

Queer art of parallaxed document: the visual discourse of docudrag in Kutluğ Ataman's *Never My Soul!*

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Through the performative storytelling of Ceyhan Firat Hizal, a Turkish preoperative transsexual living in Lausanne, Switzerland, Kutluğ Ataman's *Never My Soul!* translates to video-art practice the critical potentials of mockumentary-making and its pseudo-ontological relation to drag performativity. Queering genres of visual identification, *Never My Soul!* (2001) documents Ceyhan's self-performance *in drag*, where the drag act, autobiographical revelations, testimony and self-confession are both supplemented by and confused with a strategically rewritten script of so-called 'original' conversations. As the artist claims, the text, as well as the character performing and busily constructing herself in front of the camera, operates as a travesty: 'a transvestite itself'.¹ Oscillating between melodrama, porn and confessional documentary realism, and mocking their generic truth claims, Ataman's video is a hybrid of multilayered artifice and excess.

In an entirely different context, Marcos Becquer and Alisa Lebow, following Peggy Phelan, critique the disembodied ethnographic gaze on Harlem drag balls in Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1991). Their discussion attempts to imagine 'a filmic "match"' in documentary practice between form and content; a filmic enactment of the transgendered subjects' epistemological challenge, in which the visual narrative *becomes* what it intends to realize and portray.² The scholars suggest a queer mode of documenting queer culture: 'a docudrag – a fiction in documentary clothing; a documentary about drag ... [which] imitates the

1 'De-regulation: Kutluğ Ataman and Irit Rogoff in conversation', video download from *De-Regulation with the Work of Kutluğ Ataman*, <<http://www.de-regulation.org/node>> accessed 20 June 2011.

2 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 103. In her reading of *Paris Is Burning*, Phelan suggests that 'Livingston's film does not enact the radical epistemology of her subjects – it sticks too close to the rules of ethnographic documentary to experiment with criss-crossing filmic identities' (ibid.).

- 3 Marcos Becquer and Alisa Lebow, 'Docudrag, or "realness" as a documentary strategy: Felix Rodriguez's *One Moment in Time* (1992)', in Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. Lopez (eds), *Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 145–49.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 5 Rune Gade, 'Talk & show – Kutluğ Ataman and oral visibility', in Laura Hoptman, *Kutluğ Ataman – Long Streams* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2003), p. 6.
- 6 Irit Rogoff, 'De-regulation: with the work of Kutluğ Ataman', *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2009), p. 167.
- 7 Mark Nash, 'Kutluğ Ataman's experiments with truth', in *Kutluğ Ataman: Perfect Strangers*, exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), p. 44.
- 8 Rachel Kent, "'Reality at the service of fiction': the film art of Kutluğ Ataman", in *Kutluğ Ataman: Perfect Strangers*, p. 8.

codes of the filmic practice that purports to best imitate reality itself, documentary ... in treat[ing] an already imitative practice, drag'.³ My aim here is to capitalize upon this critical urge to define 'docudrag [as] the transmutation and implication of a gender challenge into a documentary challenge' and to borrow Becquer and Lebow's focus on the intersections between gender- and genre-mimesis in documentary-making.⁴ My proposal is that within its formalist concerns and its aesthetic enjoyment of an identity/identification trouble, *Never My Soul!* operates as docudrag.

What is at work dramatically in Ataman's artworks is a performative documentary mode of 'oral visibility',⁵ long streams of talking heads, a narrative mode beyond identity or identification; as Irit Rogoff writes, 'long streams of language that flood over you, a Scheherazade-like experience of being seduced by eccentric and extravagant narratives that get more and more detailed, more and more complex as they unfold, following their own weird lines of stream-of-consciousness logic'.⁶ 'Duration', Mark Nash suggests, is 'a key strategy' in Ataman's projects: 'the length of the piece means that the viewer is both immersed in and overwhelmed by, indeed loses control of, the material they are being presented with'.⁷ Although my discussion will foreground *Never My Soul!* and the possible queer valencies in interpreting its videographic narrative, it might be possible to consider the artist's entire body of work as a queer project.

Shortlisted for the Turner Prize and awarded the prestigious international Carnegie Prize in 2004 with his forty-screen video installation *Kuba* (2004), Ataman has become an extremely well-known, 'globally' acclaimed artist and filmmaker. His work thus offers resonances that encompass Euro-American contemporary art scenes. His screen-based multi-channel video installations 'explore the role of film as a medium through which reality and fiction collide',⁸ and where his ethnographic sensitivity vis-a-vis the subject of (re-)presentation incorporates a politically selfconscious distance, both intimate and impersonal. The artist attempts to confront the viewer with the machinery of truth-making and self-invention. Ataman's project, in a nutshell, is to document, through catalysis, the constitutive performative excess within which the subject constantly fictionalizes, realizes and undoes her/his own self. What the artist enacts is a deliberate, conscientious failure in generic representation.

The eight-hour performance of the eighty-seven-year-old Turkish operatic diva Semiha Berksoy in *semiha b. unplugged* (1997) and the testimonies of four Turkish women, each with radically different reasons for wearing wigs, in *Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999) are early examples of Ataman's videographic discourse of portraiture-via-talk. The content of the four adjacent screens in *Women*, as an allegorized community of women, relates to and deconstructs itself in terms of Turkey's republican, secularist and/or modernist ideals as a nation-state. While the spectator is exposed to an allegory of the history of Turkey's modernization in the playful performance of the famous diva in *semiha*, the oral-visual

cacophony of the four Turkish women in *Women* makes that allegory not only embody a queer supplement but also allude to a messily gendered history. In *I + I = I* (2002), the testimony of Neşe Yasin, a Turkish-Cypriot woman, reveals her divided self and memories from her post-1974 ‘present’. Screening this on two hinged screens facing each other accentuates the effect of the doubled image, as does the double voice of Yasin’s simultaneous telling of her geographically fractured life stories. The long-stream interview with a British horticulturalist passionate about Amaryllis bulbs in *Four Seasons of Veronica Read* (2002) and the conversation with a German moth-collector in *Stefan’s Room* (2005) demonstrate the artist’s aesthetic interest in portraying eccentric selves beyond identity/identification. Through portraying the perverse obsessions of his characters Veronica and Stefan, Ataman presents their ascetic art of life. In these pieces Ataman prioritizes the enactment of his conceptual, critical and aesthetic agenda rather than the elaboration, through documenting or indexing, of a geographic or national referent.

Incorporating different narrative and curatorial strategies of genre-bending, Ataman’s artworks position the spectator within a problematic arena where documentary realism *as genre* and ethnography *as method* are being constantly queered via both subjects’ and artist’s performative manipulations. Nash argues that Ataman’s method ‘engage[s] in contesting and queering dominant narratives of globalization and in particular the art world’s fascination with difference mediated through documentary’.⁹ Considering the social, cultural and geographic diversity that Ataman covers in his work, the artist’s aesthetic enactment of, and queer play with, difference cannot be considered simply as investigating contemporary Turkey from within. However, what I would like to analyze here, through *Never My Soul!* in particular, are the possible ways in which ‘queer’ as an authorial discourse in Ataman’s practice escapes and travels back into the Turkish context. I wish to imply both the burdens and the advantages of the artist’s queer(able) methodology and its national indexicality.

Reading the institutional reception of Ataman through the globalizing political economies of travel in the contemporary visual arts scene, Lebow considers the artist’s success as an effect of ‘the twin phenomena of the globalized art world’s embrace of a non-Western artist and its simultaneous embrace of documentary’.¹⁰ Referring to the spectatorial experience of video aesthetics within the cacophony of *Women Who Wear Wigs*, subtitled in English, and the artist’s reluctance to exhibit *Kuba* in Turkey, Lebow implies that Ataman’s primary emphasis on the artistic rigour of his artworks causes their political potential to be flattened and devalued by the global art market; the scholar asks *for whom* these works are made.¹¹ Interestingly, the retrospective curated by Rogoff, *De-Regulation with the Work of Kutluğ Ataman* (2006–07), seems to suggest a counter-argument to Lebow’s by positioning the artist’s body of work as deregulating the flattening gaze of the global and its hegemony over the local. Rogoff’s curatorial agenda emphasizes that the

9 Nash, ‘Kutluğ Ataman’s experiments with truth’, p. 47.

10 Alisa Lebow, ‘Worldwide wigs: Kutluğ Ataman and the global art documentary’, *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2/vol. 16, no. 1 (2008), p. 58.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

12 Rogoff, 'De-regulation', pp. 165–66.

retrospective *De-Regulation* 'aims to introduce a particular location, Turkey, without turning it into a context that didactically explains everything about the work'.¹² Rogoff puts a critical emphasis on 'tak[ing] away the link between place and identity' and assumes that the discourse of Ataman's work reveals a resonance with what she positions against the 'anachronisms of conventional geography'. In her interview with the artist for the exhibition of *De-Regulation* in Israel, Rogoff asks:

How do we make a move in an exhibition that doesn't allow people to do that [i.e. the identification of/with a Turkish sociohistorical context] automatically? How do we create a kind of break in the natural assumption that if somebody happens to come from Turkey and happens to be interviewing a lot of Turkish subjects in the Turkish language then automatically this is about Turkey and it will tell you an awful lot about Turkey? I want to ask ... how we can agitate this, how we can make this uncomfortable ... this endless desire to identify someone by nationality, by geographical location and so on? How do we not allow this to happen?¹³

13 'De-regulation: Kutluğ Ataman and Irit Rogoff in conversation'.

I shall incorporate and advocate within my analysis of *Never My Soul!* both the critical references to the contemporary Turkish context and the crosscultural articulations that the very skin of the video triggers, considering the ways in which the critical potentials of the artwork might operate both within and beyond its national referent. I wish to suggest an analytical framework that constructs a reciprocal non-hierarchical relation between the artwork's local and global modes of intelligibility, and thus avoids any automatic mode of engagement with Ataman's work by means of an essentializing, localizing reiteration of his artistic persona.

14 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 203.

Ataman's critical engagement with representation resonates with what Hal Foster advocates as 'parallaxic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other'.¹⁴ Taking the contemporary performative of 'artist-as-ethnographer', Foster's gesture towards the ethics of 'framing' the cultural other, against the 'danger of ideological patronage [that] defines [its] position in terms of *truth* and locate[s] this truth in terms of *alterity*', chimes with the critical agenda of Ataman's seemingly autoethnographic art practice. A parallaxic self-reflexivity is needed when it comes to the globalized travel of art, especially when the reputation of the travelling artist comes primarily from contemporary Euro-American visual arts scenes. Critiquing the ethnographic turn and the discourse of the global in contemporary arts, Foster argues that 'self-othering can flip into self-absorption, in which the project of "ethnographic self-fashioning" becomes the practice of a narcissistic self-refurbishing'.¹⁵ As will become clear, the versatile textuality and the indexical ambivalence in Ataman's videos, functioning as a continuous visual self-alteration, offers a queer alternative to what Foster sets as two risky extremes in artistic reflexivity, 'a reductive over-identification with'

15 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

16 Ibid., p. 203.

17 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 6–7.

18 For a critical understanding of drag performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), and *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993).

19 Alisa Lebow, 'Faking what? Making a mockery of documentary', in Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (eds), *F is For Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 231. Lebow performs a psychoanalytical critique of the distinction between mockumentary and documentary in terms of the urge for 'achieving a glimpse of the Real' (p. 236). She considers 'docudrag', previously conceptualized with Marcos Becquer, as a specific mockumentary form where 'the compelling parallels [between] the models of gender mimesis and genre mimesis' appears onscreen.

20 Saul Anton, 'A thousand words: Kutluğ Ataman talks about $1 + 1 = 1$ ', *Artforum*, vol. 41, no. 6 (2003), p. 116.

21 Ana Finel Honigman, 'What the structure defines: an interview with Kutluğ Ataman', *Art Journal*, vol. 63, no. 1 (2004), p. 86.

22 Kutluğ Ataman, 'Fictional truths: an interview with Francesco Stocchi', *Spike: Art Quarterly*, no. 17 (2008), pp. 51–2.

and 'a murderous disidentification from' the other.¹⁶ The parallax subject in Ataman's practice is what Slavoj Žižek defines as 'the gap between the individual and the "impersonal" social dimension', a constitutive gap 'inscribed back within the individual himself'. What Žižek conceptualizes as *the parallax gap*, 'separating the One from itself', is dramatically addressed by Ataman's art – as the gap between self and other, reality and fiction, document and performance, constative and performative, universal and particular.¹⁷

Ataman manipulates the filmic-generic form via content, which in *Never My Soul* alludes to the most popular embodiment of (early 1990s) queer theory that allegorizes, denaturalizes and re-marks the unmarked, hegemonic status of heterosexuality: the melancholic drag queen.¹⁸ *Never My Soul!* is an intentionally failed documentary 'about and in drag', a docudrag.¹⁹ What makes Ataman's narrative 'in drag' is his method of intermingling the scripted and the unscripted segments of the protagonist's performance, which he conceptualizes as parallax: 'I had my subject talk about her life as a transvestite. We filmed it and transcribed what she said. Then she relearned it, and we refilmed that. I intercut these two versions to create a kind of parallax view. ... I wanted to create a formal expression of her parallel situation.'²⁰

My concern was to parallax everything, so everything is reflecting back to itself. Subjects like Ceyhan and Semiha aid in the process of creating those metapieces, because they are constantly referring back to their roles as actresses and therefore instigating the viewer's investigation into the nature of these assumed and prescribed relationships.

Ultimately this artifice makes you realize how reality is created and how lies can be no less true than what is understood as truth. Truths are also fabricated. People like to describe themselves as 'very real', but we create our identities.²¹

In response to the indexical status of his artworks, Ataman states: 'the construction of the real world you describe is more fascinating to me than the data itself, which is only an ingredient not the real preoccupation ... the multifaceted nature of my pieces allows them to be recontextualized in different times and places'.²² My intention here is for my analysis to operate within a parallel migratory setting. Suggesting a discursive 'match' to Ataman's agenda, I will parallax my discussion of *Never My Soul!* by simultaneously flattening and reelaborating the video's narrative; by travelling between the localizing and globalizing performatives of its parallaxed imagery. I will start with Ataman's use of Turkish melodrama and then move to methodological implications of the artwork with regard to both the limits of crosscultural critique and the medial discourse of contemporary video aesthetics.

Never My Soul! has been exhibited in several international art venues as a six-screen video installation with varying modes of positioning the six

23 Emre Baykal, *Kutluğ Ataman: Sen Zaten Kendini Anlat!* [Kutluğ Ataman: You Tell About Yourself Anyway!] (Istanbul: YKY, 2008), p. 35.

monitors, each of which loops six different segments of the film. Within these spatial variations, the choice to light the exhibition space dimly and to place vintage televisions in front of armchairs and sofas is a common curatorial element, evoking a peculiar mode of spectatorial intimacy within the enacted setting of a Turkish middle-class living-room. The space localizes the video's reference to the mainstream consumption of melodrama. What particularly interests me, however, is the artist's decision to adapt the work to a single-channel, single-screen video format for the Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York. The order of montage in the video fragments of each screen (as well as the linear order of content, from the first screen to the sixth) is reproduced in the artist's montage of the single-screen version, giving the video a metafilmic status. Thus the experience of watching *Never My Soul!* implicates several embodied visual modes operating beyond the curatorial choice of installation. As Emre Baykal suggests, 'the reference to cinema and ... the strategies deployed to construct a narrative in conventional filmmaking' matters a great deal in the video.²³ My analysis will focus on the filmic practice and the aesthetic choices in revealing Ceyhan's so-called autobiography.

Angrily stripping off her dress and showing her penis to the camera, Ceyhan argues with Ataman in front of a boutique: 'I'm not worth three fur coats? Get me the coats or forget about me!' The implication that a famous movie star is preparing and rehearsing to act in a film is sustained throughout the loose narration of the video as a textual self-consciousness manipulating the spectator. 'I am here to act in a feature film. It's the story of a young woman with an incurable illness', Ceyhan says. The references to Turkish melodrama, the historically specific genre known as *Yeşilçam*, are supplemented by Ceyhan's identification with the actress *Türkan Şoray*.

Since the 1960s *Türkan Şoray* has been one of the most influential female movie stars in Turkish cinema. In addition to her near-ubiquitous presence in Turkish films, especially as a leading actress in *Yeşilçam* melodramas, her representation as a Turkish woman in the media (television and press) constituted a complementary offscreen persona. She maintained a series of professional moral codes in her acting, known publicly as the '*Türkan Şoray* rules': she never kissed, made love or appeared nude in any of her films. This artistic and moral self-definition, carrying a considerable eroticism in its so-called innocence and lack of sexual excess, led to decades of phantasmatic investment in her beauty within Turkish popular culture. Her professional success is a result of what I term her aural beauty, and her moral response to her self-image which resonates with the normative discourse of gender and sexuality in Turkish melodrama.

Women in Turkish melodrama are constantly forced to make moral choices between survival and sexual dignity. The films are full of sad misunderstandings between lovers who have been separated for years by ill-founded accusations of betrayal and sexual 'impurity'. Moreover, many of these films narrate sexual abuse or rape, by a cabaret-owner, of a female

protagonist who strives to become a famous singer while retaining her dignity. In this regard the clichéd line, ‘You can have my body, but never my soul!’, demonstrates how the genre redeems the female protagonist it represents and preserves the ambiguity of the other women it abjects. Referring to the gender dynamics onscreen, Ahmet Gürata’s critical reading of the remakes in Yeşilçam melodrama deserves particular attention here:

The western melodramatic binarisms between virginal/maternal innocence and fallen woman are often ambiguously combined in a single character: the heroine. The heroine of the Turkish remakes is able to protect her virginal innocence under all conditions, even if she is forced to marry someone other than her lover. The heroine earns her living as a singer when she is fallen and separated from her family. Despite a number of persistent suitors, she would never break her vow of chastity. Once the misunderstanding between the hero and the heroine is cleared up, they reunite. In the end, the heroine, who was economically liberated, is unconvincingly resigned to her position as mother and housewife. And she is no longer an object of the male gaze as a singer.²⁴

24 Ahmet Gürata, ‘Translating modernity: remakes in Turkish cinema’, in Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham (eds), *Asian Cinemas: a Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 249.

25 Ibid.

The representational discourse of mainstream Turkish melodrama generally presupposes ‘the excessive behavior of women [as] associated with over-Westernization’.²⁵ In the case of Ataman’s extravagant character Ceyhan, whenever Ceyhan’s identification with Türkan Şoray plays a central role, the spectator witnesses a camp drag mimicry of melodramatic conventions of womanliness and of bodies that the genre abjects as ‘fallen’. While gazing at her self-image and the poster of Şoray on the mirror, Firat says to Ataman: ‘It’s interesting. Even though Türkan is such a big star, she is still not world-famous. It’s so sad. She deserves it more than I do. She is my dear mother, everything to me. Of course I am not as dignified as her’ (figure 1).

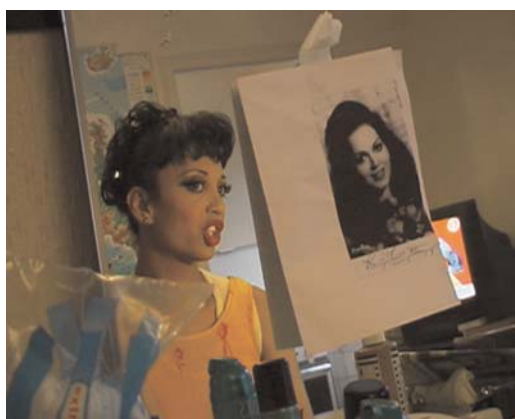


Fig. 1. Ceyhan with Türkan Şoray. *Never My Soul!* (Kutluğ Ataman, 2001). Six-screen or single-screen video installation. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Courtesy: Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

26 Nezih Erdogan, 'Narratives of resistance: national identity and ambivalence in the Turkish melodrama between 1965 and 1975', *Screen*, vol. 39, no. 3 (1998), p. 266.

27 Nezih Erdogan, 'Mute bodies, disembodied voices: notes on sound in Turkish popular cinema', *Screen*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2002), p. 236.

28 Gürata, 'Translating modernity', p. 252.

29 Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: a New Critical History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 61–80.

30 Erdogan, 'Mute bodies', p. 239.

31 Fatih Özgüven, 'Mükemmel bir diva!', *Radikal*, 10 October 2002, <<http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=647508>> accessed 20 June 2011 (my translation).

Yeşilçam's non-illusionist aesthetics of melodrama, its 'cinematic discourse blending Hollywood-style realism with an unintentional Brechtian alienation effect',²⁶ bears an impure and ambiguous national referent within its peculiar transposition of stylistic and ideological concerns about modernization. On the one hand, Yeşilçam's stylistic devices seem to transmute the narrative and the plot of Hollywood melodrama into a setting inherited from the Turkish theatre tradition of non-illusionism.²⁷ The 'unintentional alienation effect' comes from the genre's tendency to transpose the oral visuality of traditional theatre practice to the cinematic medium. On the other hand, a similar transfer also takes place in the ideological critique of modernity which 'assert[s] a localized version of modernity as opposed to the evolutionary and universalistic content of Westernization'.²⁸ Rather than problematizing Yeşilçam's discourse of resistance here, I wish to depart from its status as an object 'marked with an ambiguity and transitionality' in Turkey's cultural history and memory; an object of what Savaş Arslan considers as 'Turkification-from-below', of 'translation and mistranslation, transformation and a perversion or vulgarization'.²⁹ The failure of universalizing 'the modern', which Yeşilçam's discourse dramatizes, makes its phantasmatic investment return easily in different, yet more perverse, ways. The artistic practice in *Never My Soul!* offers a queer alternative to such contemporary citations and reappropriations of Yeşilçam already present in contemporary Turkish cinema.

Never My Soul! offers a camp reinvention of the Yeşilçam discourse of the fallen woman through the performance of a transvestite's life story. Ceyhan uses her voice in imitation of the dubbing voice characteristic of Yeşilçam as a crucial reminder of not only the mocked reference but also the filmic artifice at work. The discrepant, 'disembodying' voice of Yeşilçam dubbing, 'possessing the screen actor's body twice, for narrative (speech) and for nonnarrative (musical performance) purposes',³⁰ is reembodyed in Ceyhan's performance. Her singing, as well as her intermittent mimicry of Yeşilçam-style dubbing, helps to interrupt her ongoing pseudo-autobiographical performance of self-confession and prevent any so-called narrative line from achieving a unitary pathos. In this respect, one of the elements that makes the video operate as a queer pastiche is its transposition of Ceyhan's identification with Şoray into a fake melodrama, a docudrama 'in drag', through which Ceyhan enacts the fallen transvestite. As the critic Fatih Özgüven states, the video is an allegory, as well as an anti-thesis, of Yeşilçam: Ceyhan's spectacle exposes 'what the Yeşilçam *idea* always implied but never showed'.³¹

Aware of the western origins of camp and of the critical risks in its decontextualizations and dehistoricizations, I contend that one could find similar queer performative strategies of resisting, of perversely reembodying, the dominant symbolic in different contexts. These strategies are to be understood as cultural modes of ironic reading performed by queer spectatorship, a lovingly critical exploitation of the mainstream culture, which works to deterritorialize queer-phobia from

32 My use of 'lovingly critical' is inspired by Lynne Joyrich's reading of Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2002), in 'Written on the screen: mediation and immersion in *Far From Heaven*', *Camera Obscura*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2004), p. 210.

33 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966), p. 291; Andy Medhurst, 'Camp', in Andy Medhurst and Sally R. Munt (eds), *Lesbian and Gay Studies: a Critical Introduction* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 276. See also Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

34 Cynthia Morrill, 'Revamping the gay sensibility: queer camp and dyke noir', in Moe Meyer (ed.), *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 112.

35 Joseba Gabilondo, 'Like blood for chocolate, like queers for vampires: border and global consumption in Rodríguez, Tarantino, Arau, Esquivel and Troyano (notes on baroque, camp, kitsch and hybridization)', in Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (eds), *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 236–63.

36 Gavin Butt, 'How I died for Kiki and Herb', in Henry Rogers (ed.), *The Art of Queering in Art* (Birmingham: Article Press, 2007), p. 93.

within the modernist values of 'high' culture.³² There are several understandings of camp: while Susan Sontag considers it a particular identificatory mode in the act of reading that claims 'a good taste of a bad taste' or assigns a 'high' value to the 'low' or the debased, Andy Medhurst insists on its gay-specific definition as 'defensive offensiveness'.³³ Involving a queer relationship to language, culture and aesthetics, camp contests heteronormative signifying practices in *performing* cultural value. It can be regarded as a linguistic return of the abject, 'the suture of queer to the dominant via its resignifiable blind-spots [or] an affective response – a *jouissance interruptus* – of the queer subject that results from the homophobic effects of an un-queer ontology'.³⁴ Ceyhan's divadom installed in a Yeşilçam setting in *Never My Soul!* shares an affinity with camp. While not necessarily de-gaying its sensibility, this discussion incorporates camp as a concept that travels crossculturally to the extent that it acts as a sexually perverse reclamation of history through a critical and aesthetic exploitation and appropriation of a nation's cultural historical capital, high or low. Joseba Gabilondo problematizes global transpositions of queer and camp using various Latin American texts as case studies. What Gabilondo regards as 'border culture', in the Latino context, is strongly related to visual cultures of global consumption. Hence the imageries of kitsch, camp and baroque operate here at various levels of hybridity, where cultural parameters of the local and the global become severely confused.³⁵ However, *Never My Soul!* partially withholds its camp sensibility from the global contemporary art consumer's anonymous encounter with Ceyhan. Camp, in the video, acts as a travesty of the gendered margins constantly ostracized as abject by the various ideological fractions within the dominant normative discourses of nationalist modernism in Turkey.

Ataman's parallax agenda of intermingling the serious and the unserious, the dramatic and the comedic, the documentary and the fictive, enables *Never My Soul!* to promise an impersonal, and thus capacious, spectatorial engagement. In his reading of the drag cabaret performance of Kiki and Herb, Gavin Butt conceptualizes an aesthetics of ambiguity in queer theatricality where 'the performance prevents us from dwelling in one emotional frame of reference for very long, either of melodramatic pathos or comedic pathos'. Butt situates the concept 'queer seriousness' in the performative intervention to blur 'conventional lines between opposing social and cultural categories ... between supposedly discrete and distinctive affective states of the heartfelt and the playful, sincerity and theatricality'.³⁶ Queer seriousness, as a thematic category, acts as a hybrid reappropriation of contemporary pastiche/parody, camp, drag performativity and queer performance. The ambivalence of Ceyhan's performance, as an effect of Ataman's manipulation, bears a queer seriousness: drag with critical supplements. There is no hierarchical distinction between Ceyhan as prostitute, transvestite, patient and victim of trans-phobic Turkish police, and Ceyhan as actress, Turkish diva and porn star: both are treated in the film as performative modes of

impersonation. Acting as two significant mediators of the video's references to documentary realism, melodrama and porn, the two supporting characters appearing in the work, Jessie and Ilkay, render Ataman's play with genre more visible.

Jessie's position as Ceyhan's admirer and lover in the video works as a performative of passive masculinity and male desire. The spectator is not allowed to know the 'real' place of Jessie in Firat's life. He is naked, he insistently wants to have sex with Ceyhan, his penis is almost always erect throughout the video. Ceyhan's attitude to Jessie is often angry, nervous, mocking and demotivating, which reduces Jessie to a position of submissive desire:

[Jessie] is like a young girl. He is camera-shy. It's his first time! ... Look, Kutluğ! If I lose it, I'll run away. He's an extra. He came to play in my film. But at the same time he's my fan. That gets on my nerves. [Miming the acting of Turkish melodrama actresses] Because I'm a woman who can sense true love from a very great distance. ... You hear, don't you? He uses my hairdryer so irresponsibly. This woman has no husband to pay her electricity bill. And she's in a low-budget film. She's living on social benefit. He doesn't care!

Throughout the video, Jessie appears to misunderstand Ataman's project and the characters that he is supposed to act out: the hardcore male actor, the lover, the cabaret-owner with bad intentions and the wolf of *Red Riding Hood*. His presence shifts the documentary intelligibility of Ceyhan as character towards the genre of porn. Ataman's playful exhaustion of the two generic truth-claims – the 'real' in realist documentary and the 'real' of sex in pornography – parallels the artist's deliberate disappointment of the spectatorial urge to recognize the 'truth' of Ceyhan's performance within its Turkish referents. Scripted or not, Jessie's remarks, insistently exoticizing Ceyhan, make him a hyperbolic embodiment of a normative, western, white, colonizing masculinist gaze. Jessie says: 'Magnificent, splendid, mythic. The muse becomes art. The mistress of art. Art calms the soul. Talent, voila!'

In an interview, the artist stresses that he 'hides his manipulations and interventions to the narrative and the spectator cannot know whether the tension between Ceyhan and Jessie is real or not, [and further, she/he] doesn't have to know the extent of [Ataman's] manipulation in this tension'.³⁷ In these mocked pornographic encounters, in which Ceyhan never seems to participate genuinely, the artist's 'parallax view' gains a textual self-reflexivity with reference to its own global travel and recognition. Ceyhan's long, unwilling play with Jessie's erect penis, motivated by Ataman (posing as the filmmaker and/or the porn director) and followed by Jessie's delayed ejaculation, demonstrates the artist's urge to allegorize not only the ethics but also the desire involved in the problematic of the subject to be represented (figure 2). Scripted or not, Ceyhan refuses to 'genuinely' reciprocate Jessie's desire shown on screen. The Yeşilçam plot of the innocent girl and the cabaret-owner is partly

37 Erden Kosova, 'An interview with Kutluğ Ataman', in *Kutluğ Ataman: Peruk Takan Kadınlar* [Kutluğ Ataman: *Women Who Wear Wigs*] (Istanbul: Metis, 2001), pp. 114–15.

Fig. 2. Ceyhan and Jessie: singing and acting for their 'porn' movie. *Never My Soul!* (Kutluğ Ataman, 2001). Six-screen or single-screen video installation. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Courtesy: Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



transposed into an encounter between the non-western queer subject and the global/izing gaze.

The presence of another transvestite, Ilkay, is as significant as that of Jessie in the video. A friend of Ceyhan, Ilkay seems to be similarly unaware of what is happening in front of the camera. 'There is nothing to discuss, only shallow conversation', Ilkay says, trying to understand what the ongoing film project is about. Each time Ilkay appears on screen, the generic filmic pathos is transferred to that of documentary drama. In other words, Ilkay acts as a localizing agent, the conventional performative of localization, who tends to remind the spectator of the geographical reference and of the queer victims in that marked geography. Ilkay talks about the transvestite, Gonca, a victim of queerbashing recently murdered in Istanbul: 'It upsets me more. I am going to Turkey. It could happen to me too.'

Scripted or not, trying to convince her friend to perform as a senior *consommatrice* of a brothel, in order to reenact a Yeşilçam plot, Ceyhan fails to encourage Ilkay to enter the mockumentary setting of the video. Ilkay reacts to Ceyhan's performance by exclaiming 'This is so overacted!' Whereas the mocked submissive masculinity of Jessie leads the narrative dynamic to both a fake melodramatic and pornographic setting, the naivety of Ilkay and her fixation with 'reality' converts this into a fake confessional documentary narrative (figures 3a and 3b). Scripted or not, what makes Ceyhan's performance queer is her ambivalent self-positioning and flirtation with both performative forces of genre truth-claims. As José Muñoz's analysis of Richard Fung's autoethnographies also demonstrates in an entirely different postcolonial context, Ataman's critical ambivalence in *Never My Soul!* 'deconstructs and ruptures the white mythologies of ethnopia and pornotopia': the epistemological and erotic desire, in ethnography and pornography, for containing the Other.³⁸

Ataman's presentation of Ilkay embodies what his agenda criticizes and resists: the unidirectional dynamic of 'address' and thus the conventional

38 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 77–92.

Fig. 3a and 3b. Jessie (left) and Ilkay (right). *Never My Soul!* (Kutluğ Ataman, 2001). Six-screen or single-screen video installation. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Courtesy: Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



identificatory regimes at work in spectatorial experience. Complaining about her past victimhood and her extremely negative experience of prison due to her transgendered appearance, Ilkay becomes a subject who appears to be in charge of her personal history and speech in front of the camera. She demands a recipient in order to be listened to and understood. However, Ceyhan's performance (scripted or not), as with Semiha's (*semiha b. unplugged*), Veronica's (*Four Seasons of Veronica*) or Nese Yasin's (*I + I = I*), enables what Rogoff's curatorial practice attempts to conceptualize as 'the deregulation of experience, of who has the right to define and categorize it and of how it can become a participatory mode'.³⁹ Ilkay's complaining voice – the voice of queer exile – her discontent with Turkey and with the victims of queerphobia, embody the generic pathos of mainstream documentary drama which juxtaposes the queer relationality of what Ataman performs through Ceyhan with the video's performative mode of address. Hearing and viewing Ceyhan on screen, the spectator does not have to construct a personal identification: 'I do not need to mobilize empathy, sympathy or identification in order to be an appropriate listener, I am simply taking part in a mode of address which requires me to complete its circuit'.⁴⁰

I have watched *Never My Soul!* several times over the course of seven years, both as a six-screen multi-channel video installation and as single-screen digital archive material. Experiencing the video as a theoretical object, as an art object which 'can be brought to bear on theory' and to 'theorize our concepts beyond the academic articulations of their meaning, status and relations',⁴¹ bears the possibility of a dynamic and unstable methodology which can actively thicken and flatten its queer videographic surface or texture. While I enjoy the artist's play with Yeşilçam melodrama and the politics of heteronormativity in Turkey via Ceyhan's performance, I would still argue that the queerness of portraiture at work opens a conceptual territory beyond what one might consider, from within a discourse of nomadic aesthetics, as a localized or hybridized accent. Recalling also Rogoff's urge 'to agitate' the mark of identity and geography, I want to question the zone of intersection where that which queer aesthetics valorizes as *surface* and neo-Marxist critiques of

³⁹ Rogoff, 'De-regulation', p. 165.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: a Rough Guide* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 185.

globalization and/or postmodernism devalorize as *flat* or *flattening* overlap and transfigure each other. In this respect, simultaneously inhabiting a queer agenda and a global contemporary art market, *Never My Soul!* acts as a theoretical object that allows a problematization of the intersectional boundary between the two conceptual performatives of the depthless.

Queer aesthetics, according to William Haver, implicates and inspires a pornographic art of existence. Haver argues that queer theory's obsession with and insistence on surface as 'being's most profound depth' works to undo the heteronormative constitution of sexual differentiability in which the corporeal depth can operate only as an abyss to be veiled in the field of vision. What Haver embraces as queer is an erotics of critique where the queer critic's 'pornographic reading' and 'absolute devotion to the flesh' remain the only way to 'make the [queerly] political happen'.⁴² Haver argues that 'art's work is an existential comportment that in its very happening acknowledges that what is at issue is not a surface that presumptively conceals the depth of being's being, but the surface that *is* being's most profound depth'.⁴³ This resonates well with Judith Halberstam's commentary on Frederic Jameson's critique of contemporary pastiche as constitutive of postmodern aesthetics. Halberstam refers to Mandy Merck's queer reading of Jameson's critical reflex in his juxtaposition of Vincent Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887) and Andy Warhol's silk-screen *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) to demonstrate how Jameson's account of the body in/of representation, via the example of the Warholian body, 'depends utterly on a homophobic repudiation of the superficial, the depthless and the spectacular'.⁴⁴ In this sense, devoid of a unitary monopathic generic truth-claim and insistent upon sustaining ambiguity and artifice on the surface, Ataman's parallaxic agenda in *Never My Soul!*, a docudrag '*in and about drag*', serves for a queer aesthetics of the depthless.

How might the oral visuality in Ataman's work that is kept strategically on the surface influence a critical practice of reading the queerness in this imposed ambiguity without forgetting its global context as contemporary artwork? How has the critical scholarship on Ataman's *oeuvre* underlined the same discontent with the global art market but positioned the artist's agenda in entirely oppositional extremes of either reinforcing or resisting the profit regimes of globalization in contemporary arts? On the one hand, the curators Rogoff and Nash celebrate the queer relationality that Ataman's artwork imposes *with* Turkey (as a deregulatory agenda confronting the surplus value of identity politics in the global art scene), extracting critique and politics from it. Lebow, on the other hand, emphasizes the very gap between aesthetic and political concerns in the global travel of Ataman and his works' travel back home. Though fully aware of Lebow's concerns with the transposability of the English subtitles in

42 William Haver, 'Really bad affinities: queer's honour and the pornographic life', *Parallax*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1999), p. 13.

43 Ibid.

44 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), p. 100; Mandy Merck, 'Figuring out Andy Warhol', in Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley and José Esteban Muñoz (eds), *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 224–37. See also Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992).

Women Who Wear Wigs when exhibited in Turkey, and the supposedly self-imposed absence of *Kuba* from Turkey's art scene, I can neither mark and fix the cultural geography *as target* in Ataman's agenda in general, nor ask the ethical question of 'for whom Ataman's artworks are being made'. At the risk of endorsing exclusionary elitism and of reiterating the logic of profitable nomadism of globalized capitalism, I prefer to argue that Ataman's practice neither prioritizes nor addresses a primarily Turkish audience, or any specific national referent. It contains several other spectatorial modalities which deserve critical focus. I thus want to ask if a hierarchical system is needed, while examining the local and the so-called global parameters of such an aesthetics of ambiguity employed via the videographic surface. It is my contention that the opposition between the critically valorized, globally sexualized surface in queer theory and the latently queerphobic take on flatness in critiques of globalization would be problematized further when the aesthetic and ontological foundations of video-as-medium are taken into account.

According to Christine Ross, 'video works against depth'.⁴⁵ Treating its visual discourse of surface as a function of 'a mirror effect and no longer a mirror proper', Ross argues that the video as medium is an embodied skin and that the image it reveals allows a conscientious failure in representation:

Understanding the image as effect implies that the referential and the reflexive no longer have their function to mobilize the gaze in the service of a penetrating interpretation, they no longer constitute the gaze in its capacity for perception, in its access to meaning beneath the surface of the image. As long as the image is conceived of as effect, meaning lies on the surface.⁴⁶

In her reading of video 'as a migratory medium', Mieke Bal, thinking within and beyond migration as concept and metaphor, argues that what the intermedial identity of the video image articulates as space, as body and as time performs a migratory setting, a migratory aesthetic. Instead of unpacking Bal's departure from migration to conceptualize the migratory and relating it automatically to Ceyhan's exile in Switzerland, I want to refer to what Bal sees in video art: 'production of surface as skin [through the] poetics of video in *intimacy*'.⁴⁷ Bal regards the encounter of the spectator with the video-as-medium as an encounter between 'intimate strangers'. What triggers a heterotopic space of such an impersonal intimacy is what characterizes video: 'the [videographic] surface that, on the one hand, shows, and on the other, withholds'.⁴⁸ This is the link between Ross and Bal: video as the disidentificatory medial surface, surface as libidinal skin, where 'the image invites the gaze to slide across it'.⁴⁹

The discourse of the intimate resonates well with the second-generation queer thought on the ethics of the impersonal and the anonymous – as seen in the work of Tim Dean and Leo Bersani.⁵⁰ In this sense, Bal's

⁴⁵ Christine Ross, 'Lamented moments/desired objects of video art: towards an aesthetics of discrepancy', in Janine Marchessault (ed.), *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1995), p. 131.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Mieke Bal, 'Heterochronotopia', in Murat Aydemir and Alex Rotas (eds), *Migratory Settings*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 52 (my emphasis).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ Ross, 'Lamented moments', p. 130.

⁵⁰ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

conceptual examination of the ‘migratory’ through the medial ontology and ethics of relationality in video art can easily be extrapolated to include the concept of queer and its critical modes of erotic/ascetic relationality as an alternative to understanding video as medium.

In his study on the gay male subculture of barebacking, Dean calls for the urgency to ‘elaborate something other than a politics of empathy, identification, and recognition’.⁵¹ According to Dean’s argument, which works to articulate methodologically an ethic of alterity beyond identification politics while writing about gay male barebacking, ‘it is possible to care about something without recognizing oneself (or an aspect of oneself) in it’.⁵² Bersani conceptualizes this as ‘impersonal narcissism’ and considers such a vision of expansive self as a ‘powerful weapon against the necessities, and the very necessity, of settled being’.⁵³ Dean and Bersani conceptualize a mode of relationality where the sexual as referent is sublimated ‘as not the repressively redemptive desexualization of sexuality, but its much more interesting and progressive degenitalization’.⁵⁴ Through Ataman’s parallax presentation of Ceyhan, *Never My Soul!* enacts a queer erotics of impersonal relationality.

Scripted or not, Ceyhan, by her bathtub (figure 4), becomes angry with the artist: ‘Not now darling. This is bath time. This is my private life. No filming. Please give me half an hour. I’ll jerk off. Is it possible to come? If you’ll permit. I am so tense!’ The video also contains a fairly long scene of Ceyhan in her bathtub talking about her childhood memories: the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the absence of her mother, the violence of her father, the sexual abuse by a family relative. ‘Come on, leave the camera. Join me. See what I’ll give you’, says Ceyhan, flirting with the artist in her Yeşilçam-style dubbing voice. Not only the intimate mise-en-scene (Ceyhan in the bathtub naked) but also the performative mode of the so-called confession mocks the pathos of documentary realism: ‘I’d always known that I was different even at the age of seven or eight. I didn’t have a name for it, but I knew. Now I can name it. ... I was a star.’

Ataman’s aesthetic performance of conscientious ambiguity in *Never My Soul!* operates primarily as a theoretical and methodological object. Although his artworks in general address banal, everyday, national, gendered, sexual, ethnic and racial referents, there usually appears an erotic indifference towards videographic surface which calls for an intersubjective exchange from within the work’s intended ambiguity. Ataman’s parallax supplements the queer alterity on screen. As Nash argues, ‘instead of reinforcing an ego defensively against difference, Ataman proposes an integration or reincorporation of difference’.⁵⁵

Being exposed to the spectacle onscreen and trying to follow, empathize with or interpret the moving image, the critic or the spectator is expected to find himself ‘performing performatively’.⁵⁶ Rogoff’s emphasis on ‘being addressed’ in Ataman’s work echoes with an ethical mode of sustaining representational ambiguity which enables the very

51 Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p. 24.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

53 Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, p. 30.

54 Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 276.

55 Nash, ‘Kutluğ Ataman’s experiment’s with truth’, pp. 47–8

56 Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, pp. 189–90.

Fig. 4. Ceyhan by her bathtub. *Never My Soul!* (Kutluğ Ataman, 2001). Six-screen or single-screen video installation. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Courtesy: Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



57 Rogoff, 'De-Regulation', pp. 165–67.

surface to perform, gain affective depth, address the receiver and 'demand a response'.⁵⁷

'You want me to tell everything all at once? Warm me up, sugar!', says Ceyhan, rubbing the depilatory cream over her naked body and reacting to the immediacy of the artist's curious questions. In another segment of the video, humorously mimicking a pornographic cum-shot, Ceyhan talks to Jessie while 'helping' him masturbate and pointing her finger to his leg: 'You come here. This line. The script is like that.' The self-mocking ethos in *Never My Soul!* prevents the location of both Ceyhan's and the artist's authorial power in the performance on screen. The truth of what Ceyhan is being constantly 'warmed up' for is as performative as the truth of Jessie's ejaculation.

Reading James Coleman's *Photograph* (1998–99) as 'a theoretical object' that enacts performativity via the 'conflation of performance and performativity', Bal questions the possibilities of 'mess[ing] up the two concepts' without forgetting their theoretical distinctions.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Ataman's treatment of video as a parallaxed document works to 'mobiliz[e] the staging of subjectivity as a way of building and giving agency': the video does this 'by foregrounding ... the *performativity of performance*'.⁵⁹ The artistic intent, hiding its manipulative authorial visibility but nevertheless always reminding us of it, appears to negotiate its hegemony with the subject's performance. The video enacts the aporias of genre, authorship and intentionality in staging the very performativity of subjectivity.

Having a drink on her bed and talking to Ataman about Turkish cinema's hypocritical take on the issue of virginity, Ceyhan sees the newspaper next to her on the bed, and her eyes 'accidentally' fall upon an interview with Türkan Şoray in the paper. Expressing her appreciation of the question with which the journalist starts the interview, 'Madame Türkan, are you real?', and Şoray's response, 'It's the first time I heard such a direct question', Ceyhan starts reading from the paper the rest of the star's answer:

58 Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 206.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Fig. 5. Ceyhan on the dialysis machine. *Never My Soul!* (Kutluğ Ataman, 2001). Six-screen or single-screen video installation. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Courtesy: Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



I am a real living ... suffering, thinking, sleeping, crying, raging person, a real person. What causes such a question stems from a feeling cinema emits. ... It is as if I put a spell on cinema and cinema put a spell on me. I've only lived in cinema, in a dream world. ... Was I an illusion or a reality? ... I didn't exist outside cinema. I only existed through my films. ... That's why no one knew if I was real. ... That's why you are asking this.

Emre Baykal regards Ataman's practice in *Never My Soul!* as a 'deconstruction of the "spell" of conventional cinema'.⁶⁰ The definitely scripted encounter of Ceyhan with the newspaper interview is one of the moments when the conceptual boundaries between artifice and reality, performance and performativity, address and authorial intent, dissolve. Being in love with and feeling 'bewitched by' what that spell reveals as Türkan Şoray, the character Ceyhan Firat revealed in the video is a hyperbolic version, a conscientiously failed copy, a queer reappropriation, of that 'spell' that Şoray embodies.

In either the final segment of the single-screen version or in one of the final looping monitors of the six-screen installation, Ceyhan's body is shown in a hospital, next to a dialysis machine. The artist's long take on the medical process supplements the circularity of the parallaxed travesty at work. Recalling what Ceyhan rehearses for ('I am here to act in a feature film. It's the story of a young woman with an incurable illness'), Ataman's nearly four-minute closeup on Ceyhan's arm connected to the dialysis machine 'performs performatively' the indispensable relation between life, fiction, art and self (figure 5). *Never My Soul!* reveals intimacy via artifice: an impersonal intimacy, a skin-to-skin amorous act, a touching encounter.

In *Arts of Impoverishment*, Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit ask: 'Is there a nonsadistic type of movement? Is there a mode of circulation – within the work of art and in our relation to it – different from the moves of an appropriating consciousness?'⁶¹ These questions, with their seemingly complex implications, imagine alternative modes of relationality, a non-

⁶⁰ Baykal, *Kutluğ Ataman*, p. 35.

⁶¹ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Resnais, Rothko* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 6.

assimilating aesthetics of intimacy with the other, where the world's difference acts, in Bersani's words, 'not as a traumatic difference to be overcome but as a nonthreatening supplement to sameness'.⁶² Bersani and Dutoit conceptualize an aesthetics of impersonality in art, an aesthetics of a conscientious failure and self-divestiture in artistic expression. The critical practice within this collaboration positions its aesthetic subjectivity beyond the notions of projective selfhood. The passivity in such identificatory ambivalence is a critical passivity, an ascetic mode of refusing to represent and be indexed. While Ataman's video resonates with such an understanding of queer asceticism, this is not to undermine a critical aesthetic investment in representational visibility that the artist never entirely forgoes. *Never My Soul!* offers an ascetic practice that problematizes the self in its self-reflexivity and expands outwards from within the hegemonic representational modes of indexing art-practice in terms of nationality, gender and sexuality. The video thus bears geopolitical implications both for the academic and intellectual engagement with theory and object, as well as for the art critic and the artist. The relationality that my analysis suggests does not merely acknowledge the ways in which *Never My Soul!* performs as a critical transnational art object, and the artist as an ethical/political agent, but also proposes an ethics of performative methodology for critical scholarship; an ethics of critical engagement with identity politics, mediating a non-hegemonic encounter between queer theory, queer practice and its possible objects.

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