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Camp Existentialism: Mario Montez (1935-2013)



Mario Montez (born René Rivera), superstar of the New York underground films of [Jack Smith](#), Andy Warhol and many others, passed away recently at the age of 78. In homage to his brilliance, and in recognition of the fact that many of these films are difficult for people to actually access, I reflect here on my favourite Montez performances in Warhol's films, and honour the superstar's indelible existential bond to his namesake - and Smith's divine muse - the Hollywood actress [Maria Montez](#).

Portraying Jean Harlow in [Harlot \(1964\)](#), Hedy Lamarr in [Hedy \(1965\)](#) and himself in [Screen Test #2 \(1965\)](#), Montez gave some of the most beautiful performances in Warhol's cinema. In these three very different films, all scripted by the late great Ronald Tavel, Montez is the queen of the glamour pose. In [Harlot](#), Warhol's first talkie (three off-screen narrators wax philosophic), the director defies the norm that a moving picture frame must have actual movement within it. The glamour pose as embodied by Montez can be seen as a stylized gesture of pure presence as if it were in a vacuum, the result of formalizing the "throwaway part" of life, the triumph of affect over language, style over content, mimicry over originality. Montez is clearly the star, dressed in luminous white garb complete with furry wig, flanked by three figures in black, framing him. Ostensibly playing the role of Harlow, the enormously popular blonde and beautiful MGM bad girl, but more accurately distilling the idea of her, Montez vamps it up for the camera while constantly eating and playing with bananas with erotic abandon.

Silent and barely moving, Montez seems to be performing the archetypal female star image, which makes her more like a luminous blank slate for our fantasies than an actual personality. Montez/Harlow's continual consumption parallels our "eating up" of our favorite stars, Warhol's oral metaphor for fandom. Because Hollywood was such an enormous part of American culture, part of the fabric of American life, showing the overwhelming fascination of these images was a way of coming to terms with what it meant to be an American in one way, but always also the Other, for a male's overly emphatic obsession identification with female star glamour is decidedly shameful, queer, and forbidden.



Mario Montez with Andy Warhol

Employing dramatic movie music on the soundtrack, Warhol's *Hedy* tells the story of [Hedy Lamarr](#) - from plastic surgery to death by intoxication - as minimalist absurdist melodrama, with Montez as Lamarr occasionally bursting into songs such as "I Feel Pretty" and "Kleptomaniac" (sung to the tune of "Young at Heart"). The film opens with artful shots of Lamarr receiving plastic surgery (performed half an inch above her face, no attempts at verisimilitude here) to make her into the most beautiful woman in the world. Then in a different space, illuminated by film noir lighting, we see Lamarr arrested for shoplifting. Throughout the film, Montez plays up the "strong woman" role: Lamarr is always vamping proudly, covering up her emotions with a brave face, and courageously changing outfits in front of us to go to jail. In a satire on melodrama, Warhol presents Lamarr donning white gloves with overly emphatic musical cues and excessively dramatic zooming in and out. In the courtroom scene for her trial, dressed defiantly in formal wear, Lamarr is the center of the camera's attention as well as the focus of judicial inquiry. The camera moves closer and closer to her muscular, dark-featured face as the music increases in volume. Found guilty - she confesses that "stealing is like life" - she undresses as the wild zooming begins anew and the music reaches a fever pitch. Forced to drink herself to death (?!), she histrionically flails about. Finally, Jack Smith, playing the bailiff, testifies that Lamarr was "tragic and noble" as the film ends mid-sentence, as was common in Warhol's films. While the star may command the world's attention, the cinematic machine waits for no one. Warhol's reels always run out, leaving the drama unceremoniously unfinished.

In the classic *Screen Test #2* (1965), Montez claims, "the most wonderful mistakes that I've done for the screen have turned out the most raging, fabulous performances." The film consists of a medium close shot of Montez, ostensibly auditioning for the part of Esmerelda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to a director behind the camera voiced by Tavel. The tension in the film comes from Montez's varying looks of confusion, self-consciousness, defiance, and ecstasy. He never allows you to be certain whether he is in on the joke or not: the audition is not "real," but he plays it like it is. To put it bluntly, the director psychologically tortures Montez, who never capitulates. He continues to perform no matter what, winning us over with a mix of slapdash glamour and perseverance. Mario primps and preens for the director who forces him through such acting tests as reciting the word "diarrhea" twenty times ("Mouth it as if it tasted like nectar," Tavel instructs), playing a chicken-eating geek at a circus sideshow, dancing like a gypsy, portraying an evil child poisoner, giving "a look that would make a priest give up church," salivating, and screaming. Finally, the director turns nasty and demands that Montez take out his penis for "that's what the movie business is all about." These overt spectacles are satirically presented as the qualifications that make one a serious dramatic actress: the boundary between carnival grotesqueries and dignified acting is decimated. We cheer for Montez when he is defiantly playing along, and when he acts shy he communicates beautifully the emotional traumas that must be repressed by all stars - real or imagined - behind all manner of Hollywood glitter and gold. The objectification of the actress as "cock-teaser" (Montez's own word for himself) is scathingly travestied by the "man-queen-star, as Tavel referred to Montez. The drama consists of the extremes that Montez will go to in order to be a star, with the film he is auditioning for being the one he is already performing in and creating himself.

Mario Montez in Warhol's "Mario Banana No. 2", 1964

Sensitive to teasing from the other superstars, Montez lived in fear that his Puerto Rican family and coworkers at his civil service job would find out that he did drag. [Douglas Crimp](#) has analyzed Montez as an embodiment of queer shame's political power: "We see [Mario's] soul enlarged before us most conspicuously at those moments when Mario is overcome with shame, when we become aware - painfully - of his shame as what [Eve] Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a blazon. That blazon, which we share, might well proclaim a new slogan of queer politics: For Shame!" However, scholars Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark express concern about the "collateral damage" of Warhol's sacrifice of Montez on the altar of shame-creativity: "how did Montez experience Warhol's camera; as a scene of humiliation or as the queerly resistant citation of a scene of humiliation?" This is an important question, but it is equally problematic to assume that Montez was somehow ignorant of his collaborators' oft-sadistic cinematic practices.

Montez was a huge fan of Hollywood stars and saw himself as carrying on the legacy of Maria Montez, also the diva of Jack Smith and others, in his superstar-making underground performances. Tavel, in his excellent analysis of *Harlot*, suggests that there is one thing that can make a film seem as "real" and immediate as the theatre: when the performer seems to genuinely believe they are the character, transforming illusion into reality:



Mario Montez with Jack Smith

"Mario Montez believes he is the Queen of the Silver Screen. The entirety of Harlot rests on his belief and its success is supported almost solely by his extraordinary belief. There is deliciousness in his gestures that passeth understanding. His coy rising to and sinking against the back of the couch when Swan Lake suddenly swells up at the end of the film is a piece of intangible truth that bridges our deepest ganglia."

Critic Parker Tyler noted Montez's intense identification as well, pointing out that the ineptness of the drag parody is the whole point, that Mario is not impersonating Maria but is actually her: "It is camp existentialism."

This intense adoration that Mario had for Maria can perhaps best be illuminated through the work of Jack Smith. In his groundbreaking article "The Perfect Film Appositeness of Maria Montez" from 1962, Smith argued that the visual pleasures of cinema had been sacrificed to the supremacy of narrative, and this was to the detriment of

the art form. His appreciation for the sensual and excessive in cinema centered on an eclectic list of shame-laced “secret-flix,” pleasures ranging from the Marx Brothers and Von Sternberg to trashy genre exercises, films that Smith had mostly seen in his youth. At the heart of the essay was Maria Montez, around whom Smith developed not just an obsession but also an entire worldview. (My analysis of Smith’s text is indebted to J. Hoberman’s essay about it in *Wait For Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*.) In Montez, Smith perceived the same “extraordinary belief” that we see in her descendant Mario: She believed she was Cobra Woman or Scheherazade, and “thereby made the people who went to her movies believe.” What is appealing to Smith is not Montez’s skill, but her delirious joy at her own flamboyant beauty which transcended everything surrounding her: “one of her atrocious acting sighs suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster with imaginative truth and life.” He sees in her something genuine, a magnificent failure, and thus the perfect screen presence: “exposing herself - having fun, believing in moldiness” and a model for a new way of appreciating cinema: “To admit of Maria Montez validities would be to turn on to moldiness, Glamorous Rapture, schizophrenic delight, hopeless naiveté, and glittering technicolored trash!” I would like to position Maria Montez’s performances, like those of her followers like Mario, as examples of a trash glamour that opens up possibilities for imaginative queer world-making, offering an infectious strain of “don’t dream it, be it.”

Maria sparked in Mario Montez, whom history will never remember by any other name, a deep desire to live out his fantasies of glamour regardless of the consequences. Smith ends his essay with a prophetic anecdote told by a friend “tonight I saw a young man in the street with a plastic rose in his mouth declaiming - ‘I am Maria Montez, I am M.M.’ A nutty manifestation, true - but in some way a true statement. Some way we must come to understand that person” (“Perfect” 35). Whether this was Mario Montez or not is unknown, but clearly Maria’s delirious vision of herself as a star is contagious.



Marion Montez in Jack Smith’s “Flaming Creatures” (1963)

Smith poignantly argued: “M.M. dreamed she was effective, imagined she acted, cared for nothing but her

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This text draws from my MA thesis, “Trash Is Truth: Performances of Transgressive Glamour” (York University, Toronto, 2004) and is lovingly dedicated to Marc Siegel, who has worked tirelessly to honour and celebrate Montez and his work in recent years.

Pictures: Conrad Ventur (top), The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts (Montez & Warhol)



POSTED BY [JON](#)

ON MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2013 | CATEGORY: [ARTS & CULTURE](#), [FILM](#) | TAGS: [ANDY](#)

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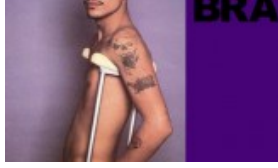
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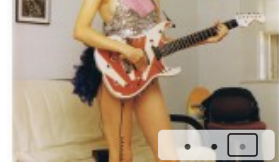
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