**The Cabaret is a Prison / The Cabaret is a Paradise**

**SLIDE 1**

**SLIDE 2**

**SING OVID (Loop 3)**

We begin with the curtains parting to reveal a female singer onstage with a single microphone. In the audience of the cabaret club sit a throng of men, all clamoring to be heard as they compare notes on the chanteuse before them. Berger yells over Mark Fisher, while David Lynch sits further back, chugging coffee and chain-smoking. Josef van Sternberg twiddles his mustache absent-mindedly while Carlo Rovelli rattles out his latest treatise and J.M. Synge scribbles in a notebook. Directors, writers, critics – all of the men sit ogling the woman shamelessly, parceling her opacity into panning shots and pithy phrases. Her status as mysterious object is uncontested – something about the club they’re in, something in its *bones* seems to give them permission to read onto and into her. How very strange, to be read onto and into.

In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Fisher writes that [**worklight ON]** ‘curtains both conceal and reveal…they do not only mark a threshold; they constitute one: an egress to the outside’ (2016, p.53) [**worklight OFF]** . The curtains keep you all out, but they’ve been keeping me inside, you see. I’m here to address that. We do not have real curtains today, but I want you to imagine that curtains part to reveal the female singer, onstage, with a single microphone (**indicate self**). If we were in a Lynch film, they might be a shimmering blue or a matte crimson. If we were in van Sternberg’s *der Blaue Engel*, set in Weimar Germany, the curtain might be more of a homespun and rag-tag affair, fitting the nomadic nature of the characters’ theatrical enterprises. Curtains mark a threshold between worlds, and today I invite you to cross that threshold. Here, tonight, our curtain is psychological. I am lifting the veil on what lies beyond and inviting you in, even as I fight my way out from behind its oppressive fabric.

*The Ballad of Isosceles* is a performance I created for two people at a time about looking, the pleasure of being looked at and the pain of not being *really seen*. It tells the fictional origin story of a ‘forgotten tenth Muse’ named Isosceles, passed over by mythology and speaking back to its hierarchies. The piece is a meditation on the origins of envy and the exquisite torture of being passed over for someone else. Using a particular seating arrangement, the piece requires audience members to ‘choose a side’ – to experience the performer’s direct attention as A or B, or to flank A and B as a ‘shadow audience’ who watch from afar. In keeping with this device, at this point I would like to ask you to choose a side. [**they choose a side]** We’ve laid it out this way so that you feel far from me, but not too far.

From his perch in the audience, Berger smugly reminds us that while we normally conceive of intimacy as a relation sustained across time, many intimacies are brief and wordless, [**worklight ON]** “contained in the exchange of a glance, a nod of the head, a smile, a shrug of a shoulder. A closeness which lasts for a second or for the duration of a song being sung and listened to together” (107-108) [**worklight OFF]** . My work very much explores this more ephemeral and weird manifestation of intimacy – the closeness made more palpable for its surefire ending.

If this were the real show, I would now say: [**SLIDE 3]** *I am Isosceles, forgotten tenth Muse. Love child of Zeus and Marlene Dietrich. There are nine other muses, all legitimate products of my father’s marriage to memory. These muses, my half sisters, are in charge of* 1) epic poetry 2) love poetry 3) lyric poetry 4) comedy 5) tragedy 6) astronomy 7) history 8) dance and 9) sacred song. *I am the forgotten tenth muse and I am the muse of envy.*

[**SLIDE 4]** Central to *The Ballad of Isosceles* is the feeling of being sung to, of song taking on a kind of material body in the space, a body that is both comforting and alienating. Do you remember the first time somebody sang to you? Did you have a lullaby? What was it? Turn to the person beside you and explain. [**Pause as this happens]** Your mother or father or a carer of some sort, perhaps, sang to you, something organic about it, something essentially mammalian about their vocal folds vibrating to release sound that seemed to envelop you like an amniotic sac, encircling you like something protective that keeps the song’s message contained between your persons. [**worklight ON]** “A song,” Berger cuts in again, “when being sung and played, acquires a body. And it does this by taking over and briefly possessing existing bodies…Again and again it takes over the body of the singer” (95). [**worklight OFF]** The song possesses the singer’s body and moves through the bodies of her listeners.

***whispered***

I remember attending a high school musical production of *Godspell*. The town preacher’s daughter played the Mary Magdalene figure whose number is overtly sexual, and as this holy daughter moved into the audience, gyrating on middle-aged fathers and stalking up and down the theatre aisles, a frenzy rose. The song had taken her over, you see. Her young and (we presume, the whole town presumes) her virginal body had been taken over by the song’s material knowledge of intimacy. That song unlocked some kind of latent knowledge inside this girl and made her a woman.

**SING TURN BACK O MAN EXCERPT**

**Normal speech**

Can song penetrate? Does the song impregnate the body with meaning, divesting it of its virginal status? Can it impart bodily knowledge to the singer? Perhaps once I sing a song, I am never the same again.

**[SLIDE 5] DOUBLED TIME**

**SING Falling in Love Again – LOOP 4**

In *The Ballad of Isosceles*, I sing that song three times over the course of 20 minutes. There must be a certain arc to the sequence, a kind of renewed and deepened frustration with each rendition. At the end of 20 minutes, the slate must be wiped clean and I effectively ‘reset’ myself for the next performance, which starts after a ten-minute break. When performing the show at festivals, I have done between 9-11 shows per day. This means singing the song 27-33 times in one 24 hour period.

**[SLIDE 6]** What is this particular and exquisite pain of the chanteuse who repeats her signature number, night after night? What drives you, the audience, backed by your chorus of (yes, often) male critics, to bear witness? If learning a song, as Berger said, means willful possession on the singer’s behalf, what drives the singer to take on this demon? What transformations lie dormant in the song’s written form that can only be activated by live incantation?

Perhaps we singers do it because songs *do something*. They move through the singer’s own body and change it irreparably. We welcome the song as host to the ghost; we offer body as a vessel to contain each tune’s fleeting lessons. And songs not only change us – they change you. In and of themselves songs carry a kind of lunar power. They pull people towards the body of the singer, or hold them suspended in space, or push them away along the tides of time. In *Der Blaue Engel* (1930), [**SLIDE 7 ]** Marlene Dietrich plays Lola Lola, a cabaret star whose power seems wrapped up in her ability to hold multiple men entranced at once. The film tells the story of the protagonist Immanuel Rath’s journey from moralistic teacher to lovestruck clown, and we are meant to trace his downfall back to the moment at which he entered Lola Lola’s club and fell under her seductive spell. We pity him for loving a cabaret singer whose job seemingly necessitates the repeated act of seduction. We are meant to trace his downfall from the point at which her song hit his ears.

In their push and pull, songs remind us of our relationship to time by shattering and refracting it, particularly when repeated. Berger echoes this by writing that the song seems to occupy kind of doubled time. The song, he shouts again from the back of the theatre, yes, we hear you John, [**worklight ON]** ‘is unfixed in time and place. A song narrates a past experience. When it is being sung it fills the present. The tempo, the beat, the loops, the repetitions of a song construct a shelter from the flow of linear time: a shelter in which future, present and past can console, provoke, ironize and inspire one another” (95-96). [**worklight OFF]** Something of quantum physics slips through here – somehow we are both in the past and the present, but also out of time, out of sync. Carlo Rovelli reminds us that time is relative – literally. There is no ‘absolute’ time; we can only make sense of time in relation to other times. [**worklight ON]** “The single quantity ‘time’ melts into a spiderweb of times…Our ‘present’ does not extend throughout the universe. It is like a bubble around us…The idea that a well-defined *now* exists throughout the universe is an illusion…It is like the point where the rainbow touches the forest. We think that we can see it – but, if we go to look for it, it isn’t there” (15, 40-41). [**worklight OFF]** Rovelli suggests that time is relative and particular to one’s own position and particularities. Similarly, he insists that each event in the world has its own past and future (45). Perhaps then each song carries its own past, future and – to use Rovelli’s term – **[worklight ON]** ‘expanded present’ (40) [**worklight OFF].** In cinema and television, songs are often portals into different times – a gateway in and of themselves even as they signpost a much vaster and more complicated set of quantum equations. Twin Peaks’s *Roadhouse* seems to be an example of this – inside, the laws of time are different, as they are in *Blue Velvet’s* Slow Club or *Mulholland Drive*’s Club Silencio – but more on that (yes) in time.

In *der Blaue Engel*, doubled time is made palpable by von Sternberg’s choice to have Lola Lola (even her name is doubled) sing *Falling in Love Again* twice – once during the film’s first climax (like women, a film can climax twice) while Rath sits rapt in the balcony, [**SLIDE 8]**  and then again at the second climax, when a more flashily dressed Lola Lola sings as the now-ridiculed Rath unravels like the seam ripped open by the song itself. We’re reminded that Lola Lola never lied about her repetitions – her doubled name should have given her away. The song acts both as a gateway to Rath’s earlier and more innocent self, in which he is the well-dressed gentleman looking pityingly on the clown, and the present in which he spends every night in grease paint. The repetition exemplifies the song’s honest but dooming prophesy. Time works cyclically, we are meant to understand, and this cabaret is a kind of prison-machine that chews and spits out desiring bodies. Only those who have surrendered themselves to being objects, only the chanteuse Lola Lola, can survive. Songs *do something* – they possess the body of the singer and transport the body of the listener over and over again.

So the song is an agent for change. But what does the song contain within itself? It contains memory – that much is obvious. Archival efforts by the Lomaxes and the folk revivalists grasp for the past through ventriloquism in the present. But songs do not conflate memory *with* the present; instead, they put past and present into unstable and dissonant contact with each other. Rebecca Solnit compares her own beloved songs to [**worklight ON]** “short stories compressed into a few stanzas and a refrain; they always spanned and layered time. The music was haunted, was about distant memory, was about the dead and gone or at the very least aimed at a beloved far beyond earshot” (2005: 114). [**worklight OFF]** By the same logic, the live song – particularly when repeated and performed by the chanteuse in the forced charge of a theatre atmosphere, is always haunted by past and future versions of its singing. It is a symptom of time’s palimpsestic nature even as it beats its wings against the present in protest against this fact, beats its wings in a vivid moment of occupation. When words are looped through voice and machine, those words’ material present is slammed up against all past incarnations. We hear the echo of iterations past.

**[SLIDE 9] SONG AS INCANTATION**

**SING LOCKER ROOM INCANTATION – LOOP 5 & 7**

**(Loop 5)**

I love Halle Berry’s upper body. I love Halle Berry’s upper body. She may have got schlonged and she’s such a nasty woman but I love Halle Berry’s upper body.

**(Add rhythm)**

I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. I don’t even wait, they let you do it.

You can do anything when you are a star. And when you’re a star, they just let you do it.

Fat pigs. Fat fat pigs. Dogs and slobs. Fat dogs and slobs. Disgusting animals. (What a bimbo.) Disgusting animals. (What a bimbo).

I moved on her like a bitch and I failed

Does she look presidential, fellas?

I moved on her like a bitch and I failed

(**Stop Loop 5, move to Loop 7)**

Does she look presidential, fellas?

(**Loop 7 with rhythm)**

America the great, America the hungry, put a dick in my mouth just to say that you love me

America the great, America the hungry, you get more from people with vinegar than honey.

(**Stop Loop 7)**

Nobody has more respect for women than I do. Nobody. Nobody has more respect for women than I do.

(**Start Loop 5 with rhythm)**

Putting your wife to work is very dangerous

I don’t want to sound like a chauvinist

I don’t want to sound like a chauvinist, but

I don’t want to sound like a chauvinist, but when I come home at night, and the dinner is not ready, I go ahhhhhhhh

I go ahhhhhhh

(**Stop Loop 5)**

Melania Trump suffered serious injuries after a near-fatal car accident this evening. When asked to comment on whether he’d stay with his wife after such a de-figuring event – an excellent and incisive question – President Trump answered ‘How do the breasts look?’

**(Loop 7 with rhythm)**

America the great, America the hungry, put a dick in my mouth just to say that you love me

America the great, America the hungry, you get more from people with vinegar than honey.

**(Stop Loop 7).**

Nobody has more respect for women than I do. Nobody. Nobody has more respect for women than I do.

**(Start Loop 5 with rhythm).**

I’m a great starmaker, I make stars of all my wives. But once they are a star, the fun is over. It’s the creation process. Like creating a building. It’s sad.

If Hillary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband, what makes her think she can satisfy America?

If Hillary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband, what makes her think she can satisfy America?

You have to treat [them] like shit. ‘Donald’s model’

You have to treat [them] like shit. ‘Donald’s model for’

You have to treat [them] like shit. ‘Donald’s model for (**Stop Loop 5)**… behavior was Hugh Hefner….The key to Trump’s personality lies in his fear of public embarrassment. Donald dreads humiliation and shame. If he feels that, he lashes out.’

(**Start Loop 5 with rhythm).**

I have a deal with my daughter Ivanka. She’s 17 and doing great. If Ivanka weren’t my daughter, perhaps I would be dating her..dot dot dot dot dot Six feet tall and got the best body. Oh she’s always been voluptuous but was she looking a little more stacked than usual? Dot dot dot da-dot, da-dot dot.

Ivanka made me promise, Ivanka made me swear, that I’d never date a girl that was younger than her. So as she grows older, the field is getting limited. **(Stop Loop 5).** Six feet tall and she’s got the best body.

(**Start Loop 5 with rhythm).**

If Ivanka weren’t my daughter, perhaps I would be dating her.

Daddy don’t hit on girls I babysit for

If Ivanka weren’t my daughter, perhaps I would be dating her.

Daddy don’t go cruising at the nursery no more.

I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. I don’t even wait, they let you do it.

You can do anything when you are a star. And when you’re a star, they just let you do it.

(You just) grab ‘em by the pussy (do anything). Grab ‘em by the pussy (do anything).

If someone screws you, you screw them back. (**Stop Loop 5).**  Grab ‘em by the pussy (do anything).

**(Start Loop 7 rhythm).**

America the great, America the hungry, put a dick in my mouth just to say that you love me

America the great, America the hungry, you get more from people with vinegar than honey.

--

I call that a vocal incantation. It’s a different type of song to those sung in *Ballad of Isosceles –* instead of calling to you from the ocean floor of history, it is an attempt to exorcise and sing back to a more recent spirit , specifically the noxious and misogynistic language-ether drummed up by the last US presidential campaign battle. Regardless of your thoughts about Hillary Clinton’s policies, the battle between Trump and Clinton felt positively Jungian – an epic showdown between reason and rage. We all know what happened – rage won, and populism taped over Clinton’s mouth. Indeed, she went silent until her book’s publication – her voice seemingly erased from public debate. I am not here today to advocate for Hillary Clinton or to dissect the mechanics of the 2016 election in detail. However, I am interested in the ways in which emotive language can obfuscate meaning; the language and emotion circulated by Trump’s campaign echo in the valleys of the present, particularly as the new US election cycle begins and populism hacks its Eurosceptic path through this continent too. Surely we know now that language *does* something – and song *is* language in its most heightened, sustained and haunted form. Words’ endless circulation and meme-ability can paper over the cracks of policy, propagating a much less nuanced understanding of what is actually fucking going on.

***whispered***

I remember hearing the drone of a radio commentator on a car trip home when I was a child. The commentator was discussing the urban legend that Paul McCartney is actually dead, the proof of which exists in a certain track on, I believe, *The White Album*. If you play a particular song backwards, the legend goes, you will hear a voice speaking the words ‘Paul is Dead. Paul is Dead’ over and over. The sound effect of songs made deliberately slower through distortion has become a catch-all cue for a parallel distortion in time. [**SLIDE 10]** David Lynch often uses this in his work – language reversed, songs slowed down or lip-synced, distorted sound as a gateway to the weird.

The idea of Paul McCartney rising, resurrected by song, from the laundry basket so frightened me that goose bumps still rise. Muddled in this childhood memory is a belief that the song can not only deliver a message; it can *raise* the dead. *Bring the past into the present tense*. The idea that the song, played in this particular way, is a sort of unstitching, a rip in the seam of time that results in the dead appearing wherever the song is played. In my prismatic childhood brain, Paul was especially likely to come out of the laundry basket in the bathroom. The idea of this scared me into brief and frenzied showers for years. Can songs raise the dead?

**Normal speech**

In *der Blaue Engel,* songs – particularly Lola Lola’s *Falling in Love Again* – seem to recall for Professor Rath his younger self, an innocent besmirched by the singer and her cabaret. For Rath, Lola Lola’s song is the bite of the apple, and he realises its damning power only at the end of the film. The song can kill and the song can raise the dead. [**SLIDE 11]** In *Ballad of Isosceles*, the songs I sing are both a narrative of Isosceles’s plight – the muse of envy, forever doomed to pit people against each other and refract the hearts of those in her path – and a curse, enacted on the audience live. The song tries to act as incantation by repetition.

**Sing *Falling in Loving Again…*again – LOOP 4**

**[SLIDE 12] We Find Ourselves Inside a Message**

[**worklight ON]** “The essence of songs is neither vocal nor cerebral but organic. We follow them in order to be enclosed….We find ourselves inside a message. The unsung impersonal world remains outside on the other side of a placenta” (105). [**worklight OFF]** So now we are not just close to the message, we are inside it too. Berger knowingly employs feminine descriptors here – he admits to believing that the song is necessarily [**worklight ON]** ‘maternal’ (105). [**worklight OFF]** What is fostered inside the folds of the song, its incubating pocket? If the song is womb-like, the vagina, perhaps, is the distance that sound travels from its originating instrument to our waiting ear. Perhaps our ears are like the physician’s hand waiting to cup the sound after it travels down the birth canal. The song is a message and we are inside it.

[**SLIDE 13]** In *Blue Velvet,* the 1986 film by David Lynch, Jeffrey Beaumont follows a similar path as that of Professor Rath, with mystery and rumour leading him into the club where Dorothy Vallens performs her lounge act – the Slow Club, a reference, perhaps, to the quality of time inside its walls. Innocent college student Jeffrey is pulled into a complex network of sadomasochistic and nefarious relations centred around Dorothy, while Laura Dern’s Sandy character remains his tether to the world of light and innocence. Dorothy belongs to the underworld, we are meant to realize. And Jeffrey’s descent into this kind of temporary Hades is, like his predecessor Rath’s, both his downfall and his destiny. Dorothy’s song – *Blue Velvet*, sung night after night for her captor Frank – possessed her long ago. The demon is firmly in possession of its host. Repeating the song seems to be connected to her amnesiac sexual slavery – we are living in the dream, Dorothy seems to believe, and someday we will wake up and the music will stop. Song speaks to an absence – Berger understands that. Speech and voicelessness, hearing and seeing run rampant through *Blue Velvet*. Sandy tells us that ‘she hears things’, marking her as one of Jeffrey’s kind – a voyeur/eavesdropper who presses an ear to the wall. At one point, in the Slow Club, we see Sandy watching Jeffrey watching Dorothy – this triangulation feels exquisitely strung out along its three points. Another time Jeffrey tells Sandy that he is [**worklight ON]**  “seeing something that was always hidden”. [**worklight OFF]** Like Rath watching Lola Lola proffer her attentions elsewhere, Jeffrey’s attraction to Dorothy seems wrapped up in watching her seduce and be abused by other men. Even when she discovers him peeping from inside her closet and welcomes him into the light, he continues to watch her with other men. Dorothy tells him that she can’t tell whether he’s a detective or a pervert – and this shows that there is something inherently perverse (by which I mean sexually subversive) about being a detective, about watching and listening and waiting and enjoying the frisson of others’ activities by proxy. In *Blue Velvet*, this conundrum reaches its ur-form when Jeffrey hides in the closest and watches Dorothy’s terrible and complicated Oedipal dynamic with Frank transpire. But then they’re back in the Slow Club, and we know that the closet and the cabaret are one and the same.

The cabaret is *weird.* I mean that in Fisher’s sense of the word – [**worklight ON]** “that which does not belong” (10). [**worklight OFF]** Two things lying in uneasy proximity: intimacy with distance, desire with alienation, kitsch with terrible truth – the cabaret’s curtains divide us and they mark the only threshold across which we can ever have contact. The weird, Fisher says, is simultaneously an affect, a mode of fiction and a mode of being (9). It can be summed up as feeling that all is not quite right, that something is out of whack – and that we have entered a world in which old parameters dissolve (13). Writing about another Lynch film, Fisher reminds us that [**worklight ON]** ‘Club Silencio is evidently a threshold space’ (55). [**worklight OFF]** The Black Lodge, the Roadhouse and One-Eyed Jack’s in Twin Peaks are also liminal spaces in their own right, disguised as curtained theatres of refraction.

The blue velvet rises in Jeffrey’s throat, and Dorothy’s, and Frank’s, filling their body cavities and soaking up the sound. Interestingly enough, the film’s action begins with the discovery of an amputated ear in a field. A film about eavesdropping and voyeurism that carries such a key organ, amputated and grotesque, at its epicenter. The ear in this case has been made to ‘unhear’ thanks to its disembodiment, but Jeffrey will reactivate its listening power by proxy.

**SING BLUE VELVET – LOOP 6**

She wore blue velvet  
Bluer than velvet was the night  
Softer than satin was the light  
From the stars

She wore blue velvet  
Bluer than velvet were her eyes  
Warmer than may her tender sighs  
Love was ours

Ours a love I held tightly  
Feeling the rapture grow  
Like a flame burning brightly  
But when she left, gone was the glow of

…..blue velvet  
But in my heart there'll always be  
Precious and warm a memory, through the years  
And I still can see blue velvet through my tears

In both of the films I’ve delved into tonight, the female performer is an otherworldly spectre and a material surface on which the male protagonist/director/critic projects his anxieties about the uncanny, envy, and fantasy. Indeed, desire seems wrapped up with envy here. Both films – unsurprisingly – also choose to focus on the male protagonist’s journey from innocence to demystification. Lola Lola is powerful but remote and her story – how she came to be on this stage, night after night – is neglected. For Dorothy Vallens, singing at the club is wrapped up in the sexual slavery forced upon her by Frank. The cabaret is a prison in which the singer must repeat her seductions night after night, playing punters off each other in the name of capital, but we never really learn the reasons behind Dorothy’s dysfunction. In fact, we never ask. *The Ballad of Isosceles* is an attempt to give voice to the singer as an archetypal figure, as an object on which we project our darkness. What is she thinking as she sings to us from beyond the threshold? We may never know, but we should - at the very least - ask.

**[SLIDE 14] Songs are Sung to an Absence**

As I say farewell, Berger and I join forces to remind you that songs are sung to an absence. And tonight I am singing to John Berger, to Lynch and van Sternberg and their proxy protagonists, to Rovelli and Fisher and the men in the seats so far back I can’t see them.

But I’m also singing to Isabella Rossellini, Marlene Dietrich, and all the chanteuses singing from inside their prisons. I am singing to Rebecca Solnit, who sings back from the page. And I am saying goodbye, for now. Songs always seem to be saying farewell. As far back as the 9th century, there are records of [**worklight ON]**  ‘professional lamenters’ [**worklight OFF]** in Ireland called keeners, who sang directly to the dead at public funerals (Antosik-Parsons, 2014, p. 211).

***whispered***

At my father’s deathbed, we sang one of his favourite Judy Garland songs – *Over the Rainbow*. As we sang to him in his coma - the deepest sleep of all, the sleep from which time steals, mercilessly - we watched his pulse begin to accelerate on the monitor.

**Normal voice**

The head keener’s mourning body acted as catalyst for the community’s own vocal outpouring; in this way, she midwived the grief-songs from others (Bourke, 1988, 288-289). Irish historian Angela Bourke suggests that keening was a live art – [**worklight ON]** ‘*Caoineadh* [keening in Irish] was an oral-formulaic poetic composition, produced in performance, in broadly the same way as Homer’s epics must have been…The lamenter addresses the dead person directly, asks him to get up and come home, reproaches him for dying, praises his beauty, his generosity…and piles image upon image of the desolation that will now follow his death’ (Bourke 2000, p.72). [**worklight OFF]**

***whispered***

My father’s pulse never reached those numbers again. We stopped singing, the song left his body, ebbing out into the horizon. The song can kill, and the song can – briefly, oh so briefly – raise the dead.

**Normal**

Verging on a trance-like state, the keening took over the body of the mourner, possessed it, and she in turn passed this on to her community by osmosis, wringing the death out for meaning. We need these singers – these cabaret singers in the cemetery, these mourners in the nightclub, to bring us closer to what J.M. Synge (while watching keeners on the Aran Islands) called [**worklight ON]** ‘the terror of the world’ (*The Complete Works of JM Synge: Plays, Prose and Poetry,* Wordsworth 2008, p. 333). [**worklight OFF]**

**SING BLUE MOON w/ LOOP 8 & delay**