'Precision is key': appreciating the labour of performance in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

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1 In all other iterations of the franchise, the final lip sync is between the bottom two contestants, a 'lip sync for your life' that determines who stays and who leaves the show at the end of that episode.

2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 17–19.

In season four of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* (Logo TV, 2012–16; VH1, 2018–20; Paramount+, 2021–), the eighth episode, 'RuPaul's best Judy's Race', culminates in the usual lip sync challenge between the top two queens of the week.[1] As befits the episode's tribute to Judy Garland, Monét X Change and Naomi Smalls join one another onstage to perform parallel lip syncs of Garland's 'Come Rain or Come Shine'. While their interpretations of the song are markedly different in visual and kinetic terms, both performers' careful attention to costume, movement, posture and energy collectively produce a moment of pastiche situated within a rich seam of associations and references. Far from the empty, unfeeling and ahistorical blankness that characterized postmodern pastiche for the likes of Fredric Jameson, this is pastiche animated by meaning made and felt through bodies.[2] However, it is not my primary aim in this essay to point out that *Drag Race*'s embodied, affective pastiche ardently resists, or rejects, Jameson's famously negative delineation, nor that it engages more productive conceptualizations of that device (namely Richard Dyer's) – although as I make clear, both of these are certainly the case. Rather, my objective is to illuminate the expressive work of such embodied engagements involved in the construction of layered identities in *Drag Race*'s televisual text, one that may be said to resonate with the cultural logic of metamodernism.

Positioned on the left side of the stage is Monét X Change. She is dressed in a skin-tight sequinned gold suit, which includes a short, fitted

matador-style jacket and tie. She wears black high heels and a shoulder-length black wig, curled with soft waves in a 1940s style, and carries a black umbrella. Her features are emphasized with bright red lipstick and smoky eye make-up. On the right is Naomi Smalls, striking a vivid contrast in an ankle-length lime-green knit dress and matching boucle cape. This outfit, accented with gold and white, is accessorized with long, crystal-encrusted, acid-yellow nails, a pale gold corset-belt and strappy sandals, chunky bracelets of gold, diamonds and pearls, a diamond necklace with three large flowers made of white Lucite and green stones, rings, earrings and hair slides. Naomi wears a black bobbed wig, with large curls just above chin level, dramatically thick false eyelashes and a bright blue eyeshadow. Monét's costuming and make-up evokes an old Hollywood glamour, combining nods to the extravagance of lavish MGM musicals, Garland's own appearances in suits or more masculine tailoring in films such as *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954), and even Madonna's matador-inspired looks of the mid 1990s. Naomi's ensemble plays with a late 1960s silhouette and pop-art palette, merging references to the styling of models like Twiggy with fashion designers such as Givenchy, the prominent couturier of the era whose clothes were associated with the refined figures of Audrey Hepburn and Jackie Kennedy.

Stylistic distinctions are emphasized further when it comes to their performance choices. Monét remains relatively contained, standing still for large portions of the song, first clasping her umbrella and then making expressive gestures with her hands in time with the beat and in keeping with the lyrics. She stares ahead, a slight frown communicating the sincerity of feeling expressed by the song and its singer. The restriction in her movements draws attention to the intensity of her facial expressions, especially the wobble of her lip, which mimics and embellishes Garland's distinctive tremor (figure 1). Monét concludes by opening her umbrella, full of gold glitter that rains down on her, connecting the lyrics of the song to the lip sync tradition of the reveal, often achieved through the removal of a wig or dress.[3]

Naomi, on the other hand, adopts a much more frenetic corporeal style, using the full extent of the stage, expanding her facial expressions to comic proportions, splaying out her fingers, even standing on tiptoes with her arms stretched above her head and on the next beat dropping to the floor with her legs stretched out straight in front of her (figure 2). As her energy escalates, she moves her body into abrupt and angular poses that gesture to the stylized posing (or vogueing) associated with the underground New York Ballroom scene. At one point she positions herself on the floor on her right hip, legs pointed towards the front of the stage, and slides forward using her left foot, left arm extended upwards. She uses her body to cover as much space as possible, her lip sync functioning less as an imitation of a specific person but rather as a way of demanding attention through a whirlwind of gestures and associations. Although the queens inhabit entirely different expressive regimes, their

3 Perhaps the most notable of these is the finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season nine, when Sasha Velour removed her wig to reveal a delicate shower of rose petals during the final chorus of 'I'm So Emotional' by Whitney Houston.

Fig. 1. Monét X Change focuses on the intensity of emotional pastiche.

Fig. 2. Naomi Smalls' expansive corporeal performance. Both figures from *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, S4, E8, 'RuPaul's best Judy's Race'.

4   Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

choices are responsive to the force of Garland's vocal performance, folding in multiple reference points – to Garland, to Hollywood, to fashion, to pop music, to queer performance (itself existing across various art forms) – that collectively build a complex performance text pulling in different and eclectic directions. If 'pastiche is always an imitation of an imitation',[4] then this lip sync vividly displays the multiplicity of imitative layers potentially taking place in the performances contained within *RuPaul's Drag Race*, performances that require a great deal of labour in their physical control and historical knowledge.

Early in his book *Pastiche*, Dyer calls attention to the Italian term *pasticcio*, an artistic practice based on combination and imitation, and the deceitful use of both, to which pastiche's negative associations may

be traced back. Dyer's route into defining pastiche is instructive for its emphasis on the variety of its constituents: 'Pasticcio is then a compilation of discrete elements, though they may be more and less disparate, and the work overall may foreground or play down the disparities, make more or less apparent its organising principle'.[5] We can understand the use of pastiche in the various iterations of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo TV, 2009–16; VH1, 2017–22; MTV, 2023–) in this way, through the diversity of the cast who provide different drag styles, or in the segmented structure of each episode that offers a variety of competitive components working to form a compilation of different performative elements. We can even see this emphasis on variety as part of the pastiche enacted by the programme's structure as a whole, which combines references to other examples of reality television, along with game shows, talk shows, Broadway musicals, films, visual art and fashion.

RuPaul Charles's *Drag Race* empire now comprises multiple versions alongside its long-running original series, all of which centre on a competition to crown the winning queen, with episodes testing competitors on the skills deemed important to a successful drag career, including make-up, costume, performance (acting, improvization, singing, dancing) and branding, as well as an understanding of drag/queer culture, such as 'reading' and 'shade'. Each episode typically features a mini-challenge, a main challenge, a runway (where queens must tailor their appearance to fit a theme), judging critiques, and a lip sync to determine who is eliminated (or who wins, in the case of *All Stars*). These are interspersed with confessionals – talking heads of the contestants speaking to a moment of the episode – and interactions in the backstage 'werkroom', typically during preparations for a challenge. Some elements of the basic formula of the show emphasize compilations of pastiche more boldly, such as the 'Snatch Game', where contestants imitate celebrities to compete on a game show modelled on *Match Game* (NBC, 1962–69; CBS, 1973–79; ABC, 1990–91, 2016–21). The game results in a mixture of pop culture figures from past and present, each one separated by historical context (and performance skill), but as the challenge requires them to interact and perform collectively, a *pasticcio*-like jumble formed by the references is foregrounded (such as a panel that includes Björk, Mae West, Ariana Grande, Joan Collins, Nancy Caputo, Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 and Tammy Faye).[6] Other challenges might instead stress coherence and aim to play down distinctions – for example, acting or dancing challenges that require group work – but the fact that this is a reality competition means that awareness of difference always comes to the fore in the relative strengths and weaknesses of competitors. A further layer is added through the various elements used across reality competition programming more widely – the confessionals and the judging panel, as well as the use of voice-over during runways and challenges – which explicitly narrate and evaluate the management of combination and imitation by performers.

5 Ibid., p. 20.

6 Snatch Game line-up from *All Stars* season two.

Dyer elaborates on the *pasticcio* aesthetic in a passage which is worth quoting in full:

> These are two major aesthetic possibilities of pasticcio: vitality and richness. The contrasts and clashes of style, the pushing at and beyond the boundaries of balance and structure, the sense of surprise, shock, chance and disorientation, propulsive flow heightened by rupture, all these can feel energetic, exuberant, tonic. Equally the quantity of connotations, associations and echoes available in pasticcio's semiotic mix allows for stimulating intellectual and affective play between the elements.[7]

This description of the energy and exuberance in something that could also be described as 'a mess' resonates with the possibilities of *Drag Race*, which also delights in its 'quantity of connotations, associations and echoes'. Moreover, the reality competition narrative seeks any opportunity to supply 'the *sense* of surprise, shock, chance and disorientation',[8] even if it is rooted in highly repetitive structures, to the point where even their interruption (a double elimination, or no elimination at all) becomes part of the formula. Although the repetition and formulaic nature of the show, alongside its investment in turning an underground artform into a mainstream capitalist enterprise, might give it the appearance of a typically postmodern product, it is my aim here to point out the affective 'vitality and richness' to be found in its performances, which have much more in common with the sensibilities often associated with metamodernism – a reconstructive space of shared possibility.[9]

If *pasticcio* grounds pastiche in the idea of a messy layering of associations to build imitation, this is a useful bridge to thinking about the specificity of drag in relation to pastiche, and moreover the specificity of drag as conceptualized by *Drag Race.* Eir-Anne Edgar frames successful drag performance through the layering of identity involved: 'Drag is ultimately successful (and most subversive) at the very moment that a type of doubled-ness occurs, a layering of the performances of everyday gender and drag gender'.[10] Following Jack Halberstam's 1998 book, *Female Masculinity*, Edgar argues that this visibility is needed in order for a drag performance to be both complex and liberating: 'The individual is neither this nor that, but both; this layering collapses the constructedness of the gender binary into a wonderfully queer and messy binary'.[11] She uses this understanding of successful (and progressive) drag to critique *Drag Race* and the ways it seeks to reassert 'stereotypical gender performances that prescribe[s] the shape and form of the Queens' appearances and behaviours',[12] especially the franchise's apparent aim to reward those queens who present the most accurate representation of femaleness (and a white, thin femaleness at that). While this criticism is valid and can be seen in various forms across the franchise, I would suggest that it does not represent *Drag Race* in its entirety, and that perhaps taken as a whole we might find in it as much mess and 'stimulating […] affective play' as we do prescription and rigidity.

7 Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 20.

8 Ibid. (my emphasis)

9 Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, 'Reconstructing depth: authentic fiction and responsibility', in Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), pp. 151–65.

10 Eir-Anne Edgar, '"*Xtravaganza!*": drag representation and articulation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*', *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2011), p. 141.

11 Ibid., p. 142

12 Ibid., p. 143.

dossier

Drag Race is concerned with highlighting not just that gender is performative, but that gender performativity is subject to multiple, eclectic, but often very precise layers of identity and modes of being. Moreover, the staging of drag in a reality television format presents plentiful opportunities for the collapsing and layering of gender identities, most prominently in the 'werkroom' interludes, where the cast discuss personal histories while partly in drag. Moments like these trouble gender binaries by showing bodies in the process of constructing multiple gender performances, between drag and non-drag identities, so that the 'artifice' of gender and identity is foregrounded even, or especially, in moments of emotional interaction. This brings us back to *Drag Race*'s position as a television text, as reality television trades on tensions between artifice and authenticity, especially when it comes to the performances of its subjects. In their masterful discussion of crying in reality television, Amy Holdsworth and Karen Lury note, through an example taken from *The X Factor* (ITV, 2004–18; Fox, 2011–13), the 'impossibility of […] extrapolating the "authentic" inner self from a "performed" exterior, however "real" the situation attempts to become'.[13] For all RuPaul's engagement in self-help discourses and efforts to help queens stop their 'inner saboteur', through its investment in pastiche as a central principle, *Drag Race* offers a heightened understanding of this impossibility. As Annie Pettit puts it, 'as a copy of a copy, pastiche challenges the very notion of an original, and therefore forces us to rethink the terms in which our subjectivity and identity are inscribed'.[14] Monét's and Naomi's performances hold a simultaneous charge of artifice and authenticity that does not sit easily within one or the other in that binary. Monét's facial expressions communicate the emotional depth of Garland's performance, self-consciously enacting the authenticity of skill and intensity associated with her talent; Naomi's gestures and postures are extreme and highly artificial, but connect with histories of drag performance that root them in another form of authenticity through a historical connection with queer culture. What is more, both of these possible authenticities are themselves performances of self-identities – artificial and constructed, but no less deeply felt.

In rest of this essay, then, I want to use *Drag Race* as a complex performance text to think through the labour and skill of pastiche, the work that goes into combination and imitation to explore expressions of identity. The critique of *pasticcio* observed by Dyer shows inattention to, or even disregard for, its possibilities of skill or precision: 'It can be seen as derivative, craftless, undisciplined, confusing, indigestible, too much, things thrown together anyhow, in short, a mess'.[15] This aligns with wider criticisms of pastiche as the archetype of postmodernism's emptiness in its failure to be critical, exacting, historical or inspiring.[16] I argue instead that the multiplicity and layering of pastiche in *Drag Race* draws attention precisely to the craft and discipline involved in its creation, and moreover that it is derived from intellectual and affective labour informed by an eclectic and detailed engagement with the past.

13 Amy Holdsworth and Karen Lury, 'Tears, tantrums and television performance', in Lucy Fife Donaldson and James Walters (eds), *Television Performance* (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), p. 145.

14 Annie Pettitt, 'Performative pastiche: Judith Butler and gender subversion', *Colloquy*, no. 3 (2017).

15 Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 20.

16 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17; Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 84.

dossier

Fig. 3. Katya Zamolodchikova in her first angular pose. *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, S2, E6, 'Drag Fish Tank'.

In a runway challenge for *All Stars* season two, 'Pants on the Runway', Katya Zamolodchikova describes her look in the following terms: 'I'm giving you 1980s lesbian literary agent, disinterested, pissed off, Ellen Barkin Fantasy'. In this voice-over description, which accompanies her runway walk, Katya articulates the minute specificity of her aesthetic choices, from make-up to wig, to costume and accessories, to posture and movement. She walks with her hands in her pockets, mimicking the aloof and controlled gait and posture of a supermodel, her expression impassive as she enacts a series of poses and angular gestures (figure 3). She pauses at various intervals to elaborate the allusion, exaggerating these model poses so that they become overdetermined, mannequin-like: she pushes her hips forward while leaning backwards, one arm bent with her hand on her hip and the other hanging to make a triangle shape between her torso, arm and leg. She then swings her hand up to frame her eye between her index and middle fingers. She repeats variations on this pose at another point on the runway, adding in a bend forward with her chest and arms, hands on hips. The serious model-like movement and demeanour is complicated by an outfit that combines high fashion with something more utilitarian, unstylish, even ugly. She wears a batwinged, long-sleeved brown pantsuit with canary yellow stilettos, accessorized with a platinum blonde bobbed wig, earrings, long nails that colour-match her shoes, severe black eye make-up and an almost grey lipstick. The pantsuit is a vintage design by Thierry Mugler, and the top features graphic panel detailing particularly identified with the designer's bodysuit designs; the colour and minimal detailing of the suit allude to the Soviet-era influence on Katya's drag persona, and especially her gymnastics skills. The overall effect is quite sleek and bold, but the outfit holds a tension between high fashion and frumpiness. Through the voice-over our

attention is drawn to how her physical performance works in tandem with her costume as a construction of a precise affect, with a time, mood and protagonist. Evoking Ellen Barkin provides a frame for a certain kind of hardened, edgy sensibility, which expands on the intellectual urbanity of 'lesbian literary agent', another frame that suits the tensions between chic and ugly in her visual aesthetic. Katya might have referenced a more fashion-oriented protagonist, given the intensity of her movements and pedigree of her outfit, but the mundanity of 'lesbian literary agent' perhaps connects us to the Ball scene, where categories might include 'executive realness'.[17] While Ball categories might be intended to showcase queer performances of straightness, the upfront queerness of Katya's self-made categorization itself presents an ironic reshaping. All of these disparate elements come together to produce something that is idiosyncratically of Katya's creation; past elements of fashion, film and queer culture combined not to decontextualize the past or rid the present of its own personality, but to create an opening, a space of possibility – the metamodern.

In connecting her intention and enactment of the fantasy through this description, Katya instructs the audience on how to read her performance, consciously pointing out some of the references that contextualize her presentation. In so doing, she also intimates the intellectual and physical labour required to deliver a runway challenge, highlighting the relationship between planning and delivery. Although this segment is a very brief moment of the episode (14 seconds of screen-time in total), the articulation of where the performance comes from and what it aims to achieve invites us to consider the thinking and effort behind each position and expression, to consider Katya's choices as precisely tailored to deliver a specific affect. If, for Edgar, 'moments when the seams of various masculinities and femininities are sewn tightly together call attention to the skillful artifice necessary for a winning drag presentation', Katya's runway offers a moment in which attention is being called to that 'skillful artifice' more explicitly.[18] Particularly striking here is the centrality of mood, of how the look is built around an emotional state – in this case boredom and annoyance, communicated so clearly in the expressive work of Katya's face and body – just as in other forms of performance. Dyer states his intention at the beginning of his book to

argue against the notion that pastiche is incompatible with affect; indeed, the reason for being interested in it is that it demonstrates that self-consciousness and emotional expression can co-exist, healing one of the great rifts in Western aesthetics and allowing us to contemplate the possibility of feeling historically.[19]

For Katya, self-consciousness and emotional expression co-exist at both ends of the work needed to create the pastiche; its conception and delivery combine a rich knowledge of the referenced artistic forms and culture with a sense of irony, as even the emotion she imbues in the

17 As seen in the film *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990).

18 Edgar, '"*Xtravaganza!*"', p. 142.

19 Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 4.

dossier

performance communicates distance and detachment. If the metamodern can be characterized by 'the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment', we can recognize a similar dynamic in this example, as well as in the one that opens my essay, where irony, self-consciousness and artifice co-exist with emotion, commitment and authenticity.[20]

There is a pedagogical dimension to the way that pastiche is framed as skilled labour. As mentioned earlier, there are various structures in *Drag Race*, the runway voice-over included, that manage and guide the audience's comprehension of the meaning and skill of the queens' performances. This is necessary, for as Dyer notes: 'Pastiche intends that it is understood as pastiche by those who read, see or hear it. For it to work, it needs to be "got" as pastiche.'[21] *Drag Race* is addressed to a mainstream audience (especially after its move from Logo TV to VH1), and has been widely recognized as bringing drag into the mainstream (for better or worse). The relationship between reference and pedagogy in *Drag Race* has been explored in detail by Michael Shetina, who focuses on 'Snatch Game' performances to trace the ways in which the programme makes queer history accessible to its audience, displaying detailed knowledge of gay iconography from both the centre and the margins. It is not only the audience that benefits, but also younger drag queens. During the lip syncs of Monét and Naomi, fellow contestant Latrice Royale expresses her admiration for Naomi's skill, and explicitly addresses its worth as a lesson: 'Young children. Take a note, bitch. This is how you do it.' We can take 'it' to mean not only the lip sync as a specific skill, but as a sign of Naomi's accomplishment as a drag queen and as a performer, as Latrice appreciates Naomi's magnetism. The range of reference points work to situate the programme's value, as such 'links to the past legitimate *Drag Race* as part of an archive of historical queer performance'.[22] Coming back to Dyer's recognition of pastiche's potential for 'feeling historically', Shetina's argument makes it clear that the grounding of *Drag Race*'s historical references in skilled embodiment is crucial to making the archive accessible and legible.[23] Indeed, he argues that the affective charge of its overabundance, which I would suggest links it to *pasticcio*, is in its emphasis on feeling: 'The pleasures of *Drag Race* are highly sensorial, with vibrant costumes, heightened emotions and intense colour schemes; furthermore, the bodily spectacle of drag and the show's evocation of fierceness invite viewers to experience visceral pleasure'.[24] This sensorial intensity is both informed by, and informs embodied understanding on behalf of the performers and their audiences; to engage with the layers of pastiche is to comprehend the work of various bodies involved in the creation of art, of culture, of identity (of meaning), and to feel their simultaneity through time.

The quote from this essay's title – 'precision is key' – is delivered by regular *Drag Race* judge Ross Matthews, during an episode of *All Stars* season four. Although I have focused on how the queens themselves

20 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, no. 2 (2010), p. 2.

21 Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 3

22 Michael Shetina, 'Snatching an archive: gay citation, queer belonging and the production of pleasure in *RuPaul's Drag Race*', *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2018), p. 150.

23 Shetina further elaborates the ways in which *Drag Race* enacts strict hierarchies over who and what is included in the archive and the lesson, which reveal 'anxieties over gender, race and the boundaries of gay archives'. Ibid., p. 153.

24 Ibid., p. 149.

offer ways to appreciate the skill in pastiche performance, the judges also highlight the work involved through their evaluation of successes and failures. The emphasis on attention to detail that is so often expressed by judges (especially Michelle Visage, who occupies the role of 'mean judge' on the panel) places value on precision in all aspects of the performers' compilations. Judges also comment on the queens' emotional states, pointing out failures that are a result of thinking too much or needing to let go. These aspects of the judging, though not a form of pastiche in themselves, necessarily highlight the skill *and* feeling needed to construct a pastiche performance.

What I hope to have established here is not simply that there are lots of opportunities for pastiche in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but the richness of pastiche as a multi-layered and vital form of performance, existing in stark opposition to Jameson as an *integral* part of meaning-making and affective reach, within both the show and the enjoyment it produces for viewers. I have focused on particularly successful examples, and it is worth noting that not all pastiche is of equal value or success. Dyer's warning to not overvalue mess is instructive in this regard: 'Still one should caution: mess is not necessarily energetic, lots of meaning does not necessarily constitute playful riches'.[25] As a global television franchise, with a number of international versions (from the UK to Thailand, and most recently Brazil and Germany), *RuPaul's Drag Race* reflects the wider popularity of the reality television format programme in the industry, which signals the globalization and commercialization of contemporary television. Reality television formats are also highly formulaic, offering an aesthetic and structural template that can be reproduced elsewhere. Shetina observes the importance of repetition to *Drag Race*'s original series, arguing that its citational practices are 'legitimated by the show through ritual repetition'.[26] His use of 'ritual' here inflects repetition as meaningful, not simply duplication but something with cultural value; I want to build on this by situating the programme's use of pastiche as central to its rituals. Moreover, this reliance on repetition is an important aspect of its overabundance as a text (both literally, in that there are now hours and hours of *Drag Race*, as well as sensorially) and its complexity as a performance text that draws attention to the labour and skill of embodying pastiche. If reality television more widely can be approached through its oscillation between authenticity and artifice, and the metamodern between irony and sincerity, then perhaps *Drag Race* can be considered to work on closing the gaps between these poles, messing up the boundaries to offer everything all at once, for good and bad.

25 Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 20.

26 Shetina, 'Snatching an archive', p. 148.