

CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

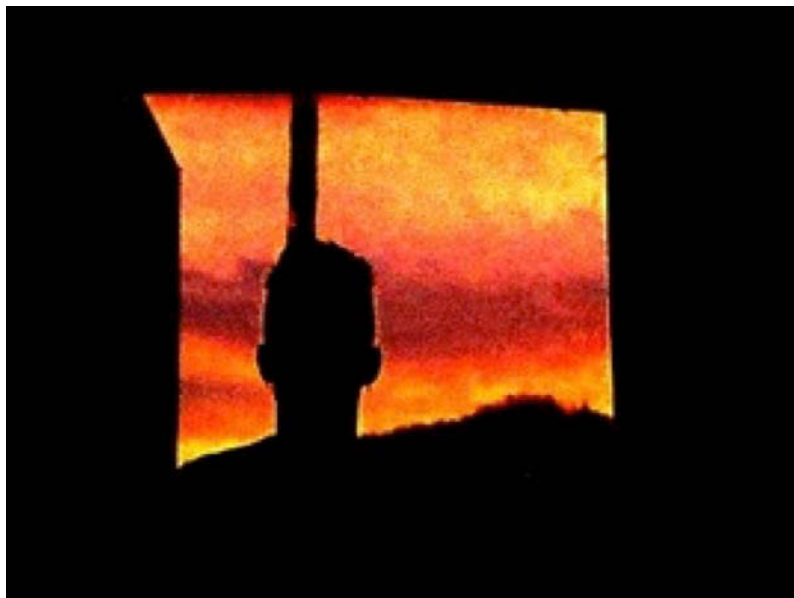
Novemeber 18, 2012—MoMA PS1, New York
<http://experimentallecures.org>

Window

by Alexis Blair Penney

Hey, does anybody have a light? A lighter?

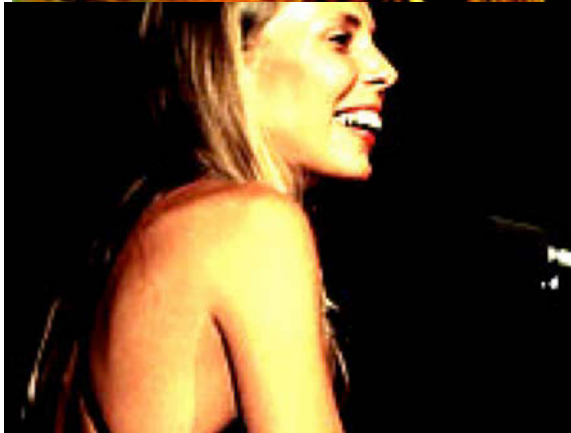
Hey, I just want to give you guys a quick intro before I get into my stuff, because I'm really digressive and who knows if I'll get past the first slide. So I actually just want to lay out the facts as I see them of what I want to talk about first. I'm lighting some incense (thank you,) 'cause I want to just look at this as like a weird drag show that I'm hosting, 'cause I've done that way more times than I've actually lectured at an art gallery, believe it or not. It makes me feel comfortable because the bar I used to work in for four years, the bathrooms smelled really, really bad, so we burned copious amounts of incense during all the drag shows, so that's my little comfort zone.



My name's Alexis Penney. I want to talk about five topics today, from the pop to the totally obscure and weird. Everybody knows who Jesus Christ was—is, whatever. So, the 1973 movie written by Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, called *Jesus Christ Superstar*, that's my most accessible way to get into Jesus. It's a rock opera. The 1977 debut by the author Tanith Lee is the closest thing I have to a religious text; it's called *The Birthgrave*, she wrote it over the course of three years in art school. For me it's like the Bible; she just flips it off as like a story—she just writes normal stories—so I don't know how that happens. And then three women, four women—well five—myself and my weird love life, my mother, who in turn introduced me to Barbra Streisand and her role as Esther Hoffman in the 1976 rock opera, *A Star is Born*, which is a remake of two originals, and Joni Mitchell, another woman I inherited from my mother, grew up in Saskatchewan, Canada; she's a singer songwriter, her sonic, as she called them, “sonic platforms” to display the lyrical and poetic slant of her poetry, paved the way for women, like my last woman Madonna, and her self-confessional reflective pop.

*"To wake, and not to know
where, or who you are, not
even to know what you are -
that is a strange awakening.
But after a while, uncurling
in the darkness,
I began to discover myself,
and I was a woman."*

- Tanith Lee,
The Birthgrave



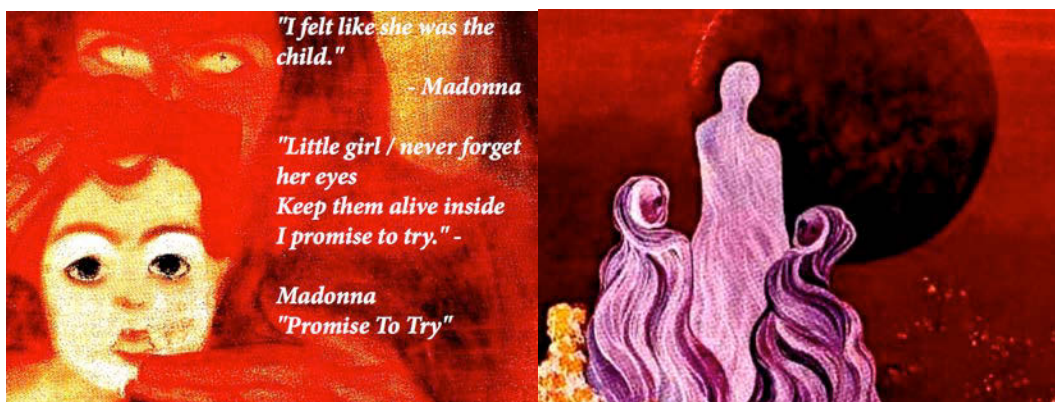


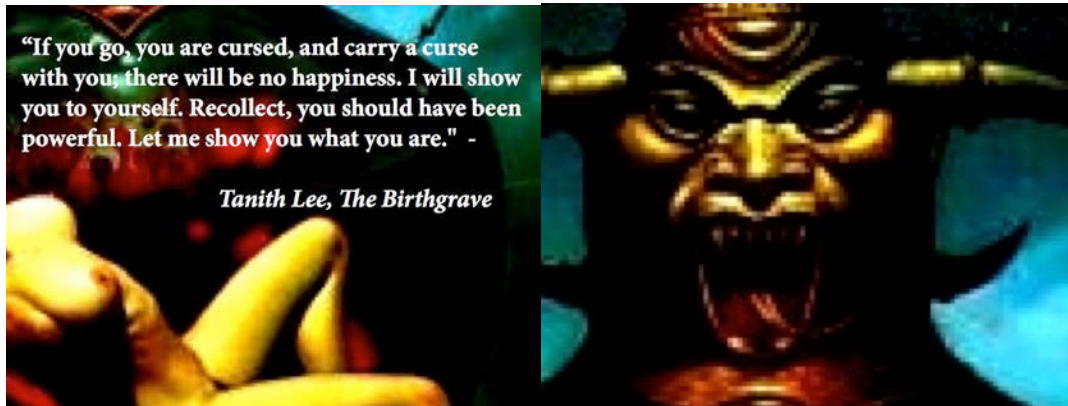
So, with that said, I'm going to put on a little show, I'm going to ramble through the lives of these women and how they intersect with mine. This is really just a conversation about how I choose a song, when I'm gonna perform at a drag show, and what that means, and what energy I'm choosing to put out into the audience. I'm gonna spill a little bit of my guts, and spill a little of these women's guts; we're going to look at this kind of, like, (front row's- like ew!) We're going to look at this kind of like seers of old; they used to spill the innards of a cow,

or of a sacrificial animal, and look for signs in the intestines, and I kind of look for signs in my own weird guts, and then this is kind of an invitation in the end, for you to find a sign in your own guts. So—

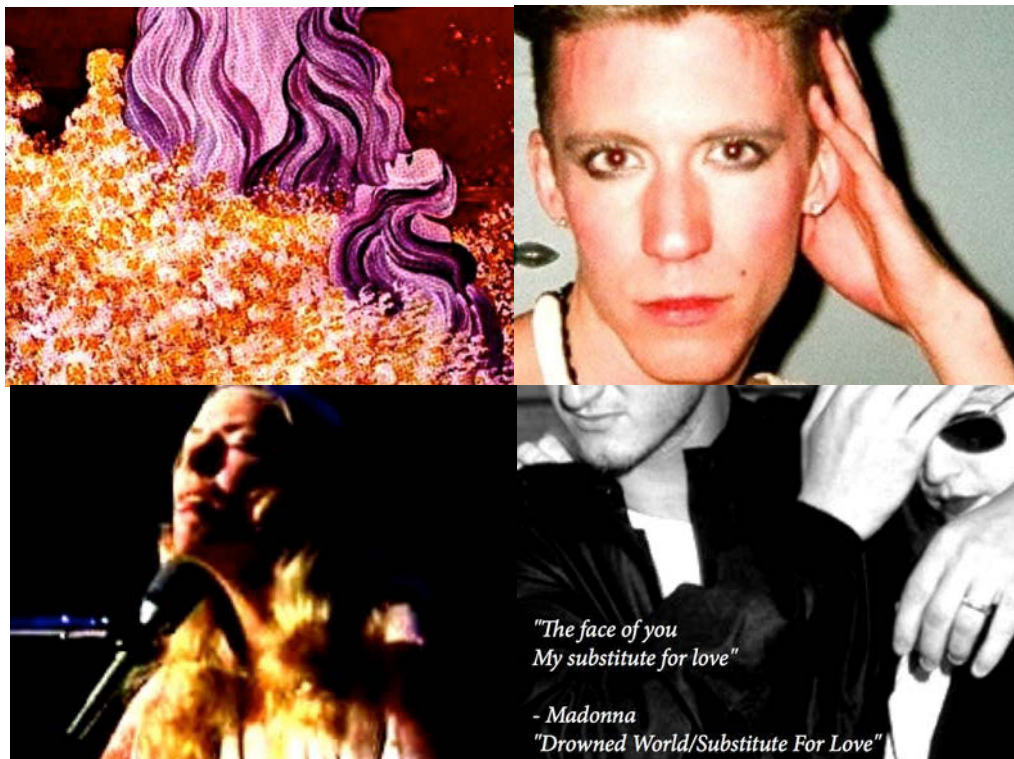
If all else fails, I've got music, and like really pretty visuals, so—

[Music- Madonna] So *The Birthgrave* opens: we are a nameless, faceless, formless heroine, in the base of what we soon come to find out is a dormant volcano that's erupting. The first passage reads, "To wake, and not to know where or who you are, not even to know what you are, that is a strange awakening; but after a while, uncurling in the darkness I begin to discover myself and I was a woman." We all have an origin story; Madonna was born in Detroit to, coincidentally, a woman named Madonna. I was born in Kansas City to a woman named Sue. She thought she was going to be an actress, a singer; it didn't quite work out for her. Immediately in Madonna's early life, at the age of five, she lost her mother, after a year long battle with cancer, and to me that represents the maiden archetype, becoming the mother: she had to take care of the family, it's this automatic handicap that, regardless of circumstances, we can all sort of seem to perceive our heroine at the base of the volcano.



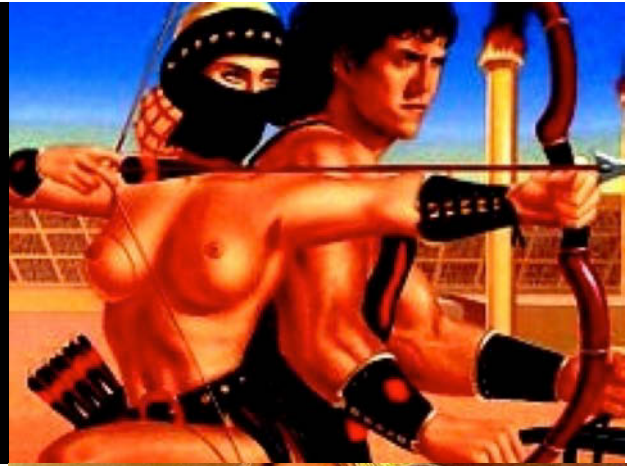


It's a lot of insanity, in this slide show.



She soon comes to an altar, as she scrambles around in the dark. It's a quote from Madonna about her mother's death, feeling like a child. She comes to an altar, where she finds an cold flame, and a bare stone bowl, and a knife. This is Karrakaz; this malevolent force speaks to her and tells her that if she were to leave, she'll carry a curse on her, there will be no happiness, everywhere she goes will be death, destruction, but an easy way out at that moment could be to take this knife. What she calls a knife of easy dying. For some reason though that seems like a really, really easy and attractive way out, when she has no idea who she is. She's this adolescent woman that's awoken in the base of a black cave. She flees from Karracaz, in spite of the curse. As she flees the volcano, it erupts, and decimates the entire village at its base. But because of a legend that they have passed down for

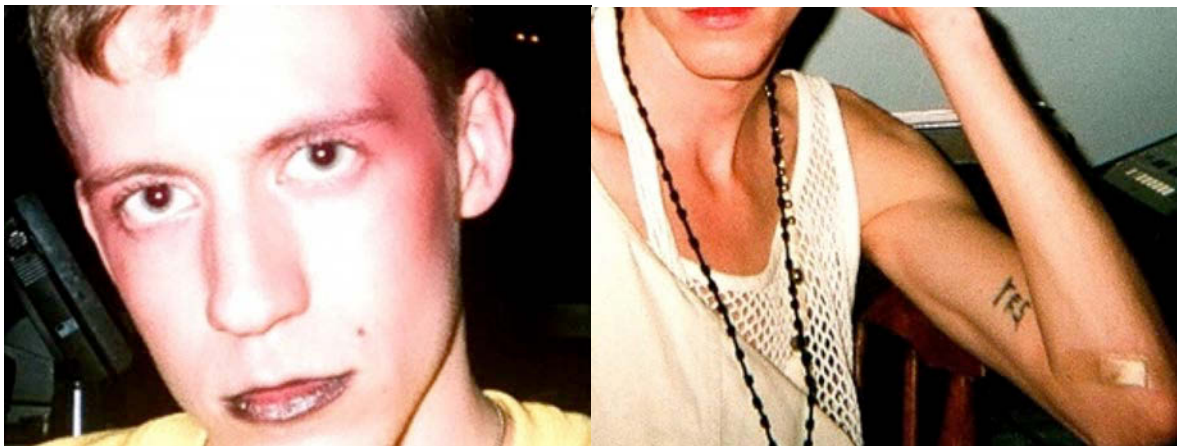
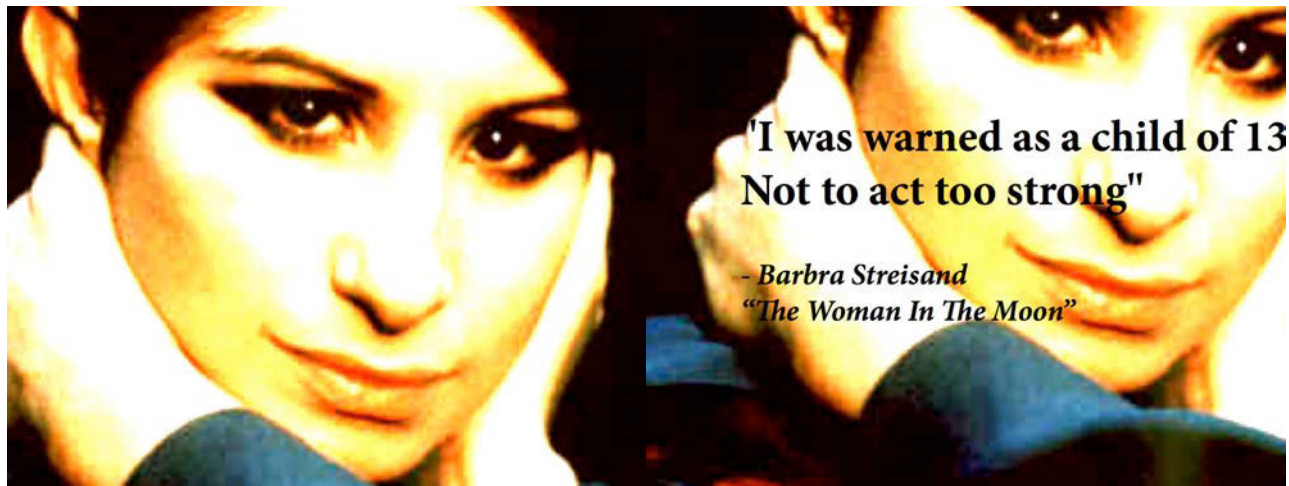
generations, she is worshiped as a goddess, this woman of the mountain. So, she has this handicap right off the bat. She is of people, the force Karrakaz had explained to her that she is of a lost race, that once used humans as their slaves, using, like, psychic powers of subjugation: they could fly, they could look like anyone else, they could shoot eye beams; you know, like, they were the superior race, kind of this evolutionary apex. So she is of humanity, but she is also the last of her race, for her people were decimated by a plague. So she ends of being thrust into this role as goddess, which kind of mirrors to me anyone who walks onto a stage is immediately thrust into this role; anyone who just walks through life, especially women, are kind of thrust into these roles, that have little or nothing to do with actually how you see yourself.



But the big reveal for Karkkuz, for this woman is when she finally sees a mirror: her face is hideously disfigured, so she has a perfect woman's body, but this demonic, horrible face.



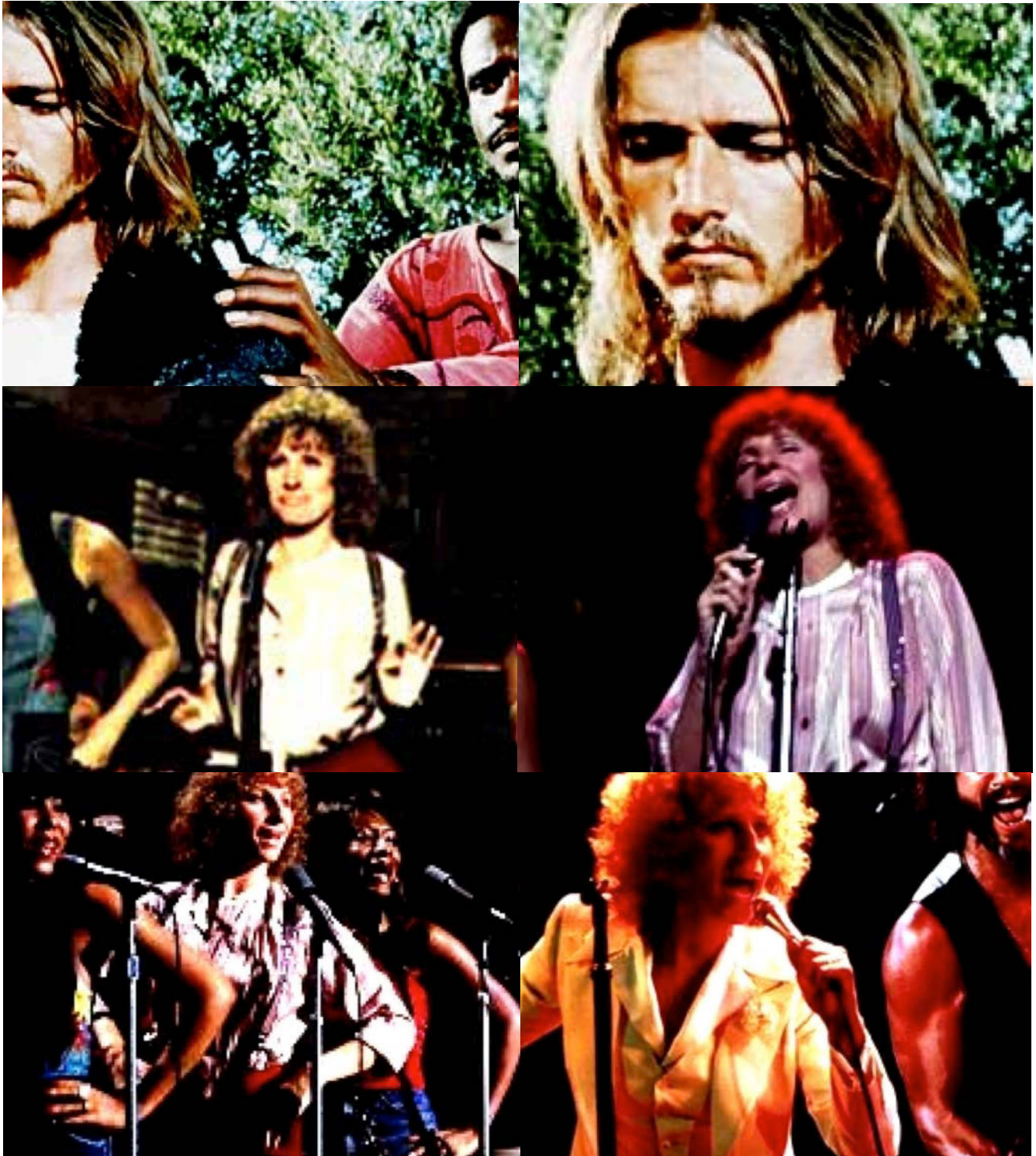
It also kind of mirrors back to me the automatic trauma of Madonna's early life. Joni Mitchell growing up in the wilds of Saskatchewan, succumbed to this, one of the last outbreaks of polio in Canada, from which her left hand was left crippled. I was born in fucking Kansas, that's my handicap there. We all kind of have these things we have to deal with early in life. So she leaves this volcano; she's suddenly this goddess, mimicking Jesus in his early—oh well, I meant to show that as Barbara's curse, you know, her beauty that was so strange and exotic then. It's funny to think about that now, but that was really a big deal when she came out the in late fifties, early sixties.



That's me. We find Karrakaz, this woman, in the land of men, as we all find ourselves. She soon makes the acquaintance of one Darak Goldfisher, who's this bandit from the mountains. As she walks through this ruined village, feeling powerless as the cold flame in the bowl told her that she was, she still unconsciously heals people just by touch. She convinces herself that just the influence of their beliefs are healing them as they touch her, because they've been raised with this legend of the goddess in the mountain. It's really easy to make excuses for the things that we do, the way that people act around us, whether we are actually effecting that or whether that comes from their mind.



But Darak is the one man that kind of sees through this—he doesn't really, he wasn't raised with the legend of the goddess. He kind of rapes and pillages as he's reconstructing this village, this disaster-strewn area, and takes her kind of as a captive bride; though at once she recognizes him as someone from her past. Quentin Crisp said, "There will be no great dark man," talks about the homosexual yearning for this great dark figure of masculinity that represents everything of the patriarchy and heterosexuality, but will nonetheless have sex with you and be your boyfriend. Darak is kind of the first iteration of that in Karrakaz's journey. For me that was a weird kind of dude in the rock world that I had looked up to sort of musically before I met him when I was twenty, and who eventually paid my way out to California. *[Music changes to Joni Mitchell.]* I joined his bad singing backup, as Karrakaz joins Darak's band of marauding thieves. In spite of these handicaps, that she feels powerless, she finds that wherever she goes, men cluster around her as her guard, and everything she tries to do she is excellent at, she can string a bow, and she can kill with like really easy precision.



She travels with him, to take over a merchant caravan, which they slaughter, and then proceed to impersonate the caravan, to take it into a town to sell all the stuff that they stole from them for money. She's excellent at this as well, at the city illusion of this woman in fineries; basically, she can do anything with just a thought, though she still feels this burden, this heavy lodestone of destiny, she's cursed in the face and she feels that everyone that encounters her will die, as the cold serpentine flame in the altar told her; and as things happen with men, Darak does die, sabotaged in the end, by a man that Karrakaz makes a tryst with, as it happened. Madonna, age twenty,

on a plane to New York, dropped off in a cab in Times Square, working at Dunkin Donuts, giving fellatio to two thugs in an alley at knife point—we all get kind of swept up into the way the world works, the way men work, but eventually people die, men leave us. I killed my ex boyfriend--I'm kidding—I didn't; he broke up with me.





[Music changes to a different Joni Mitchell song.] Mirroring kind of the way that Karrakaz found that she was really excellent at the bow, really excellent at all the things that Darak needed her to be good at, I joined my ex-boyfriend's band as a backup singer, just so I could keep tabs on him while on tour, though I wasn't really much of a singer or performer. I started doing drag, because there were just too many men on stage already, and it didn't—one gay guy didn't need another gay guy backup singing for him, you know what I mean? So that kind of happened organically, and then took on a life of its own. It did seem like destiny in a weird way as I started lip-synching to Madonna songs. My mom put my freakin' copy of Madonna *Ray of Light* in my Easter basket in 1997, so it's almost like she indoctrinated me into this life, in a way.





So left without Darak in her life, we kind of come to a place where we meet Esther, Barbra Streisand's character in *A Star is Born*. Love these ladies, Jesus too, he's a rep. I feel like Jesus I can just let slide as a backdrop, you know how that shit goes. Esther is a backup singer in a club; famous rock star John Norman, played by Kris Kristofferson, stumbles in too drunk one night. Of course, it's Barbra Streisand; she's actually amazing. And so, not only does he go back to her apartment with her, and they sleep together, but he—he decides that he wants to take her on the road, and launch her career. He's a crazy philandering, drunk, like, coke-snorting rock star dude, like really intense—you don't even really know why you like him. I was reading an article last night by the director, who struggles on the set of this film, as you can imagine, with Barbra Streisand and her then-husband, who was her hairdresser—that's funny—kind of echoed the struggles of Barbra's—Barbra and her husband, actually; there was just so much crazy drama onstage, during the press junket- at this huge stadium scene in Arizona, Barbra and Kris got into it in front of press, in front of mics, in front of ten thousand people. So it was a really fraught intense production and kind of autobiographical about Barbra's life, and her sort of place in the

world. She lost her father when she was just born, which plunged her family into poverty. She grew up in New York, again that sort of initial handicap that makes us kind of doubt our power. One thing that I love about where Barbra's story diverges from everyone else's—Madonna was born into her name: her name was Madonna, her Mom was Madonna, she grew up Catholic, it's kind of literal; Barbra, performing around gay bars in the 60's, in the West Village, she ditched the "A" from her name, as sort of this way of striking herself as different from other Barbaras, apparently.





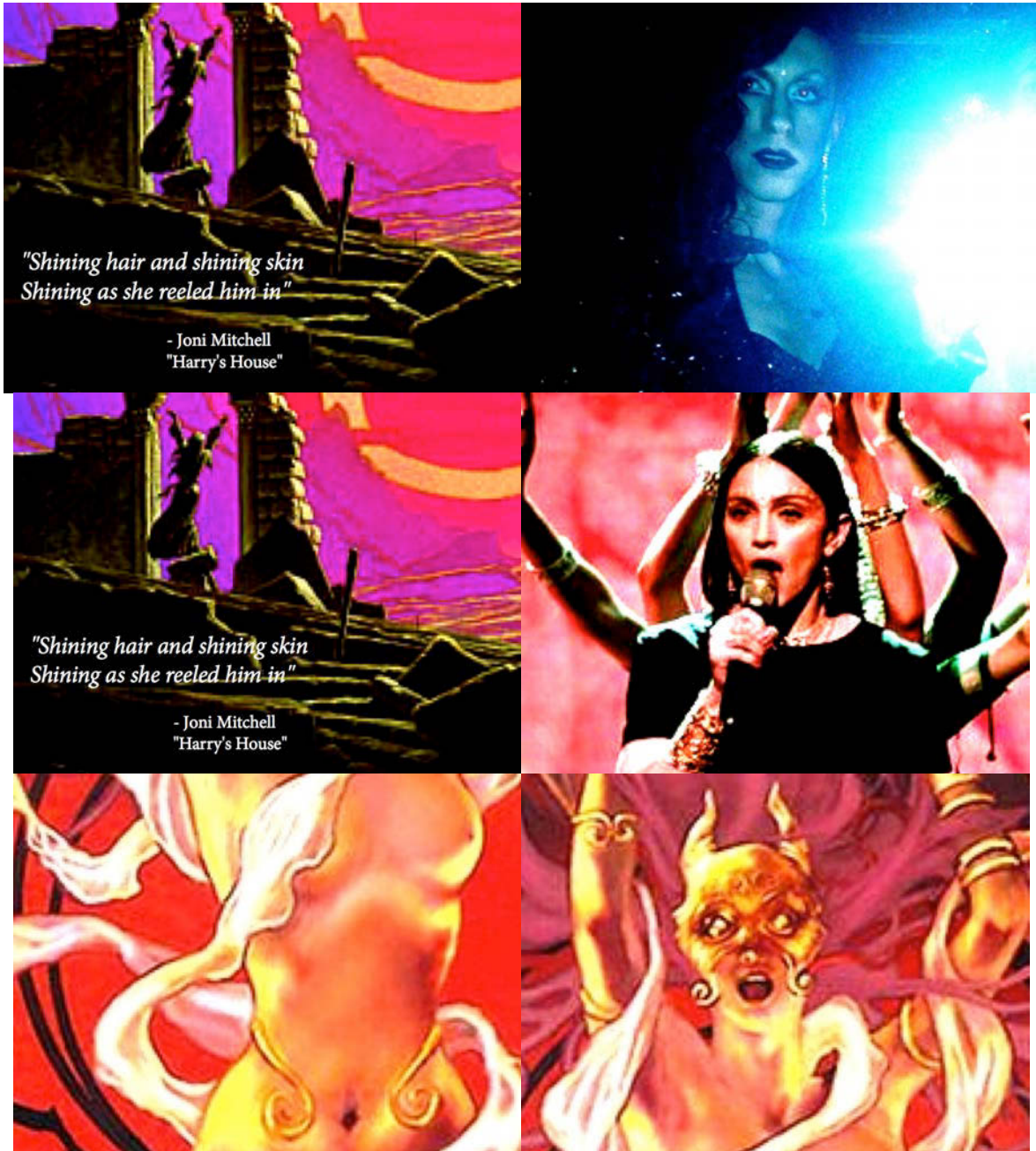
So John thrusts Esther into the spotlight at one of his shows, and he's gotten her backing band and backing singers, that creep up behind her, behind her back, and of course she slays, and everyone becomes this huge fan, and suddenly Esther becomes this goddess and her career starts to eclipse John's, who's this drunk rock star—he walks offstage, he crashes a motorcycle into his fans. She stumbles into his limo, “I mean I know you, but I don't even know you”. This mirrors the meaning of Karrakaz, and her next great dark man who is called Vazkor. When she stumbles into this guy, who is an overlord of this sci-fi crazy society from the east, he looks just like Darak, her previous lover. And she, who had been using her powers to kill, to impress upon people that she was a goddess, she breaks down in tears because here is her dead lover, again, reincarnated; and he's also this face from dreams that haunt her throughout her life, and she can't quite place where this person came from, or why he exists with her. Her relationship with Vazkor, it's a little different. He's kind of this John Norman warrior, like, a little farther than why do you love him. She doesn't love him: he's a cold manipulative, psychic human who is masquerading as the only other member of this lost race, of which Karrakaz knows that she's a part of.



*"I had so many lovers
Who settled for the thrill
Of basking in my spotlight"*

*- Madonna
"Drowned World/Substitute For Love"*





So he sees in her this power, that she knows, that she sort of is buried within herself, and uses that—once again she's thrust into this place, as goddess; as Esther becomes this pop star, she's immediately like mobbed by paparazzi; as Madonna's meteoric rise to fame. For me on a way smaller scale, as suddenly a backup singer, people just started to want to hear me sing, and see me lip-synch in clubs, which was totally weird at the start, I don't know what that was about. Vazkor uses her, as in my immediately post-break-up, which has been three years, life, a sort of succession of great dark men have not necessarily used me, but sort of fit this mold, this narrative, just as Karrakaz sees this dude's face everywhere she goes.





I keep finding myself in these weird interactions with straight guys, that I'm not sleeping with, [*Music changes to Barbra Streisand.*] But that somehow want to share my bed, and share sort of this weird spotlight, and this weird, whatever you want to call it, glamour or aura, that I unconsciously possess—I swear it's not on purpose. So they fit in our narrative—they fit into my narrative, they fit in the personal narrative of this wandering woman, Karrakaz, but she starts to kind of really revel in the power that she actually starts to discover within herself.

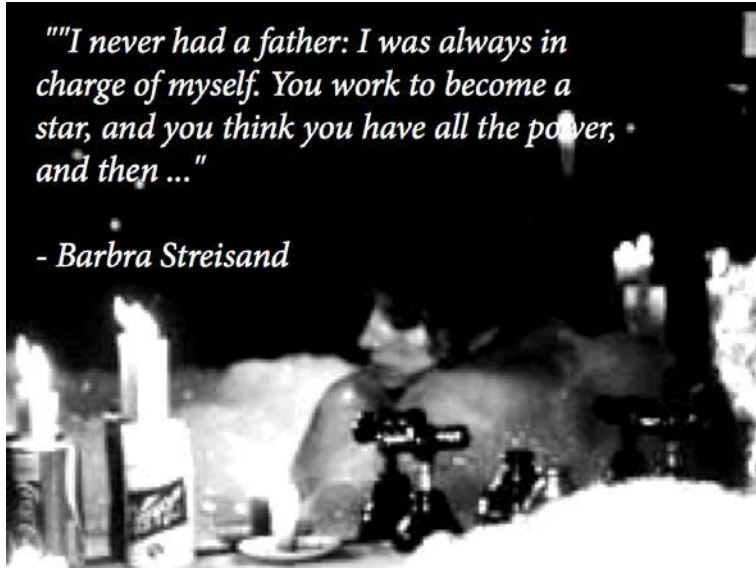


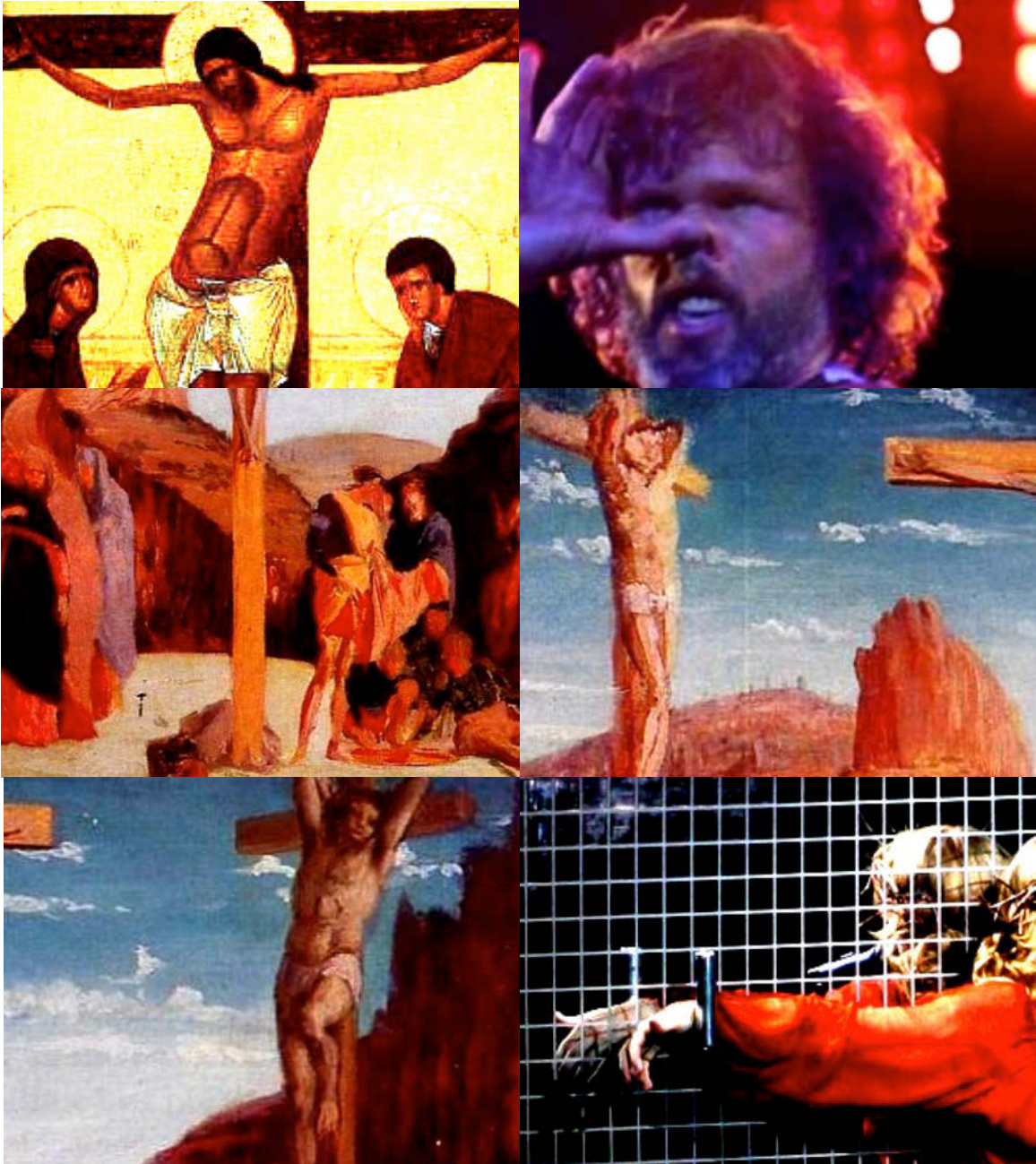


Because not just is she good with a knife and a bow, she actually does possess these psychic powers that that flame at the altar had told her that she didn't. So she kills with a thought and shatters vases, and inhabits for all intents and purposes this goddess creature that Vazkor needs her to be for his political ends. Just like Joni Mitchell, who was discovered in a club in Florida by David Crosby, who takes her to Los Angeles, to kind of start her career. Karrakaz finds herself in, well, here's some more great dark men. I'm living with one right now, I think he might be in the audience. Barbra says "I never had a father, I was always in charge of myself, you work to become a star and you think you have all the power, and then-" Yeah, and then.

"I never had a father: I was always in charge of myself. You work to become a star, and you think you have all the power, and then ..."

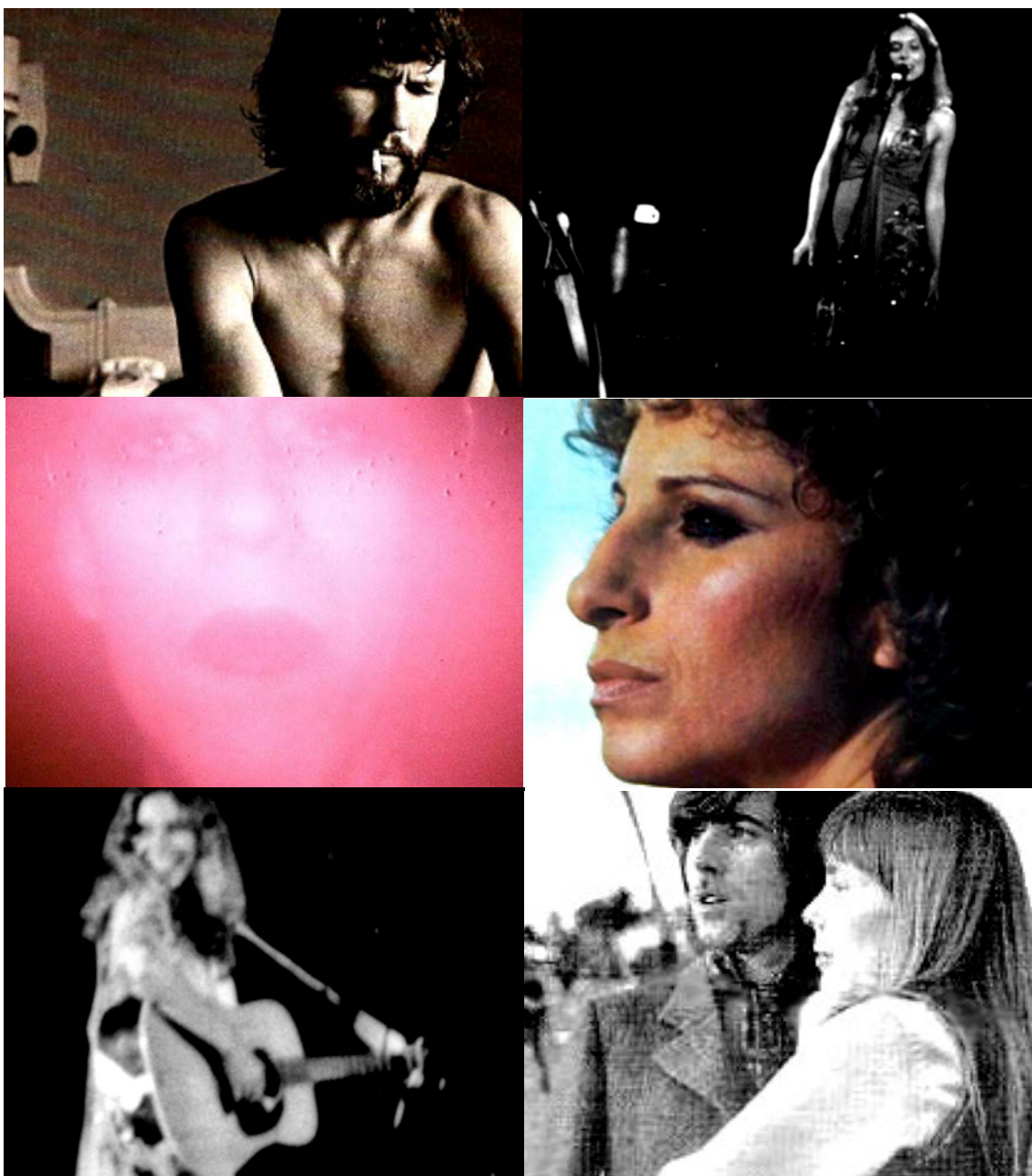
- Barbra Streisand





She finds herself in this strange society of Vazkor's, which kind of mimics L.A., kind of mimics the debauchorous society that Jesus Christ in *Jesus Christ Superstar* finds himself living in, which is sort of this surreal, like, 70's pastiche of, like, technology and biblical times. And in this society, they worship the lost race, and they attempt to be everything like this lost race—the lost race who didn't have to eat or drink, or defecate, or urinate—so these people wear masks to shroud their faces and they never eat in public, because they're ashamed of their sort of less-than status of this lost race, and they inhabit the cities of this lost race. This kind of mimics Los Angeles and how Joni Mitchell talks about it as the city of fallen angels. Paglia would call it this Apollonian sky-cult that men kind of construct as a way to escape from the earth, from their mothers. Inhabiting this goddess creature, Karrakaz really does begin to find her true power, just as I began to find my true power within drag and within music, and Barbra Streisand found her power with this movie, fraught as it was with technical issues. She picks up a guitar, for the part, and actually writes her first song, which is "Evergreen", the love theme from *A Star is Born*, which

went on to win her an Oscar. She also writes “Lost Inside of You”, the song that was just playing on the piano, finding kind of this power within music and within who she, in spite of her past as sort of just this standard singer, who was singing just these songs written by men through history. Of course Madonna picks up a guitar at some point. I should have brought a picture of myself with a guitar too, but I can’t play. As she finds her power, and as it sort of eclipses Vazkor’s, she realizes that this dude is no good; he rapes her, impregnates her, for the—sort of, to secure an heir, especially an heir of the lost race for his political gains, but she summons a great storm, and derails his military campaign, and kills Vazkor. There’s a passage that I wanted to read of when she destroys his mental capacities, if I can find it.

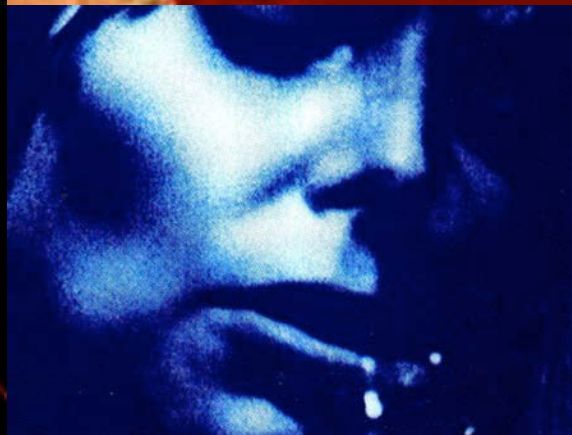
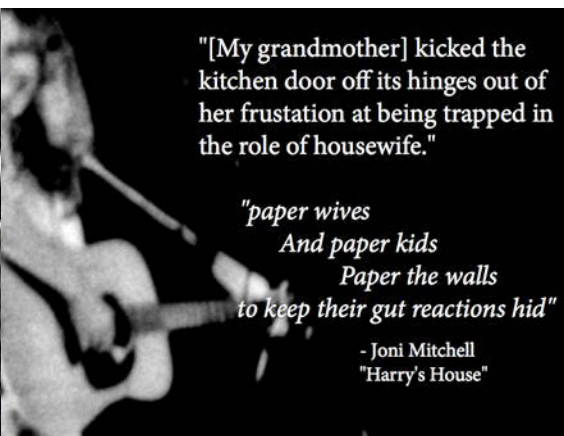




"[My grandmother] kicked the kitchen door off its hinges out of her frustration at being trapped in the role of housewife."

*"paper wives
And paper kids
Paper the walls
to keep their gut reactions hid"*

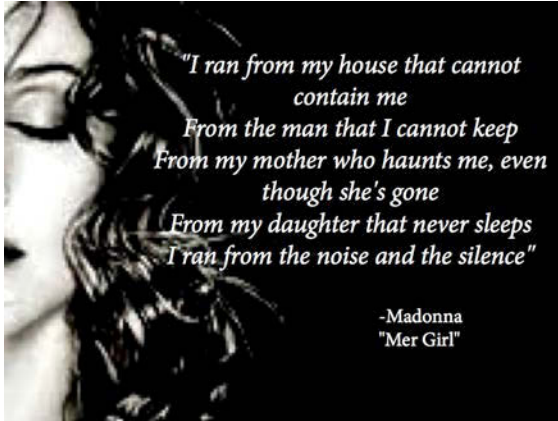
- Joni Mitchell
"Harry's House"





“I saw the fire leap from his pupils, clear this time and very bright, and the deep fury answered from the core of my brain, a shaft shot out blazing, caught his little death wish for me, contained it, turned it, I seemed much larger than Vazkor, taller, burning, I felt his power shrivel and draw back and I pressed after it, pursuing it into the very brain cave of his lair, into the dark places of Vazkor’s mind. There I found the diamond spark of his knowledge, down the black corridors of his skull, which in most mankind are closed and empty, but which in Vazkor were open and alive. I found the spark, the little hard, bright stone, and I scorched it to ashes, destroyed it without compunction, because he had claimed he was my brother. He was only a man.”

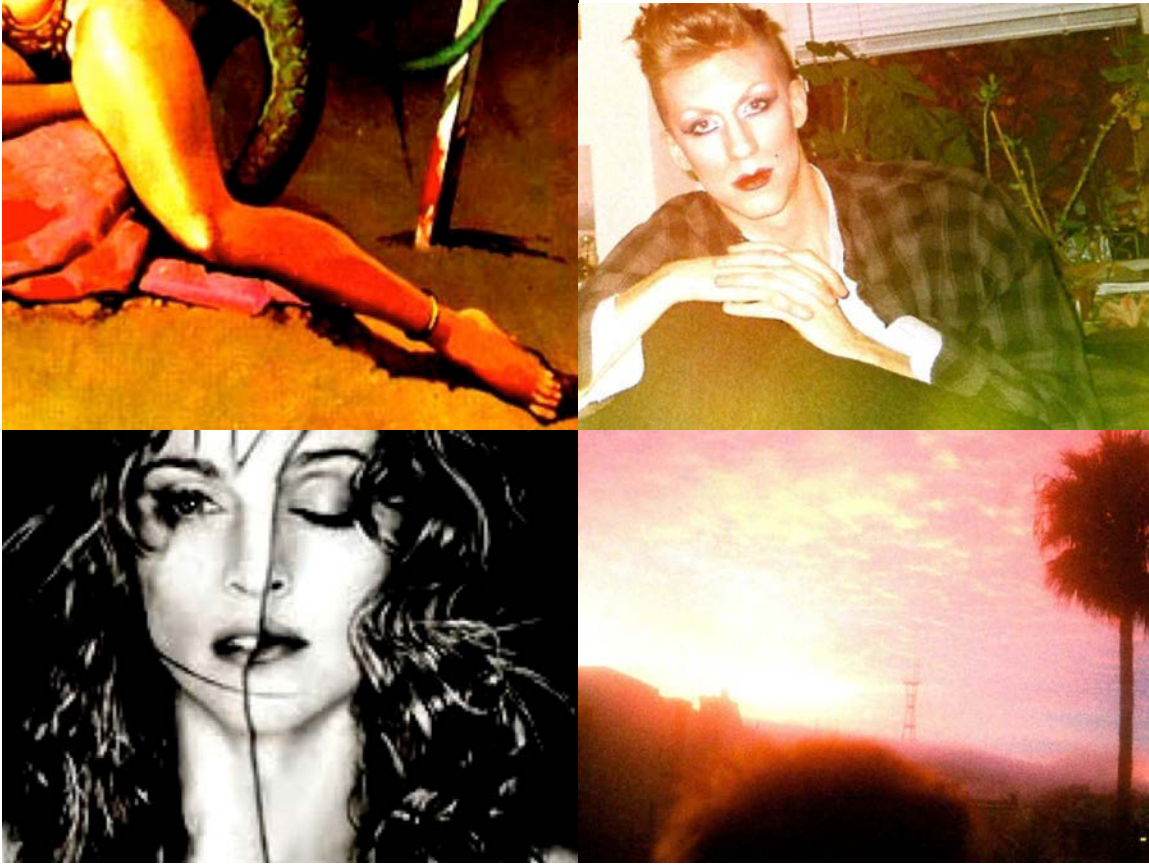




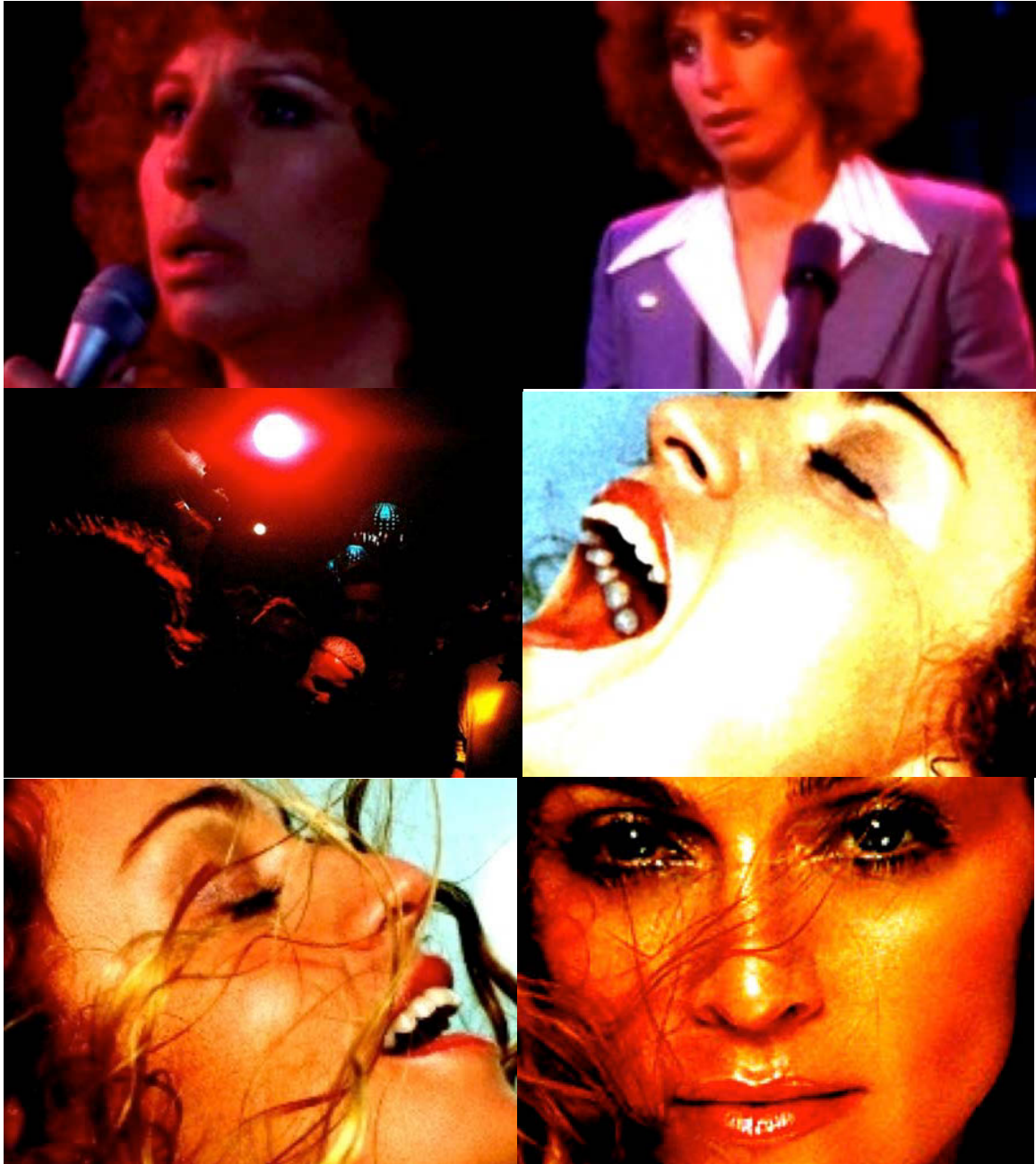
Not to be dramatic, but I kind of mirror my relationship with all these straight guys as that, as sort of claiming to be one thing, existing in this world of this subculture, this gay whatever, existence that I lead, but they're not really willing to go the full distance. I try not to take that as a personal affront, I know that I'm very attractive, but it's really hard sometimes. And I see her destruction of these capacities of his, that he has learned and honed, whereas they are natural for her, I see that destruction as kind of the reduction that I make, when I'm reducing men in my life to just this box of, "Oh, there's another straight guy that I'm dating". Something that I have been experiencing recently is that there is sort of more to the picture than that. Obviously no man is just a face, a great dark thing from your dreams; everybody's an individual, that lodestone of destiny that made Madonna Madonna, that made me who I am. We all bear that and the players just aren't necessarily just some random player in your game.







After she kills him, she wanders in the wilderness as an animal. I want to stop the audio, there we go. She wanders in the wilderness as an animal, in the way that Joni wandered in the wilderness after she broke with Gram Parsons. Back in Esther's life, as his career is eclipsed by Esther's, John Norman crashes his car in the desert and dies while his tape player is playing her newest single. It's really dramatic. I wish I could say that I'm like solo for men wandering in the wilderness right now, but I'm not 'cause I've already said, I've got one staying with me right now. In the wilderness they kind of find this sort of strange self-reflective—I don't know, the story starts to replay itself in his mind; and this is kind of where I bring in Jesus as sort of this self-alienating emo, like, drama queen, who, just like Karrakaz knows he's of the human race, but also somehow needs to cast himself as separate, as often I do, or as often all of us do. I think it's really pervasive in human nature to alienate ourselves from each other, though, honestly, like, I know I'm a fucking weirdo, but I have the exact same cells and biological processes going on here as you do, or as anybody does. But it's really easy to fall into that trap of self-alienation.

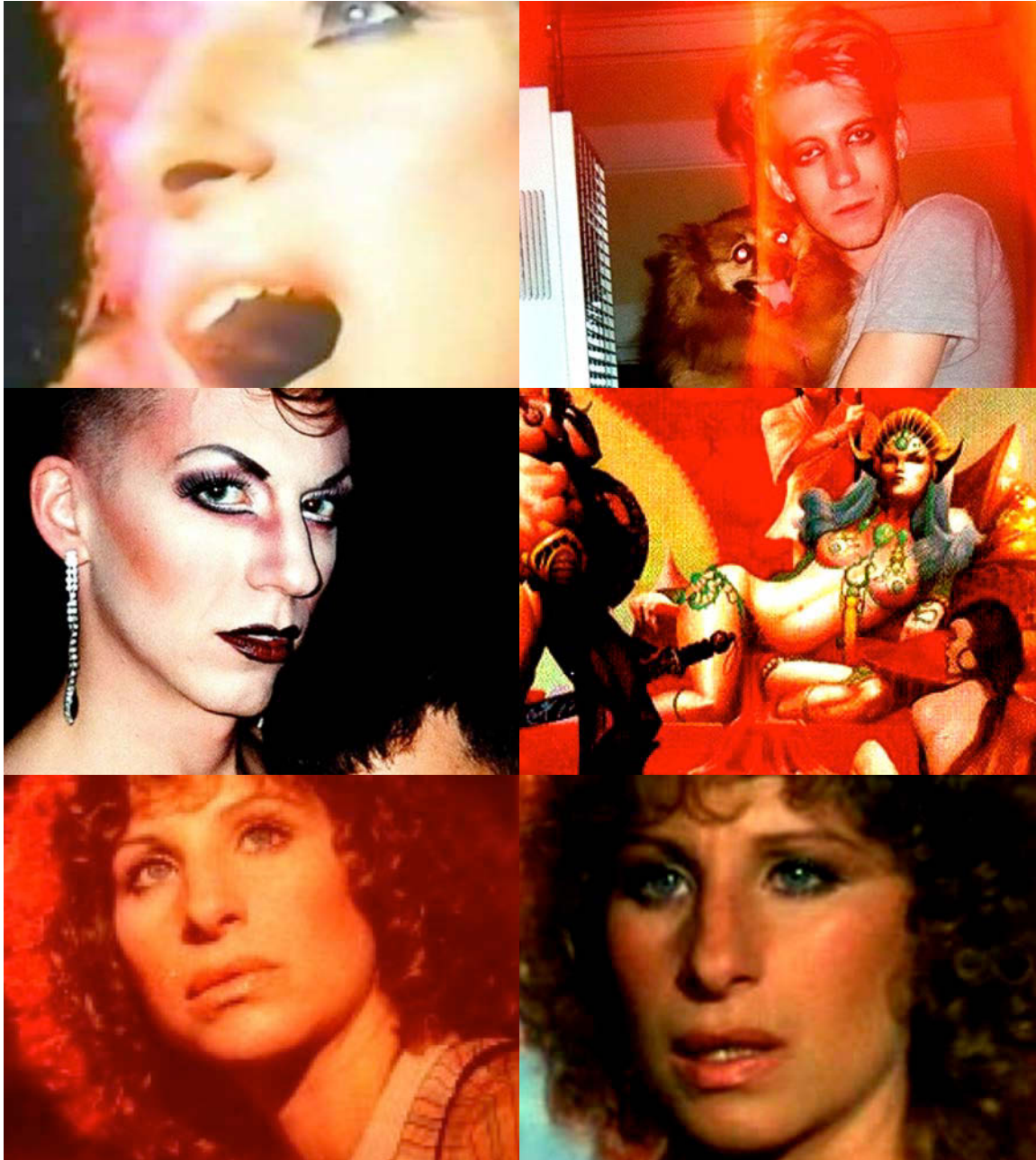


In the movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*, we find Jesus on the mountain, wandering in the wilderness, intriguing God to tell him, "Why do I have to die? Why does this have to be my death? What is this going to do?" We all know what happened from Jesus's death, his crucifixion, and subsequent resurrection; a bunch of insane people took that and ran with it. And it kind of pervades the culture to this day. But that's not as important to me as this moment, of "Why me?" But then faced with that choice, with that destiny, with that name of Madonna, Mother of God, with that weird upbringing from some crazy failed actress in Kansas, to become some weird drag queen, Jesus makes the choice to take that knife of easy dying, and finds himself strung up on a cross, just like John Norman finds himself crushed under a car in the middle of the desert. It's a really gross, intense thing. So Madonna puts herself on the cross at some point too. It's a little less permanent, though nowhere less as powerful, for me.



*"I'm the master magician
Who's setting you free
From the lies you've been told
When you're breaking your back
Bring your last straw to me
I turn straw into gold
I'm gonna need you later, when you're not
around
But I can take it, don't look down
Watch closely now..."*

*- Barbra Streisand/Kris Kristofferson
"Watch Closely Now"*



Do we have time? OK.

So we find ourself in the desert, wandering. But somehow we make our way out of that. Karrakaz calls down a UFO—this is where it gets weird. I don't know if you've followed me at all, but this is the resolution. She calls down a UFO, this spaceship, with her mind. Unbeknownst to her, on board this spacecraft, they analyze her mind, and they look at everything that's happened to her, and the space crew says, “You think that don't have these powers anymore, but you've actually been fully powered this whole time; and what happened was this man, during the plague, that wiped out your lost race, who is actually this dark-haired man who looks just like Darak and Vazkor, drilled into them at the last phase of their race, as people were subsuming to the plague all over the place, that you are evil, this is your sin, this is your fault.” So Karrakaz, which is actually her name, became this curse, and she felt cursed, just because she was a little kid, getting this weird end-times religion dropped into her head. So actually she's had the power the whole time, and the big reveal comes. She's actually not disgrified;

she's actually very pretty. Just as Barbra refused to sing the lyric, "I was beautiful then," when she covered "Memory" from *Cats*, we all find reasons to think of ourselves as aliens, as different, or ugly, but, in the end, we're just all the same, and often very beautiful.



But Esther kind of meets—she kind of does the final triumph of this whole story. These are all the women wandering in the desert. Delivering John, her late husband's, eulogy at the Grammys, she takes one of his songs, turns it into one of her own, and she becomes this sort of goddess figure that sings about change for women, and sort of really makes it—makes the whole thing worthwhile in the end.



So, if I can fuck with the audio one more time, I'll do one more song—are we over time? OK. Cool. Well, I don't know if any of that made any sort of sense, but I'll take you to our final moment where Barbra sort of deifies herself as this world-changing woman, without the influence of men, no more—solo. And I'll read one more passage from *The Birthgrave*. “A hot breeze burned on my naked face, lifted strands of my hair. I am alone. No one stands beside me. I have no Darak Prince to ride my chariot, to walk with me, to hold me to him. I have no one. And yet, I myself at last, I have myself. And to me, at this time, it seems enough. It seems more, much more, than enough. Thanks guys.



