaret and early film demanded the suspension of disbelief in the viewer. We were supposed to be seduced by these new digital identities; to earnestly buy into the dream.

A bit like Brecht demanding that audiences suddenly remain aware of the actual nature of theatre, more recent works implicitly demand that the audience thinks about the constructs involved in both live and screen performance. This is not done in the overt seminal way in which Brecht demanded that we literally see the mechanisms of the machine. The works operate on the assumption that the audience has a certain level of visual literacy in understanding the technologies being deployed; that we are past the Pop Video Era. Instead, they progress straight to contextualising what we are seeing; that we get to grips with the relationship between what happens on screen and the activity of performing. Lipsynching, make-up and evidently primitive filming techniques are one of the ways in which these works makes performance evident. It intentionally makes no attempt not to conceal the cracks. This is in direct opposition to the drive of the 1980's attempts to confront the same thematics and content via the pop video.

HK 119, Planning To Rock and Jonny Woo/Peter Podworski make choices in constructing their works that seem to want the audience to be aware of the often-primitive contexts in which their performances take place. They acknowledge the grotty clubs and dingy basements in which their work is made in complete opposition to the fantasies of (gutter) glamourous lifestyles that 1980's pop videos were eager to project.

Perhaps one of the strongest ways in which this becomes evident is in the use of scale.

The 'close-up' is a manipulation of relative scale in film that resonates with multiple meanings. So much so, that it has directly or indirectly spurned a whole body of theoretical writings about photography and the moving image.

Its associations with glamour is strongly related to the way in which it was developed by early cinema. It could be a means of highlighting the importance of a central character, of lingering on the beauty of a performer or of indicating narratives of interiority, to stand for psychological processes not visible as material realities. Without the close-up, there could have been no star. In fact, it is so strongly linked with the hierarchical importance of performers emerging within studio systems that it remains a strong shorthand for a rich vein of bitter and camp humour.

One need only think of "Sunset Boulevard" (1950) or "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane"(1962) to understand the speed with which the mass audience was expected to understand the nuances of social meaning associated with the close-up.

Not surprisingly then, the close-up with all of its associations was a strong tool for the Pop Video Era performers to create their on-screen identities. However, in that generation's hands, it was used in an almost parrot fashion, structuring videos in a very classical cinematic language drawing directly on its sources. Close-ups cut to long shots of glamourous central performers tottering off into the swirling mist; veils were lifted from made-up, oversized faces to immediately cut away to crass symbolic imagery involving flowers or ice

In effect, the Pop Video Era made mini movies that encompassed all the lifestyle accoutrements that the classical studio

system would shove in around the central characters.

The ways in which the language of the close-up developed, however, is complex. Its many meanings were proposed and distilled through trial and error. However, one of these meanings grew directly out of the early cinema industry's poaching of the performed arts.

There was one thing that a close-up could do that was not usually possible in the live performance experience. It was able to provide its audience with a clear, enlarged view of what was going on with the performer's face, something pretty significant in terms of human social communication.

This benefit was one of the things that meant that it rapidly became entwined with standing for live performance in the language of film. Close-ups were to become a feature in narrative films where the director wanted to convey to the audience that the actor was playing the role of a live performer on stage. Some have suggested that one of the reasons for this was that it was an attempt to translate the cabaret and theatre convention of using a spotlight onto the screen, something that was not easily transferred given early film's hunger for light.

This meaning has remained strongly: it is there in Von Sterberg's "Blue Angel" (1930) in pretty much the same way that "Cabaret" (1970) first assails the viewer with Joel Grey's made-up face. His subsequent song telling us that we are in a cabaret is somehow unnecessary after the work's transition from the stage- where the audience would view it across an orchestra pit- to screen.

The mechanism of the close-up runs through a number of these recent works. It is not merely a practical choice. Clearly, the full gamut of video editing options available to their counterparts in the late 1980's is available on their laptops today; in fact the works make use of them. And of course, the works exist entirely as recordings, in exactly the way that the works of the Pop Video Era existed.

Yet, they have chosen to pare down what is seen to the point that they come across as very much the 'close-up' experience. They tap into a visual language that tells us immediately that the concept or idea of live performance is something that we must bear in mind at all times, like Brecht reminding us that we are in the theatre. If we are to experience their expressions and the things they have made as beautiful, then we must do it with open eyes, understanding how they have made them rather than being hoodwinked into buying into the dream. Ultimately their distinction from the works of the Pop Video Era is their lack of naivetÈ. Sure, these artists are driven as much by exhibitionism, the desire for 'fame' and an audience's reaction as an earlier generation, but they choose to continue their activities acknowledging the limitations of both context and likely outcome.

Cabaret, like camp, suffers from problems of popular notions of what it is. It has been sanitized, polished, declawed and had its fangs removed for popular consumption in much the same way that popular notions of camp have been reduced to a simplistic, misinformed idea compared with what complex mechanisms may actually be at work.

Susan Sontag's famous essay on camp was one of the first serious attempts to address the mechanisms at work in this broad cultural notion. Despite subsequent academic discussions, subcultural and popular media misconceptions of camp have resulted in a cheapening of the concept. Camp has come to stand for anything that is exhibitionistic, flamboyant or conforms to gay subcultural orthodoxies. Most importantly, its mechanisms for conveying highly complex human drives and experiences have been persistently watered down by an attempt to place it within easily accessible lowest-common-denominator media terms.

Predominant gay subcultures remain one of the most virulent arenas of its erosion, since understanding the mechanisms of camp has become less important than assimilating it as a badge of identification.

An example of this was a recent post-performance conversation between a gay-identified cabaret performer and a rainbow-waving member of the audience who had come over to congratulate him. In his act, the patter had touched on Tallulah Bankhead and her legendary dying words when she called out for, "Bourbon! Morphine!".

The eagerly twittering fan purported that this was one of his favourite bits of the performance. When the performer asked him why, his response was, "because it's so camp."

A little uncertain, the performer asked, "How was it camp?"

"It was so funny. She was such a queen!"

The performer excused himself and left.

If this scenario highlights how easily complexity and the complicated human experience can be misunderstood yet still appropriated into shorthand for a specific cultural identity, then perhaps the recent waves of artistic works that touch on the notion of cabaret and live performance is an attempt to regain complexity. It may be an attempt to negotiate other performance personas after the simplistic video identities arising in the 1980's and more violently stripped of any hard edges in the era of the corporate-controlled music video.

Just as cabaret performers of the Weimar period are now popularly misunderstood as decadent, sexy, doomed etc and not attributed their rightful role in paying the price for resisting the social attitudes of the day or struggling to give visibility to identities that were taboo, perhaps these artists cannot prevent themselves from being slotted into whatever reading a broader audience wishes to impose on them, their visual, musical and performance works. But, in the works themselves, there is at least evidence that they are not going to let that happen without a fight.