Chapter 11

**Tilda Swinton: From Avant-Garde Androgyne to *The Avengers***

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The film industry has traded in gossip since the early days of movie stardom. Stories of eccentric actors and their scandalous personal lives have remained central to publications, moving from early fan magazines to tabloid journalism and, in the 21st century, celebrity-focused websites. Unlike with many young starlets, Tilda Swinton (born Katherine Matilda Swinton in 1960) became an appealing subject for such publications only decades into her career. Born in London and raised largely in Scotland, where her father was a Lord Lieutenant of a 19th-century mansion house, Swinton began her acting career in political theatre after finishing a degree at Cambridge. Her early film work involved seven collaborations with the radical filmmaker Derek Jarman from 1986 until his death in 1994, as well as the remarkable performance of a gender-shifting aristocrat in Sally Potter’s *Orlando* (1993). Swinton’s first real foray into mainstream cinema came in 2000 with *The Beach*. Swinton has described this as a key turning point, not necessarily in terms of acting, but because it was the first time she was tasked with dressing for a red carpet (“Planet
Tilda,” *W* Magazine, 21 August 2011). This moment marked the start of her reluctant ascendance to the dual status of film star and fashion icon. By 2008, Swinton had begun to accumulate high profile awards, including an Academy Award and BAFTA for Best Supporting Actress in *Michael Clayton* (2007). These awards were accompanied by increased press coverage of Swinton’s private life, particularly her romantic entanglements, when it was reported that the man who accompanied her to such ceremonies (Sandro Kopp) was her boyfriend, not the father of her children (John Byrne), with whom she still lived in the Highland town of Nairn, Scotland.

For tabloids, the vague details of Swinton’s relationships read like a dream: not only could they report on this apparent *ménage à trois*, but the relative ages and occupations of the three participants made for an even better story. With the Scottish playwright, Byrne, twenty years older than Swinton, and the artist, Kopp, eighteen years younger, the actress was presumed to be lustfully having her cake and eating it (“Tilda Swinton: Her toyboy, elderly lover and an intriguing *ménage a trois*,” *Daily Mail*, 14 February 2008). In subsequent years, Swinton would go on to detail the much more mundane aspects of this set up: Byrne and Swinton had not been together romantically for years, but they were living together to raise their children, and both had their own – separate – romantic relationships (“Transformer,” *BUST Magazine*, June 2010: 67).


Though appearing in some fifty screen productions prior to 2010, Tilda Swinton’s distinctive star presence has gained increased exposure and currency in the past decade. In this period, discourse around the British performer has retained many of the same associations—with androgyny, the avant-garde, and an otherworldly timelessness—but Swinton has simultaneously appeared in more mainstream and auteur-driven productions. As Jackie Stacey
notes, Swinton thus demonstrates an “unusual facility to cross between independent and more popular culture forms” (243). This chapter will consider how Swinton has increasingly brought her unique qualities to productions by established auteurs like Wes Anderson, Luca Guadagnino, Jim Jarmusch, Bong Joon-Ho and Lynne Ramsay. In particular, her roles in US-made films by the likes of Anderson and Jarmusch seem to have served as an important stepping stone for Swinton to dabble in mainstream comedies like *Trainwreck* and in the Marvel superhero franchise, with *Doctor Strange* and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Thus, while Stacey rightly identifies “flux and mutability” as some of Swinton’s signature qualities (243), her more recent roles will be shown to stabilize and mainstream some of Swinton’s edgy elements. As my analysis of related promotional materials will reveal, such unconventional elements are increasingly contained to interviews and media profiles. In these, details of Swinton’s eccentric home life in Scotland serve to remind the public that—while she may appear in a film like *Trainwreck* alongside the famously “relatable” Amy Schumer—Swinton is still far-removed, physically and metaphysically, from your average film star.

**A Tourist in Hollywood, An Artist at Large**

In the aforementioned *Harper’s Bazaar* article “Liberated in Love: Can Open Marriage Work?,” Swinton’s romantic situation is compared to that of the early 20th century painter Vanessa Bell, sister of Virginia Woolf, and to Bell’s “romantic experiment.” Bell lived on her English country estate with her children, her lover, his gay lover, and occasionally the father of her children. Both Swinton and Bell’s alleged living situations are framed as signs of individual thinking, of being unconventional and imaginative: “Open marriages have always fascinated and unsettled us because they threaten our assumptions; they raise questions we prefer not be raised” (“Liberated in Love”). Though Swinton would subsequently clarify that she was not in an open marriage, the associations around such an arrangement would still appear to hold, and they have informed the reception of Swinton in the media ever since. As a performer and artist, Swinton’s long and
dive career is largely characterized by her ability to unsettle boundaries and to question assumptions, particularly around gender and artistic mediums. As Hilary Radner explains, Swinton has been aptly described by Anderson as a “visual performance artist at large,” a label that captures her ability to “cross borders and transgress categories,” including those of on- and off-screen performance (401-402), as well as different artistic mediums including theater, film, fine art, and fashion.

In keeping with Swinton’s sustained interest in unsettling boundaries, her forays into the Hollywood mainstream can be seen as another dimension of this, a chance to explore the boundary between high and low art. Why can’t she appear in a Judd Apatow comedy? Why shouldn’t she be a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the highest-grossing film series of all time? Much as Swinton’s personal life reveals a natural inclination to think outside the box – to respond to individual circumstances, rather than societal expectations – her career demonstrates a remarkable ability not to place oneself in a box, all the while literally placing herself in a glass box. In “The Maybe” (Serpentine Gallery 1995) and “The Maybe (reprise)” (MOMA 2013) Swinton as performance artist presents her sleeping self as though a living museum specimen, while gallery attendees can surround her and peer in. As the remainder of this chapter will suggest, this openness to all kinds of roles – and to being seen, as in the glass box, from every angle – has prevented Swinton from being typecast by filmmakers or by herself. This is not to say that Swinton does not bring distinct qualities, or associations, to these diverse roles, but that elements of her essence are used to different effect, in different kinds of roles.

An interest in a decentralized career structure is reflected in Swinton’s engaging interviews. In a profile in The Gentlewoman in 2012, she refers to the independent films I Am Love (2009), Julia (2008) and We Need to Talk About Kevin (2011) as the “three pillars” of her work since the new millennium (“Tilda Swinton,” The Gentlewoman, Spring & Summer 2012). As she explains, she started working with Luca Guadagnino on I Am Love in 2000, with work on Julia “a
Swinton describes all other films from 2000-2012 period as “excursions”: “those industrial films are like family holidays in comparison with what it took to get [I Am Love, Julia and We Need to Talk About Kevin] made” (Ibid). The reference to these three films as “pillars” suggests how Swinton’s diverse career is measured rather chaotic, reliant on a structure of integrity but with some space for wild ornamentation. As implied by Swinton’s description of “industrial films,” roles in such productions can be much more contained in terms of both the scale of the role and the time scale of her involvement. Swinton’s work on two of her “pillar” films went far beyond acting, since she was a producer on I Am Love and an executive producer of We Need to Talk About Kevin. She also has producer or executive producer credits for subsequent films in which she appears, including Bong’s Okja (2017), Mark Cousins’ epic documentary Women Make Film (2018) and the forthcoming Memoria (2020), Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s first English-language production.

Often describing herself as “a tourist” in Hollywood, Swinton’s occasional forays into mainstream roles may also have a financial motivation. Like other actors with a preference for playing the kind of nuanced roles more often on offer in arthouse cinema, Swinton may be tempted by the injection of income that can come from bigger studio productions. Radner also considers finances to be a motivation for Swinton’s work as a brand ambassador “usually paid” for fashion houses and luxury products (406). Symptomatic of Swinton’s well-documented status as a fashion icon (see De Perthuis; Radner), she has served as the face for companies like Chanel, the Italian jewelry brand Pomellato, and the cosmetics company NARS. As Radner explains, such collaborations, which typically involve Swinton appearing in advertising campaigns, “add to her relatively meagre income from her film roles (by Hollywood standards)” and may well be necessary for Swinton’s household, since “she appears to be the main source of financial support for a bevy of persons surrounding her, including her children, partner, former husband, [and] the village alternative school her children attend” (406).
My suggestion that Swinton takes certain roles purely on the basis of income might appear at odds with other strands of Swinton’s persona: her ties to avant-garde and artistic expression, her upper-class family background. Yet such a financial imperus might explain the somewhat jarring references Swinton makes to wanting to stop making films altogether: “That’s really what I would like the most,” she tells The Gentlewoman in 2012 (“Tilda Swinton”). Swinton even frames her BAFTA and Golden Globe-nominated performance as numbed mother Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as secondary to her interest in helping director Lynne Ramsay get the film made. Serving on the project as a producer, first and foremost, she explains that “for a long time, I didn’t necessarily want to be in it. To be honest with you, I just don’t really like doing it. I love actresses like [Renée] Falconetti, who was only ever in one movie. Every film I make is a personal disappointment: I want it to be the last” (Ibid). Swinton’s candour is far-removed from the gushing gratitude for film opportunities we have come to expect from actors, particularly women. Swinton’s reference to Renée Falconetti, the French stage actress who made a single film appearance in Carl Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne D’Arc* (1927), may also be telling of her diverse career. While it is much too late for Swinton to take Falconetti’s route – of only appearing in one film – she is arguably succeeding in only appearing in each kind of role once. And if with every film she does feel that “I want it to be the last,” then by shifting into a new kind of character with each film then her idealized interest in singularity is somewhat achieved. Indeed, discussing her role in *Doctor Strange* in 2016, Swinton explains that: “I’m in this game to amuse myself. I don’t know how interesting I would find it to repeat. I’m not really interested enough in any sense of craft to hoe a kind of defined row” (“Why ‘Doctor Strange’ Star Tilda Swinton Wanted to Do a Superhero Movie,” IndieWire, 4 November 2016). But although Swinton may not repeat her roles in any generic sense, taking a thematic lens to her career reveals how her sustained interesting in androgyny is matched by a sustained engagement with issues of ageing and anachronism.
Agelessness and Anachronism

Dating back to her first experimental appearances in Jarman’s films and in Orlando, through to her roles in American indie productions like Only Lovers Left Alive (2013) and The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014), Swinton has played characters largely defined by their age or their agelessness. Viewed against this history, her Marvel role as “the Ancient One” seems like less of a radical departure. The role is simply another opportunity to portray a character with a complex relationship to time. Much as many of Swinton’s performances and characters seem unwilling to follow a prescribed binary of gendered identity, her roles can involve untethering a character from a fixed time and place. This is particularly the case with Orlando and Only Lovers Left Alive – roles to which the Ancient One might be tied, in a kind of loose trilogy of Swinton-as-time-traveler.

As Orlando’s titular character, Swinton plays the aristocrat poet on a journey through some 400 years of English history. Like in the Virginia Woolf novel on which it is based, Orlando begins the film as a man but later transforms into a woman. In the film’s most iconic scene, Orlando enters a maze in an 18th century French styled robe and powdered grey wig. When Swinton exits the maze, she is wigless and wearing radically different period clothing: a Victorian bustle. Through the cinematic magic of costume and editing, Swinton enters the labyrinth in one century but exits in another. And though Swinton only plays one character, Orlando is consistently recontextualized—moving from the 1600s to modern times. The film radically resists the tropes of the costume drama, or historical drama, providing something of an anti-narrative that allows for significant commentary on gender politics throughout British history.

Perhaps more so than any other performance, Orlando signals how Swinton has become a symbolic figure that demonstrates how the past inflects the present, and vice versa. Stacey grounds her conception of Swinton’s “flat affect” performance style in Lauren Berlant’s
discussion of flatness as “a structuring of ‘unfeeling’ that belongs to a historical archive, pointing “back prior to the twentieth century European and American modernists with whom it is usually associated: from Gertrude Stein and Buster Keaton to Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock”” (Stacey 253; Berlant 197). Stacey considers how Swinton’s performance of a flat affect can mean “the present ‘becomes historical,’” so that we can understand “Swinton’s performance of flat affect as belong to the historical present” (253-4). Drawing a comparison with Greta Garbo’s minimalist performance style in Queen Christina (1933), Stacey also argues that Swinton’s film career “reworks the temporalities of particular genres of feminine affect that have become so central to our emotional landscapes since the cinema began” and “indicates her capacity to generate readings of her transcendence of time” (247; 249-250). Stacey traces this back to Swinton’s early film roles, her collaborations with Jarman, arguing that “Swinton’s more general association with Jarman’s artistic practices intent on reframing conventional histories of sexuality, such as Caravaggio (1986), The Last of England (1988) and Edward II (1991), contribute to her reputation as a figure whose presence belongs to the project of contesting historical narratives and traditional chronologies and teleologies that have anchored them” (253). Stacey’s analysis of Swinton’s presentation of a “historical present” focuses on Swinton’s early film work with Jarman and her recurring performance art presentation of her sleeping self as a living corpse in “The Maybe” and “The Maybe (reprise)” (250-254). But such a tendency to transcend time by contesting traditional chronologies lingers on into her 2010s film roles, particularly in Only Lovers Left Alive and Doctor Strange.

Only Lovers Left Alive was Swinton’s second time working with the American independent film maverick Jim Jarmusch, with whom she would collaborate again for The Dead Don’t Die (2019). More so than any other US indie filmmaker of his generation, Jarmusch’s work takes a global outlook: frequently filmed in Europe or Asia, and starring European performers—as in The Limits of Control (2009), in which Swinton plays the cipher-like character of “Blonde,” in a production filmed in Spain and starring Isaac de Bankolé as a solitary assassin. As signaled by the
name, Swinton’s character is purposefully enigmatic in a film that foregrounds acts of translation and (mis)communication between a series of characters with labels for monikers, including Lone Man (de Bankolé) and Nude (Paz de la Huerta). Jarmusch tends to work with the same performers over time, and it took him some seven years to fund and make *Only Lovers Left Alive*. Swinton was attached to it from early on, and Jarmusch credits her optimistic – verging on fatalistic – approach to timing to the project eventually getting made: “whenever a bump in the road had him ready to abandon the project, Tilda Swinton would insist: ‘That’s good news, it means that now is not the time. It will happen when it needs to happen’” (“Jim Jarmusch: ‘Women are my leaders,’” *The Guardian*, 20 February 2014). Indeed, time, persistence and patience are central themes of the film.

*Only Lovers Left Alive* offers a particularly interesting example of Swinton as symbol of cultural anachronism. The vampire film focuses on Adam (Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Swinton) and seems motivated by a desire to reveal how much knowledge and culture vampires would experience over the long course of their lives. Named after the Biblical couple, Adam and Eve are effectively human encyclopedias: they speak many languages and have personal experiences of a diverse range of cultural and scientific movements and historical events. Swinton’s role as Eve can be seen as a culmination of her interests in myth and archetype, while a script littered with Middle and Early Modern English and references to Christopher Marlowe provides an interesting addendum to Swinton’s controversial decision to leave the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company back in 1984 (See Goodman 215-228). Anticipating Swinton’s role as the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* and *Avengers: Endgame*, there is an otherworldly power to Eve’s anachronistic presence. Delivering terms from middle English like “my liege lord” and “weskit” with a confident ease, she has something of a magical touch: able to tell how old things are just by touching them, Eve also seems able to absorb the content of books purely by tracing over the words with her finger. And with Adam presented as a rather depressed figure, it is up to Swinton to convey the playful possibilities of vampires using centuries of knowledge to their advantage.
In the closing sequence, desperate for blood, Eve politely addresses a Tangiers couple in their native French, before revealing her fangs. It is easy to see why Jarmusch and Swinton would be willing to wait seven years to make this a reality. Like a blood-sucking follow-up to *Orlando*, Swinton’s intellectual vampire is the epitome of refined timelessness.

**Figure 2:** Swinton as intellectual vampire in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013).

Swinton’s ageless qualities have also lent themselves well to her increased engagement with modelling and the fashion industry. Since the early 2000s, Swinton has emerged as fashion icon and muse, as in 2003 when the Dutch avant-garde design duo, Viktor & Rolf, sent her down the catwalk followed by an army of Tilda-like clones. Notably, Swinton’s trajectory has worked against the accepted ageism in the industry, particularly when it comes to models. In 2009, the almost 50 year-old Swinton’s modelling stints included the cover and an editorial for *AnOther Magazine* (Spring-Summer 2009), photographed by esteemed photographer Craig McDean, and the Winter issue of *Acne Paper*, photographed by Vogue Italia regular Paulo Roversi (Issue 9, October 2009). Both of these shoots confirm Swinton’s instinct for wearing dramatic couture shapes and styles, and presenting an edgy, offbeat appearance. For *Acne* she
channels Marchesa Luisa Casati, donning a curly brunette wig and the belle époque style of the eccentric, wide-eyed muse. Casati was an Italian heiress and patroness of the arts in early 20th-century Europe. Like the Harper’s Bazaar piece on open marriages, that groups Swinton with modernist painter Vanessa Bell, Swinton’s distinctive appearance and aura lend themselves to moments of cultural time travel: as though Casati and Bell are her true contemporaries. These fashion editorials work to consolidate Swinton’s filmic persona as timeless, ageless. In the Acne spread in particular, titled “The Lost Album of Marchesa Casati” we can see overlaps with Swinton’s elaborate period costumes in films like Wittgenstein (1993) and Orlando. Swinton’s appearances as the Ancient One in the Marvel Cinematic Universe equally builds on her on- and off-screen associations with being from another time and, perhaps, another plain altogether.

Swinton’s casting as the Ancient One in Doctor Strange was initially fraught, with fans of the original Marvel comic (in which the character is a male Tibetan mystic) seeing it as a problematic example of Hollywood’s “whitewashing” practices. The President of Marvel Studios and Doctor Strange’s director Scott Derrickson repeatedly defended their casting of Swinton, explaining that the role was written especially for her, and the decision to reframe the character as a Celtic rather than a Tibetan mystic was partly due to the crude Asian stereotyping of the character in the original comic (“Doctor Strange Director Explains Why the Ancient One Was Never Going to Be Asian in the Movie,” Vanity Fair, 13 October 2016). From my perspective, one with a complete lack of investment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the decision to cast Swinton as the now-Celtic mystic is a clever use of poetic license. Though not quite Ancient Celtic paganism, Swinton’s personal lineage connects her Anglo-Scots family back to medieval Scotland at least. Furthermore, from her early days in theatre she has expressed a keen interest in symbolic power of myth and religious icons, as explored in a thought-provoking interview with Lizbeth Goodman in 1989 (215-224). In particular, Swinton discusses her forthcoming role as Orlando, and how she intends to find a point of gender identification for the character: “I would play it moment to moment. I’d treat it as myth rather than as realism” (224).
As with her gender-crossing performance in Orlando, and numerous times since, Swinton ties her interest in the role of the Ancient One as getting to an opportunity to escape from realism, including traditional configurations of gender. As she surmises soon after her casting was announced, “I have yet to decide exactly where I’m going to place the gender of this character.” (“Tilda Swinton Is ‘Delighted’ To Look Unrecognizable In ‘Trainwreck,’” The Huffington Post, 15 July 2015). What came to pass is a performance that takes advantage of Swinton’s willingness to appear androgynous, but where her womanhood is crucial to the character. This includes the scene where Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) arrives to meet the Ancient One and assumes they must be the elderly Asian man in the room, with Swinton mistaken as someone merely there to pour the tea. Swinton’s look for the film, and her subsequent minor role in Avengers: Endgame, is also uncannily similar to a high fashion spread “Planet Tilda” that she shot for W Magazine in 2011. As part of the “out-of-this-world” shoot by photographer Tim Walker, Swinton appears bald and wearing an androgynous, all-burgundy outfit, composed (according to the fashion credits) of a coat, dress and pants. The excess of material, all in one color, make it hard to distinguish the garments, while Swinton (who is probably crouching her knees) appears to be hovering over the alien landscape of rural Iceland. Her costumes in Doctor Strange mirror the look entirely, from the bald head to the cloak-like coat layered over monochrome fabrics in shades of mustard, beige or burgundy. Looking at the images side-by-side, one might wonder if Swinton somehow summoned up the invitation to play the Ancient One when shooting the magazine spread four years previously.

“Shockingly Conventional”: Swinton in Trainwreck

While the Marvel films repurpose recurring elements of Swinton’s persona (androgyny, agelessness) for a mass market, Trainwreck allowed her to bridge an arguably bigger gap—to play an everywoman. As Stacey has explored to great effect, Swinton’s extreme version of whiteness is central to her onscreen presence and broader public persona (263-266). Lending itself well to
her role as a vampire in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Swinton’s paleness also suits her other otherworldly roles, including that of the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (2005-2010) and the corpse of Madam D in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*: “the whiteness of Swinton’s flesh seems to resist the imprint of time, as angel, witch, vampire and corpse… [...] The paleness of her whiteness suggests a vitality sourced from elsewhere” (263). It is precisely because Swinton’s pale whiteness has been central to her image that her characterization of the ruthless magazine editor Dianna in *Trainwreck* caused such commotion. As Nina Terrero puts it in an *Entertainment Weekly* article on Swinton’s transformation, “Famous for her avant-garde style and bare-bones approach to beauty, Tilda Swinton is unrecognizable – and shockingly conventional – as Dianna” (“Tilda Swinton in *Trainwreck*: Here’s the scoop on her transformation,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 21 July 2015). To look conventional here refers to her carefully dyed caramel-colored hair, tanned skin and smoky eye makeup.

Figure 3. Swinton wearing fake-tan and popular hair and makeup trends in *Trainwreck* (2015).
Descriptions of Swinton as paradoxically shocking and conventional are best understood within the historical context of her public image. Swinton’s 2008 appearance at the Academy Awards (where she won an Oscar for *Michael Clayton*) was described in the *New York Times* as “brazenly pasty, unsustained by rouge and bronzer, a white waif in an ocean of spray-tanned limbs and bobbing plastic torsos” (Alex Kuczynski, “Extreme Makeover,” *New York Times*, 13 April 2008). In many respects, public exclamations around Swinton’s natural paleness seems unwarranted. She is, after all, of ancient Scottish heritage, and her skin tone would not appear extreme to most in the UK or Ireland. It is more her unwillingness to mask it with make-up or tanning products that marks her out as unconventional – and her appearance as Dianna in *Trainwreck* “shockingly conventional” by comparison. Swinton’s paleness also seems central to her own sense of self growing up, as when she discusses her early identification with the equally androgynous David Bowie when addressing him in the opening speech of a Bowie exhibit in 2013: “I was a freak like you and even looked a little like you . . . [a] gingery, boney pinkey whitey person” (“Tilda Swinton Praises David Bowie,” *Spin*, 22 March 2013).

These various factors all contributed to Swinton’s decision that her costume for Dianna should be marked by three popular trends among 21st century Western white women, but far-removed from Swinton’s normal appearance: “a Tandoori tan,” heavy eye makeup, and curtain-like caramel colored hair. Swinton complements these external, cosmetic elements of Dianna, with various performance strategies—including a number of affectations and gestures that seem removed from Stacey’s focus on her “flat affect” (243). Dianna is impatient with her employees, including the film’s protagonist, Amy (Amy Schumer), and this is signaled through her face (pained expressions of boredom), through her hands (frantic circular gestures for staff members to wrap up things they are saying) and through her stomping exits from scenes. As Dianna, Swinton’s walk is distinctive and in alignment with other dimensions of her physical transformation. Twice Dianna makes a swift exit – as though she has better places to be, or more important people to see – and her walk is accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of heavy
heels. These sounds, trailing her as she attempts to march out of rooms, belie Dianna’s try-hard nature. She is someone who always wears high heels, even if she can’t really walk in them; someone who thinks they are the height of fashion, even if her appearance suggests contrivance rather than inherent style.

These qualities extend also to Dianna’s hair: Swinton wore a carefully styled wig, which falls over one eye, hiding part of her upper face. While not an uncommon look, it is far removed from Swinton’s personal hairstyles in recent years (short hair, often pushed back into a voluminous sculpture), and from unobscured shots of Swinton’s intense gaze in the vast majority of her film roles. Her characters’ haunting stares and penetrating glares just wouldn’t be the same with one eye hidden behind a curtain of hair. Dianna’s hair, like her tan and her heavy eye makeup, works as a mask that separates the natural-looking Swinton from the manufactured Dianna. Also significant is the hair and skin coloring of Amy’s co-worker Nikki (Vanessa Bayer), another of Dianna’s employees. Bayer’s pale skin and deep red hair stand out from both Amy and Dianna’s tanned, blonde figures. For audience members aware that they are watching a “shockingly conventional” Swinton, Nikki/Bayer serves as a reminder of Swinton’s natural coloring, presenting us with a veritable before-and-after transformation within the same shot.

Swinton’s portrayal of Dianna, particularly her discussion of the character and the influences for her physical transformation, can be better understood through Stacey’s argument that Swinton is often in dialogue “with femininity as genre” (259-60), a dialogue Stacey positions against descriptions of Swinton as chameleon-like: “unlike the animal, which adapts to the tones and textures of its environment, Swinton almost effects the reverse: standing to one side of the generic contexts of her production, she draws them towards her only to formalize their conventionality through her shifting embodiments of them” (Ibid). As a public figure, and in the majority of her film presentations, Swinton has sidestepped traditional visual markers of movie star femininity—to present as androgynous, and to present as pale and barely made up on red carpets and publicity materials (even when dressed in high fashion gowns and clothing). I am
particularly interested in Stacey’s description of Swinton’s drawing generic contexts “towards her[,] only to formalize their conventionality through her shifting embodiments of them” (259-60). While Stacey is not referring specifically to visually trappings like costume and makeup, a parallel can be drawn here to Swinton’s very conscious decision to embody various contemporary feminine beauty trends when designing Dianna’s look.

Over the course of Swinton’s career, she frequently discusses her interest in helping to shape her character’s costumes, describing close consultation with costume designers in order to put together “the disguise, as “the lion’s share of my work (“Only Lovers Left Alive’s Tilda Swinton talks Playing a Vampire,” Daily Dead, 10 April 2014). The same applied with Trainwreck, where she has described the significance of the tan, the commonness of Dianna’s physical appearance, and of imagining that Dianna models herself on Carine Roitfeld, former editor-in-chief of Vogue Paris (Terrero, “Tilda Swinton in Trainwreck”). Asked about seeing herself as Dianna, Swinton explains the weight of the transformation: “the Tandoori tan. That’s probably the most heavily disguised I’ve ever been, in my life. Forget The Grand Budapest Hotel or Snowpiercer. And yet, there are women walking down the streets right now, looking like that. It’s a desired look, apparently” (“Tilda Swinton Talks Trainwreck, Doctor Strange, the Coen Brothers, and More,” Collider, 14 July 2015). In another interview, Swinton similarly comments on the attainability of this look: “You just have to go to a big make-up counter in a big department store and you, too, can get that look” (“Tilda Swinton Is ‘Delighted’ To Look Unrecognizable In ‘Trainwreck’”). In Swinton’s observations about the commonness of Dianna’s look, and the ease with which it can be procured (at any big cosmetics counter), one can sense her bemused distance from such cosmetic choices, and the way it might seem to contribute to the almost-prescribed conventions of – as Stacey puts it – “femininity as genre” (259). Swinton has chosen Dianna’s look precisely because it is one she sees regularly, and one audiences can be presumed to recognize too, and by “draw[ing] them towards her” for a rare embodiment she offers a reminder of how easy it would be for Swinton to masquerade as conventional, but how
unnatural this would be for someone who has always identified as “a freak. . . [a] gingery, boney
pinkey whitey person.” Thus, despite Dianna’s bronzers and self-tan being applied directly to
Swinton’s skin – with the reference to a Tandoori curry suggesting a lengthy marination – she
wears these cosmetics at an ironic distance.

Swinton’s role since October 2014 as “the new face” of NARS cosmetics is notably
absent in the considerable discussion of Swinton’s makeup for the film, including a step-by-step
description of the process taken by Trainwreck’s makeup artist, Kyra Panchenko, in Entertainment
Weekly: “The first step toward achieving the Oscar winner’s makeover was a daily, hour-long
session with self-tanning cream, followed by ‘layers and layers’ of bronzers on her face and
décolletage. ‘She’s [normally] translucent, and we turned her the color of a coconut shell,’ says
Panchenko” (Terrero, “Tilda Swinton in Trainwreck”). Such a description, particularly the tonal
terminology (bronzers, translucent, the color of a coconut shell) reconfirms the significance of
pale whiteness to Swinton’s persona, as does Swinton’s NARS makeup campaign. The specifics
of the NARS look that Swinton modelled, just months before Trainwreck was released, are virtual
opposites to her makeup as Dianna. NARS’s print campaign with Swinton sees her wearing a
barely-there look: nude lips and eyeshadow barely darker than her natural complexion. As Ashley
Mateo describes: “The stark, neutral palette shows off her striking looks, so all you can focus on
is her beauty” (“Tilda Swinton For Nars Isn’t Your Typical Beauty Campaign,” Self, 17 October
2014). The NARS campaign makeup is therefore much more in keeping with Swinton’s personal
look. It seems noteworthy that neither Swinton nor any critics bring up her recent casting as the
face of NARS when discussing her Trainwreck makeup at such length. Perhaps Swinton senses
that, much as she seems to distance herself from Dianna’s cosmetic choices, NARS would rather
not be associated with this over-tanned and over-bronzed version of Swinton. But, again,
Swinton’s work as a fashion muse threatens to spill over into the reception of her filmic image.
A Balanced Film Star Diet

Swinton’s description of her “tandoori tan” in Trainwreck is not the only time she resorts to food when discussing her work, with cooking metaphors offering intriguing insights into a career that might be viewed as a multi-course banquet. Swinton refers to the “various ingredients” in her life with Sandro Kopp (“Tilda Swinton interview,” The Scotsman, 22 November 2018) and recalls how producer Henry Rosenthal once told her that “being called an underground film star is like being called a jumbo shrimp” (Ibid). Swinton even refers to her work with noted filmmakers in such culinary terms: “I tend to cook stuff up with my friends,” elaborating that these include Guadagnino, who directed her in I Am Love, A Bigger Splash (2015) and Suspiria (2018), as well as Bong, who directed Swinton in Snowpiercer (2013) and Okja (2017) (“Why ‘Doctor Strange’ Star Tilda Swinton Wanted to Do a Superhero Movie,” IndieWire, 4 November 2016). Some five years earlier, Swinton similarly explains her ongoing sartorial collaborations with particular designers in this way: “Having them make clothes for me is like being cooked for by someone who knows what you like to eat” (“Planet Tilda”). Food also recurs in media profiles of Swinton, including one focused on Drumduan Upper School, which Swinton co-founded in 2013 to provide a space where her children could continue to experience a nonconventional education. Schooling there includes class trips where students help Swinton cook soup from foraged ingredients like wild garlic and nettles (“A sentimental education: inside the school that Tilda built,” The Observer, 14 June 2015).

In another border-crossing between Swinton’s personal and performed roles, the sensuality of cooking and eating plays a central role in I Am Love. In the part of bourgeois homemaker Emma, the film provided Swinton with the opportunity to perform the transportive properties of food. It opens on the preparation of a dinner party at the home of the wealthy Recchi family, Tancredi (Pippo Delbono) and his Russian-born wife, Emma. She supervises the preparation of her son’s favorite dish, a Russian fish soup called “ukha.” Here, food serves as a bond between mother and son and, in a later scene, it will come to establish a bond between
Emma and her future lover, Antonio – a young chef. Dining with other Recchi women at Antonio’s restaurant, known for a distinctly artful approach to food, Antonio prepares for Emma what Karen de Perthuis describes as “a dish that transports her into a state of sensual retreat from the people and conversation around her” (272). While the itemized foods they are brought include a dish of marinated egg yolks, pea cream and zucchini flowers, Emma is transported by a plate of prawns (the kind of jumbo shrimp she quite literally compares herself to in a later interview). Swinton is captured in various extreme close-ups as she becomes alert to the flavors and then savors them: wide-eyed anticipation, a slowly chewing mouth, the closed eyes of intense pleasure. Swinton plays the scene like Emma is experiencing a private moment of sexual rapture in the public space of a restaurant.

A year later, and perhaps related to the critical praise for *I Am Love* and Swinton’s sensual performance, she was invited to develop a food-infused scent with the French fragrance house État Libre d’Orange. Far removed from the trend for celebrity-branded perfumes by everyone from Elizabeth Taylor to Sarah Jessica Parker, Swinton’s scent “Like This” does not bear her name on the title, or even within the description (“Like This,” etatlibredorange.com). And yet, Swinton describes it as an intensely personal homesickness potion, with its predominant note of ginger, carrot, orange all based on “the individual smells of [my] house” (“Tilda Swinton,” *The Gentlewoman*). Swinton also considers it as something of a self-portrait, another medium in which she can express herself, and so it includes “Lots of orange, because I’m a natural ginger. Pumpkin from my birthday month, November...” (Ibid).

Much as Swinton appears to take great pleasure from food and cooking metaphors, her overall approach to her career might be conceived of as a food pyramid. Over the course of four decades, she has filled her plate will all kinds of food: and if experimental and independent productions are her staples, then Hollywood productions might be seen as those offerings high in fat, sugar and salt that you take only in moderation. But Swinton does not want to discount this peak of the pyramid altogether, because to do so is miss out on particular experiences, ones
that she may not have had a natural taste for—things for which she has acquired a certain palette for with age.

The full range of Swinton’s appetite has not, and could not, be captured in a single essay. For instance, beyond the roles and thematic threads considered here, Swinton’s career since the 2010s has also been marked by a sustained engagement with voice-based roles. Her crisp English accent has narrated documentaries like *Letters from Baghdad* (2016) and *Women Make Film: A New Road Movie Through Cinema* (2018). She also uses her voice publicly, in more activist roles, from issuing statements of support in defense of Russia’s gay community in 2013, to launching a public campaign to raise the funds needed to save Jarman’s “Prospect Cottage” in 2020. This crowdfunding campaign was a success, in no small part due to Swinton’s involvement (“£3.5m crowdfunding campaign saves Derek Jarman’s Kent home,” *The Guardian*, 31 March 2020). In entering the new decade with this continued commitment to Jarman’s legacy, Swinton underscores the significance of their collaborations from the 1980s and early 1990s to her career and to her life. It is difficult to predict how Swinton’s career will evolve in the 2020s, but there is no doubt that she will always find filmmakers—like Jarman, Jarmusch, Bong and Guadagnino—who will “cook” with her for as long as they can.