

## The Love of Small Differences: Narcissism in *Mildred Pierce*

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This paper considers Sigmund Freud's notion of "the narcissism of small differences" and its implications not for conflict and hostility, but for love. This Freudian term, borrowed from Ernest Crawley's 1902 study of marriage in so-called primitive cultures, first appears in Freud's writing in the 1918 essay "The Taboo of Virginity." From Crawley's claim that people are separated from one another by a "taboo of personal isolation," Freud extrapolates that "it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them." This leads Freud to define the narcissism of small differences as "the hostility which in every human relation we see fighting against feelings of fellowship and overpowering the commandment that all men should love each other."<sup>1</sup> Although this concept is most frequently applied to analyses of community and the hostilities between neighbouring groups, the question nonetheless remains: if such minor differences keep love at bay, then what manner of difference would allow it to flourish?

Drawing on this question as a foundation, this paper employs Jacques Lacan's work on the *objet petit a* – object-cause of desire – to enrich our understanding of narcissism and its function in love. Reading the Freudian difference through the *objet a* in this way opens up a discussion of love as a procedure, a working-through of our desire. To exemplify these ideas, I consider the mother-daughter relationship in Todd Haynes's HBO television miniseries *Mildred Pierce*, more specifically how Mildred's incestuous desire for her daughter Veda can be understood as a burdensomely narcissistic kind of love devoid of any substantial difference. As Renata Salecl reminds us, "in love, we encounter the same attraction (which can easily turn into

repulsion) to the jouissance of the other: this jouissance is discernible in the gaze of the other, in his or her voice, smell, smile, laughter.”<sup>2</sup> We see this characterization of love as a delicate process which dangerously borders repulsion embodied in *Mildred Pierce*.<sup>3</sup> Salecl’s description also speaks to the difficult task of distilling love from the muddiness of attraction as well as to the importance of *objects* of desire. I will be particularly concerned with the voice, which is one of Lacan’s additions to Freud’s list of partial objects (breasts, feces, and phallus). The voice has a kind of autonomy at least partially separate from its source in the body. In her consideration of the voice as partial object, Salecl posits that the voice functions in love as “the medium of disarming the other’s protective shield, of gaining direct control over him or her and submitting him or her to our will.”<sup>4</sup> Salecl implies that the voice functions both as an object of desire and a tool, or perhaps weapon, of love. Here we see the close relationship and easy slippage between hatred and hostility, and love. In the case of *Mildred Pierce*, this slippage occurs through the intermingling of love and narcissistic obsession.

In *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Freud describes primary narcissism as the original attachment to the mother connected to vital functions of self-preservation (87-88). Here narcissism is less a perversion and more a necessary stage of development. Freud describes a rather comfortable situation in which we may rationally allow ourselves a certain degree of narcissism in a way that does not necessarily interfere with our love of things outside ourselves. However, Freud distinguishes this primary narcissism from the narcissism identified later in life when one seeks a love object modeled after oneself instead of one’s mother. So what happens when narcissism and object-love do not exist in two distinct places along a continuum, but are actually absorbed into one another? This is the question that *Mildred Pierce* can help us to answer.

Toward the end of the first episode of the series, Mildred (Kate Winslet) is struggling with the shame she feels for having taken a job as a waitress; she makes her friend Lucy Gessler (Melissa Leo) promise never to tell her daughter Veda. When Lucy raises an eyebrow to observe that Veda has some “funny ideas” about social class, Mildred insists that “[Veda] has something in her that I thought I had ... and now find I don’t. Pride, or nobility, or whatever it is.” It is precisely this “whatever,” this enigmatic quality of Veda’s, that Mildred endeavours to identify and protect from the shame of a vocation in the service industry. This line of dialogue functions both to articulate a lack in Mildred and to signal the beginning of her search for an extra “something” in Veda. Subsequently driving the narrative is Mildred’s mission to identify or create a minimal difference between herself and her daughter, which would relieve her of the over-proximity of a love wholly rooted in narcissism. As Žižek explains, what the subject loves in the other is “what is in the beloved ‘more than him/herself’,” an elusive excess that evades the subject.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the question Mildred asks is actually “What is in Veda, more than Veda?” The answer to this question, the riddle of the *agalma* (a term Lacan borrows from Plato’s *Symposium*), can be solved through an understanding of Mildred’s narcissism. This thing in Veda which is more than Veda – the object-cause of Mildred’s incestuous desire – is actually an inscription of Mildred’s narcissism.

Here it is important to note the distinction Žižek draws between the object of desire itself (Veda in this case) and the *objet a*, which is the cause of desire. While Veda is the object of her mother’s desire in *Mildred Pierce*, the *objet a* is actually just a fragmented, refracted, and idealized version of Mildred herself. It follows that if Veda’s *agalma* is actually Mildred, then the object of desire is too close to Mildred. Lacan relates this *agalma* to a precious object hidden inside a worthless box. We can understand Veda as one such worthless box. While Veda is

certainly central to my argument in this paper, it is important to note that Veda could be an infinite number of things. She is significant only in so far as the *agalma* involves her in Mildred's cycle of desire.

In a discussion of passion in the postmodern condition, Žižek identifies the initial traumatic experience of the beloved upon hearing the lover's declaration of that love ("Passion"). Even if the beloved ultimately reciprocates the love, the immediate experience is that something obscene, intrusive, is being forced upon us. In *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred's self-love acquires the traumatic properties of the love declaration. Consequently, strategies of distancing and differentiation by means of which Mildred could believe that she is not *really* a narcissist are necessary to relieve the burden of this overproximity. Mildred's failure to create difference between her narcissistic self and the *objet a* proves to be a traumatic experience, one which is entirely too much and too close.

The state of motherhood provides Mildred the opportunity to attain this minimal difference by transforming it into a narcissistic obsession with Veda, which manifests as unconscious incestuous desire. At first, Mildred's incestuous desire would appear to succeed in creating the small difference; the incest taboo, after all, should prevent Mildred from ever attaining the object of her desire. Such an attainment would, as Lewis Kirshner explains, carry the risk of a slippage into the horrific, deadly enjoyment of *jouissance*.<sup>6</sup> However, because Mildred's desire for Veda is narcissistic in character, since her child Veda is quite literally an idealized fragment of herself, the cycle of desire is still too close to Mildred; the gap between the *objet a* and the actual object remains collapsed. As a result, Mildred proceeds into a fantasmatic space of *jouissance* in which the wholeness she once believed she had appears to be restored.

This unpleasant position necessitates further barriers to be constructed between Mildred and Veda if Mildred is to attain the crucial small difference.

In the line of dialogue discussed earlier, Mildred acknowledges the correspondence between the lack in herself and the “something else” in Veda: “she has something in her that I thought I had.” The implication here is that Veda’s *agalma* defines the contours of Mildred’s lack; the *agalma* and the lack are simply the presence and absence of the same mysterious thing. Mildred’s lack, together with the corresponding efforts to regain the sense of wholeness, repeatedly fail in the series until the debut of Veda’s sensational singing voice. Until we hear Veda sing, motherhood and, later, the positioning of Monty Beragon (Guy Pearce) as a proxy lover, prevent Mildred from being able to distance herself from her narcissistic obsession with her own daughter.

The failure of motherhood to assuage Mildred’s narcissism is further illustrated by the representation of mother and daughter as each other’s double; indeed, this doubling proves to be a traumatic experience for Mildred. In her analysis of Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Ana Salzberg recognizes the essential narcissism that drives Mildred’s narrative. The mutual doubling of Mildred and Veda, Salzberg notes, underscores Mildred’s narcissistic drive to craft Veda into a perfected reflection of herself.<sup>7</sup> Salzberg proceeds to examine the implications of the doubling effect for the spectator, but not before invoking Freud’s description of the traumatic experience of encountering one’s double, which we can relate to Mildred’s character in the Haynes film. Specifically, Salzberg references Freud’s contention that the subject is horrified when she encounters her double because it constitutes a return to the subject’s primary narcissism (101). Here Lacan’s distinction between the ideal double and the actual subject helps to illustrate Mildred’s experience of encountering Veda, her ideal double: Mildred is confronted

with the difference between her unconscious subjectivity and her ideal self as reflected in Veda. In Mildred's case, because her life effectively revolves around her double, she is constantly confronting her primary narcissism.

In the Haynes remake, Mildred and Veda are visually rendered as doubles through the marked resemblance between actors Winslet and Wood. In fact, by the end of the finale episode, Mildred and Veda have identical hair colours and styles. Mildred has even begun to dress more like Veda in very structured, severe cuts, exaggerated shoulder pads, and buttons going all the way up. This is particularly evident when mother and daughter stand outside the bungalow at Mildred and Bert's remarriage reception. Haynes's miniseries provides further evidence of Mildred's narcissism in her vocational pursuits. Considerable screen time is given to the first restaurant location's illuminated "Mildred's" sign, which seems disproportionately large in relation to the repurposed model home it stands beside. As "Mildred's" hardly has a commercial ring to it, the protagonist's self-branding of her chicken and waffle establishment seems all the more noteworthy. Moreover, keeping in mind the recent death of Mildred's younger daughter, one might expect her to name the franchise in memory of Rae. Instead, Mildred's obsession with Veda eclipses Rae's expulsion from the narrative, which is largely forgotten for the rest of the series. Above all else, it is clearly important to Mildred that evidence of her success should refer directly to herself. This narcissistic investment in her creations extends to Veda, whom Mildred uses as vehicle with which to realize her class aspirations, as Lisa Coulthard argues in her essay on the miniseries.<sup>8</sup> As Mildred's daughter, Veda functions as the concrete evidence of Mildred's labour of motherhood, her creative masterpiece.

The Haynes version of *Mildred* underscores the protagonist's narcissistic characterization yet further through the frequent use of mirrors and reflective surfaces. Importantly, the numerous

scenes in which Mildred gazes at her own reflection coincide with events that threaten Mildred's narcissism. When Mildred and Bert separate early on in the series, Mildred pulls up her slip in front of the mirror to inspect her legs and reassure herself that she is, as Lucy assures her, the representative of a "new American institution": the desirable, fast-and-loose divorcée. Considering the sociohistorical context of the narrative and the fact that Bert had been seeing another woman, the couple's separation implies a failure on Mildred's part. The divorce threatens Mildred's standing as the domestically savvy, middle-class housewife of an intact nuclear family, revealing in this way a gap between Mildred's idealized self-concept and the way she appears to others.

The mirror functions as a tool with which Mildred may seek the narcissistic reassurance that there is no such gap. Similarly, after catching a glimpse of her own reflection in the glass that frames a "help wanted" sign for a sophisticated tea room, Mildred is too proud to actually apply for the position, and thus her harrowing job hunt in Hollywood comes to a close. In an attempt to justify her pride, Mildred visits a café where she will be waited on, promptly taking out her compact mirror. Emphasizing this self-assuring gesture, the camera cuts to an exterior shot in which Mildred is seen in slightly slower motion, peering into the mirror and attempting to dab away the residue of the afternoon. Another mirror shot featuring Mildred literally looking into her vanity occurs after she has sex with Wally Burgan (James Le Gros), a man to whom she clearly feels superior, but who is nonetheless in a position to advance her career. Mirror shots during or after compromising situations continue to proliferate, culminating with the emotional climax of the miniseries at which Mildred catches Veda and Monty together in bed. Unfazed by the situation, Veda crosses the room seductively to sit naked before her vanity. The camera closes in on Veda until it reveals Mildred reflected in the mirror, horrified and transfixed by her

discovery. It is here that *Mildred Pierce*'s play with doubling is at its most obvious: optics aside, in this scene Veda looks into the mirror and sees Mildred reflected back.

The trauma of this moment occurs as Mildred is forced to confront the fact that she remains the dupe of her own fantasy. When Veda rises naked from the bed, coolly faces Mildred, and slowly crosses the room to pose before the vanity, she addresses Mildred's gaze and implicitly acknowledges Mildred's desire. Monty reveals that he also was conscious of being Mildred's pawn when he accuses her of using him "as bait to lure Veda back to the teat." Robert Corber similarly asserts that Mildred uses Monty to attract Veda, achieving an incestuous union by proxy.<sup>9</sup> While Monty insists that he and Veda have fallen in love, Veda gives no indication that she returns Monty's passion. Rather, Veda's dispassionate demeanour and her direct return of Mildred's gaze indicate that Mildred is the intended addressee of this encounter. Veda affects a smug satisfaction even upon Mildred's initial discovery of her in Monty's bed. This suggests that Veda feels she has somehow won, beating Mildred at her own game. Veda shows no signs of tenderness toward Monty as she instructs him to dress and prepare to leave. Monty obediently does so and even brings Veda a robe with which to conceal the body she quite deliberately exposes to Mildred. Importantly, as Monty observes, there seems to be no reason why Mildred should appear so "confounded" by the incident.

Surely, Mildred implicitly encourages the sexual undertones of Monty and Veda's relationship from the beginning. When Veda meets Monty for the first time at the opening of Mildred's first restaurant, she is clearly smitten with him and his devil-may-care attitude. Mildred allows Monty to take Veda home, returning later that evening to find the two of them still awake; Monty even refers to their evening spent together as a "date." As Mildred and Monty enter into a relationship, it seems logical that Monty might assume somewhat of a paternal role

in Veda's life, especially given the relative absence and general ineffectuality of her biological father. However, Mildred actively encourages Veda's childish infatuation with Monty and nurtures the more peer-like nature of their relationship, insisting that Monty take Veda out for dinner "somewhere nice." Mildred seems to arrange such outings to mimic the dynamic of a couple rather than that of a father and daughter.

Mildred's failed attempt to establish distance by using Monty to facilitate an incestuous union with Veda is twofold here. First, if even for a moment Mildred achieves satisfaction by realizing her incestuous desire for Veda via only slightly more socially acceptable means, Mildred slips into a space of *jouissance*. Second, Mildred acknowledges that her narcissism or incestuous desire cannot be realized because Veda makes it obvious that she does not truly reciprocate Monty's love. Veda's choice to participate in, but not truly validate, Mildred's proxy strategy to achieve an incestuous union forces Mildred either into *jouissance* or into confronting the fact that she is once more the dupe of her own fantasy. Either way, Mildred most certainly does not achieve that crucial minimal distance between herself and the object of her desire.

After motherhood fails to create a separation between Mildred and the *objet a*, and after sharing a lover fails to create the same minimal distance, we belatedly and unexpectedly discover that Veda has quite a beautiful soprano. Almost out of nowhere, the narrative offers Mildred an escape from her narcissistic deadlock in the form of Veda's singing voice. Mildred may finally give a shape to Veda's *agalma*, one that is not merely an inscription of herself. It is important to note that from its origins Veda's voice is separate from Mildred: Veda begins to sing professionally while she is estranged from Mildred, who experiences Veda's voice for the first time in disembodied form over the radio. Moreover, as Lisa Coulthard argues, Veda's voice exists in excess of her body ("Stinko"). Previously, the transposition of Mildred's narcissism

onto Veda as a kind of masterpiece, as the evidence of Mildred's labour as a mother, was still too closely bound up with Mildred herself. On the other hand, the voice is quite literally that "something else" that Mildred does not have. Coulthard argues that it is precisely Veda's singing voice which is the something "in her more than her," to use Lacan's phrase, that Mildred struggles to identify in her earlier conversation with Lucy. Thus, the mystery of Veda's *agalma* may finally be solved with something other than Mildred herself. At last, Mildred is able to transpose her narcissism onto something beyond herself, giving form to Mildred's lack.

The non-Mildred nature of Veda's voice is further reinforced by Veda's own ignorance of her talent until her mentor overhears her humming after a concert. This suggests that somehow the power to evoke Veda's voice is located outside the claustrophobic space of the mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, as Veda relays the story of how she discovered her voice, she insists that at one point her voice just "started to come." In addition to underscoring the abstract nature of the voice, Veda's vague explanation posits her body as a mere instrument of some divine voice-force that moves through her, but does not originate from within her. The notion that Veda's voice is really that something "in her more than her" is corroborated by the contrast between Mildred's visible, practical labour and Veda's invisible, creative labour. Until this point in the narrative, significant attention has been given to the visualization of Mildred's labour. Mildred is invariably wearing the evidence of the day's work in the form of sweat, baking flour, and dust. Her work, primarily the act of maintaining a household, (sort of) parenting, and baking is allocated to craft and the domestic sphere. In contrast to Mildred's historically marginalized and undervalued labour, which produces concrete objects for practical consumption, Veda's literally invisible artistic labour is elevated to the status of "high art." The voice in its elusive,

abstract form is something that cannot bear reference to Mildred in the same way that Mildred's other vocational pursuits or Veda-in-and-of-herself can.

Mildred's delight in Veda's voice depends on its disembodied nature. When Mildred attends Veda's performance at the Philharmonic, the experience is so overwhelming that she refuses to use the opera eyeglass to see Veda up close. As Coulthard notes, Mildred "prefers to gaze from a distance like a star-struck fan" ("Stinko"). In the position of a fan, Mildred finds validation for her desire for Veda beyond her own displaced narcissism. The adoration of Veda's other fans creates a space of permitted obsessive desire and over-loving, allowing Mildred to desire in a more socially acceptable way. In addition to positioning herself at a bearable distance from Veda's *agalma* through fandom, Mildred achieves the Freudian difference between herself and Veda because the voice appears to answer the question of Veda's drive. Salecl defines the *objet a* as the other's drive, suggesting that it be understood as that which "forces the Other into some activity, regardless of how painful this activity could be for him or her" ("Introduction" 53). Salecl goes on to contend that notions of artistic genius are directly linked to this drive; this may explain the attractiveness of artists as objects of love. Mildred's perception of Veda's artistic drive provides contours for Veda's *agalma*, which Mildred can only fail to assimilate to herself. Consequently, Mildred is relieved of the overproximity of her narcissistic obsession with Veda. Love is displaced onto the voice in such a way that Mildred is no longer confronted with her own narcissism when she encounters Veda.

As Kirshner notes, when the gap between the *objet a* and the beloved is collapsed, the loving subject is relegated to psychopathology. He contends that in order for true love to occur, the subject must acknowledge the fact that the conflation of the idealized *objet a* and the actual beloved is merely a fantasy. Here Kirshner's line of reasoning parallels Žižek's characterization

of the fundamentalist believer as the “dupe of his fantasy”: the fundamentalist and the psychotic occupy the same dreadful position of overidentification with the fantasy of *agalma* fused with the beloved (“Passion”). When Mildred finally condemns Veda, she also tacitly admits to the discrepancy between the inscription of her idealized self and her daughter’s monstrous reality. This recognition signifies an interruption in Mildred’s narcissism, since her efforts to build Veda into a masterpiece that would validate her own narcissistic aspirations have undeniably failed. The curtailment of Mildred’s narcissism is further emphasized by Mildred’s fall from the luxurious mansions, debonair lovers, and a high-power career to the Glendale bungalow, Bert, and pie-making. As Coulthard observes, by drinking to Bert’s final resolution – “to hell with her; let’s get stinko!” – Mildred admits to a defeat devoid of nobility.

Having demystified the *agalma*, Mildred is left only with the actual object of desire: a worthless box. As Adam Drury argues in relation to the clinic, “the act of the cure ... involves the subject’s affirmation of the *agalma* as a semblance, whereupon I die, yet go on living.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the series does not actually conclude with Mildred’s defeat, nor does it suggest a clear victory for Mildred. By disowning the monstrous Veda, Mildred acknowledges that her former inscription of Veda’s *agalma* – that is, Mildred’s ideal self – is a misapprehension with no basis in Mildred’s less than ideal reality. We see here that Mildred is not back to square one. Rather, she has transposed her love onto Veda’s voice and eased the burden of excessive narcissism by disowning her. Consequently, Mildred is left with a manageably displaced cycle of desire and the opportunity to continue the indefinite work of love as distinct from narcissistic obsession.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Worlds of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), vol. 14, p. 199. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 52. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>3</sup> *Mildred Pierce*, dir. Todd Haynes (HBO, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Salecl, "Introduction," *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "With or Without Passion: What's Wrong With Fundamentalism? Part 1." *The Symptom* (2005), <<http://www.lacan.com>>. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire: The Objet Petit A In Lacanian Theory," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 53 (2005), p. 1-20. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>7</sup> Ana Salzberg, *Beyond the Looking Glass: The Narcissistic Woman Reflected and Embodied in Classic Hollywood Film*, dissertation (University of Edinburgh, 2010), p. 107. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>8</sup> See Lisa Coulthard, "'Let's Get Stinko': Melodrama and the Mundane in Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*," *Flow* 13.12 (2011), <<http://flowtv.org/2011/04/lets-get-stinko>>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert J. Corber, "Queer Motherhood in *Mildred Pierce*," *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Drury, "Agalma At the Void: On the Subject of an Eventual Sublime," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 5.2 (2011), p. 7.