

Radical Loneliness and a Little Masculinity: Kristen Stewart's Ideological Resonance in Illiberal America

This paper offers a reading of Kristen Stewart as a particularly potent American icon imbued with resistant ideological resonance for an increasingly illiberal nation. Relying upon Sianne Ngai's interrogation of the aesthetic category *interesting*, this paper will show that what is *interesting* about Stewart is a kind of radical affect in response to Trump era excess.

If the interesting marks a tension between wonder and reason, increasing in direct proportion to the acuteness of that tension, the feeling that underpins it seems to lie somewhere between an object-oriented desire and an object-indifferent affect (Ngai 133).

In Kelly Reichardt's 2016 film, *Certain Women*, the vignette starring Kristen Stewart and Lily Gladstone can be interpreted as an allegory embodying the relationship between movie stars and their audience that signals an impasse between identification and desire. Desire here begins as in classic cinema: as object-oriented; Gladstone wants Stewart, who does not want her. Stewart's response radically reconfigures this relation, as she neither feeds nor repudiates the attention of her fan, but is always already in a state of retreat and indifference to it.

Conversely, Stewart's acting style, criticized for being "underwhelming" strikes the perfect pitch for the character Beth, who mirrors Stewart's persona of the underwhelmed star who doesn't really want to be here, who is literally in the middle of backing out of her appearance during the performance. By acknowledging, in interviews, that she cannot merely throw on empathy for a performance, Stewart 'breaks character' as an actor in favor of a claim to a more resistant position. It is in the singular moment when Stewart's acting style meets Stewart's IDGF public persona (culminating in her take-down of Trump on SNL—"I'm like so gay dude.") when Stewart and her fans can take pleasure in "raising a fist" (Harris) to Trump.

Harris, Mark, "Taylor Swift's "Look What You Made Me Do" Is the First Pure Piece of Trump-Era Pop Art." *Slate*, 31 August 2017.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2012.