

# **Is that girl a monster? Some notes on authenticity and artistic value in Lady Gaga**

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This article will discuss a specific reading of Lady Gaga's image as something new and provocative in pop and celebrity culture. Since the release of *The Fame Monster* (2009), arguments for the postmodern 'subversiveness' of Gaga have emerged both in music journalism and scholarly writing. Such claims surprise me for one basic reason: the extent to which Gaga's star *persona* is related, in many media texts, to specific discourses about the cultural and social value of music. For this reason I will deliberately ignore the visual texts on which 'postmodern' readings usually rely (for example, Gaga's music videos), and will look at the discourses that emerge in Gaga's interviews, analysing one particularly long piece from the online music site *Noisevox* (Norris 2009). This example clearly shows the construction of a biographical narrative that relies on quite distinctive notions of authenticity. Drawing on Frith (1998), authenticity can be defined as a series of statements of truth about the value of music. More specifically, I am referring to what have been called a 'romantic discourse' about music as a non-mediated expression of the self, and a 'folk discourse' about music as cultural expression of a community (Frith 1998, pp. 21–46). Overall, I want to underline that more extensive studies on Lady Gaga should not ignore this discursive rhetoric, as it frequently re-frames Gaga's visual and allegedly postmodern ethos.

## **Postmodern readings**

*Pitchfork Media's* review of *The Fame Monster* (Plagenhoef 2010) is a good example of the ways in which postmodern readings of Gaga have been expressed in music journalism. In this

article, Gaga's visual production is compared to the artistic work of Matthew Barney and David Cronenberg. Also, she is firmly framed as an artist who subverts common stereotypes about fame culture:

Unlike the empty famewhores [*sic*] climbing atop the shoulders of reality TV and tabloid journalism to notoriety, we know next to nothing about her personal life [ . . . ] she's the anti-Kanye, the anti-Eminem, and the anti-Winehouse [ . . . ] her art is as much the manipulation of that image and notions of modern celebrity as it is music or fashion. (Plagenhoef 2010)

This argument misses the fact that the flamboyant polysemy of Lady Gaga is – to follow the classic position of Dyer (1979) – strongly 'structured' through discourses that emphasise both the authenticity of her music and Gaga's private sphere as site of a coherent identity.

Similarly, in recent academic debates on Gaga's gender and queerness, Don Nasilowski (2010) and Kirsty Fairclough (2010) suggest that she performs gender roles in a Warholian fashion. Fairclough's argument, then, is quite close to that of *Pitchfork* in suggesting that '[Gaga] can be placed firmly against mainstream pop princesses and can be read as interrogating the performative nature of both gender and sexuality, and their relationship to stardom and celebrity in contemporary culture' (2010). However, analysing the discourses of Gaga herself reveals that symbolic playfulness is only one facet of a more complex picture.

### **The authentic Gaga: 'real' art against Warholian celebrity**

In her interview with *Noisevox*, Lady Gaga largely discusses her work and its meanings, to the extent that a precise system of values emerges along the conversation. A thematic analysis shows the ways in which romantic and folk notions of authenticity are combined in order to construct a 'real' Gaga, the one behind the stylish and media-exposed star. In the interview, this narrative is initially shaped by the rejection of celebrity, which is placed in opposition to

music as art. Discussing the meaning of the song (and video) *Paparazzi*, Gaga clarifies that she did not intend to celebrate fame culture, but to show its social perils. The opposition between celebrity and art is explicitly addressed as the interview goes on:

I am not interested in being a celebrity, I'm interested in being an artist, and there is a very big difference. I don't think there is a very fine line, I think it's pretty clear who is a celebrity and who is an artist. (Norris 2009, part 2)<sup>1</sup>

The romantic and folk notions of authenticity are then employed to legitimise this position. The former one is expressed through two specific sub-themes, which can be called *passion* and the long-standing narrative of *hard work* in star mythology. Gaga states many times that she is 'passionate' about her music and artistic project, and that music, videos, and fashion are just ways of expressing her personality. However, she also stresses the fact that her passion has been constantly disciplined through everyday efforts. Here the theme of hard work emerges, pointing to the struggles of the young artist and the 'rags to riches' path she walked to achieve fame. The themes of passion and hard work come as intertwined in the following statements:

It is a very strong misconception that *The Fame*, my album, is about how wonderful fame is. I wasn't famous when I wrote this record, I was eating shit and in the street, I had nothing, so [the album] it's about the dream of wanting to make something of yourself, being passionate! My passion for music and for art and for fashion is so deep in my blood that I could cry just saying it talking to you about that. (Norris 2009, part 1)

This romantic discourse about Gaga's music as an unmediated expression of her identity and biographical path is then reinforced by the rejection of an elitist notion of art. On one hand,

Gaga stresses that she comes from the New York artistic ‘underground’ and still belongs to that community. On the other hand, the notion of art as aesthetic experimentation does not become an expression of social difference (‘the conception that Gaga is cocky for the sake of being cocky is so wrong [. . .] we love avant-garde, but it’s not for the sake of avant-garde’ [Norris 2009, part 3]). As result, Lady Gaga makes art, but she does so because it is an expression of sincerity and hard work. These statements can be considered an expression of ‘popular’ cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). In this guise, culture is not an expression of social distinction, but the expression of an inclusive community.

Here, a folk discourse reinforces the romantic one. The ‘realness’ of Gaga and the value of her work are further validated by her reference to her fans’ support. In the interview, fans are framed as the community to which she belongs, and fandom is an expression of love that confirms her social and cultural value. In this way, Gaga’s celebrity is naturalised as an expression of ‘the will’ of a community. Take for example the following passage, where Gaga rejects the opinion that her music, as ‘dance music’, would be ‘soulless’:

The soul that I feel from my fucking beautiful fans at my show *can not be a lie, it can't*. I’ve never in my life seen the intensity on their faces. I mean, they blood, suck and kill to be together. I mean, there is glitter, and the sweat [. . .] and they believe in it so much, and it’s real, in those moments it’s real, *they bring my music to life* [my emphasis]. (Norris 2009, part 3)<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the interview constructs a biographical narrative that fosters a double legitimation: the romantic discourse (music as an expression of real feelings) gains validation through the folk one (the social and cultural value of such feelings is acknowledged by a vast community).

## Conclusion

As shown by Richard Dyer, star-images have histories: the textual meanings that they embody can change (1986). My account, then, does not pretend to be an exhaustive reading of Gaga's image. Also, it is not a prediction of the ways in which her fans relate to the narrative analysed. More simply, I am arguing that the subversiveness of her image should not be taken for granted, but placed in a wider historical and cultural context. Despite their emphasis on openness and semiotic playfulness, postmodern readings risk to 'close' such enquiry prematurely. In Gaga's media performances a complex dialectic between visual subversion and narrative construction is usually at work, and the latter aspect should not be underestimated.

## Notes

1. For a similar example, see *Lady Gaga: I'm an artist, not a celebrity*. Desihits.com, 2009. Available from:  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/DesiHits#p/search/3/OJEqHFEY3FI> [Accessed 25 September 2011].
2. See also *Capturing Lady Gaga* [online]. CNN IBN TV, 2011. Available from:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Hh6Q0OsVEU&feature=related> [Accessed 25 September 2011].

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