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22 Barbie in a meat dress: performance and mediatization in the 21st century

Abstract: Although mediatization is a permanent condition of modern societies the particular forms it takes on are historically contingent. The processes of mediatization derive from the workings of the culturally dominant media forms of a particular time. Over two decades ago, I felt comfortable in positing the televisual, defined in terms of Raymond Williams's concept of flow, as central to mediatized culture. This is no longer the case, as the televisual has clearly yielded sway to the digital in all its forms. In seeking to understand the implications of this transition for performers navigating this new cultural terrain I focus on two currently successful pop music artists, Nicki Minaj and Lady Gaga. Whereas the performers I chose as my original examples, performance artists Spalding Gray and Laurie Anderson, each developed a single, largely consistent persona that proved adaptable to different media and cultural contexts, both Minaj and Gaga create multiple personae that morph with astounding velocity. Gaga, in particular, takes this strategy so far that she seems to have no stable performance persona or brand image at all. Her constantly changing appearance and image suggests instead the urgency and frequency with which we must adjust our self-presentations to the multiple platforms on which we continuously perform them.

Keywords: Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, Raymond Williams, flow, mash-up, multi-selfing, persona, character, on demand, JIT (just in time)

In the late 1980s, I took up the question of how performers were negotiating a postmodern cultural environment in which a number of previously established givens, such as the dichotomies between art and commerce, high and low culture, artist and entertainer, live and recorded performance, artistic integrity and "selling out" could no longer be taken for granted. I focused on two performers, Spalding Gray and Laurie Anderson, each of whom could be described as a performance artist while also having clear ties to other forms (Gray to theater and literature, Anderson to music and visual art). I defined postmodern culture primarily as *mediatized* culture, by which I meant a cultural formation completely saturated by media information, imagery, and epistemologies. Following Dana Polan (1986), I argued that postmodern culture could be understood on a model derived from Raymond Williams's concept of *flow* (Auslander 1989, 1992: 53–81).

The Ur-narrative of flow is Williams's experience of American television in 1973 while in a somewhat altered state of consciousness, as described in his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (2003: 92).

One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial 'breaks'. Yet this was a minor problem compared to what eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to operate in an extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste New York. ... [T]he transitions from film to commercial and from film A to films B and C were in effect unmarked. There is in any case enough similarity between certain kinds of films, and between several kinds of film and the 'situation' commercials which often consciously imitate them, to make a sequence of this kind a very difficult experience to interpret. I can still not be sure what I took from that whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem – for all the occasional bizarre disparities – a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings.

I took Williams's description of the "single, irresponsible flow of images and feelings" produced by television as both a model for understanding the cultural flows of postmodernism and an index of the degree to which postmodern culture was mediatized by the televisual. In this cultural condition, no single expression, work, or text stands on its own: anything can show up at any point in the flow, everything is always already in relation to (overlapping, repeating, interrupting) other things, and the meaning of each thing emerges relationally rather than autonomously.

Discussing performers like Gray and Anderson, I developed the concept of *persona* to describe their central mechanism for negotiating postmodern mediatized culture. *Persona* is a term I have continued to use to describe a performed identity that mediates between the "real" person (that is, the performer as a specific human being) and the audience. Unlike characters (in the dramatic sense) *personae* are not defined by specific narrative contexts, though performance *personae* can embody characters. For example, when I extended this schema to musicians I posited that the primary figures musicians portray in performance are their musical *personae*, the individual's presentation of self in the role of musician (Auslander 2006). In this context, I use the term *character* to refer to entities performed by the *persona* that exist within specific narrative contexts, usually in the lyrics of songs. In schematic terms, I see performing musicians as tripartite: there is a *person* performing a socially defined role of musician, the *persona*, which, in turn, may portray a *character* as the protagonist or narrator of a song narrative (Auslander 2004).

In the 1980s, performers like Anderson and Gray consciously or unconsciously developed a strategy to traverse the flow of postmodern culture by developing highly mobile performance *personae* that could function in multiple contexts and discourses both simultaneously and sequentially. These *personae* were not characters in that they were not anchored in specific narratives or fictions but appeared across multiple scenarios. In Gray's case, his *persona* emerged from the autobiographical monologues he performed first on stage then on film and television but

served also as an actor (Gray's conventional film and theater performances seemed as if they were undertaken by his persona), a fiction writer (the main character of Gray's novel *Impossible Vacation* is his persona, who is also the author of the first-person narrative), a critic (Gray wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* in the voice of his persona), and so on.

The Spalding persona, which began as the [semi-]fictional conceit of his performances, has become "real" by virtue of its continual reappearance in the cultural arena. ... The blending of real and fabricated personae and situations that occurs when performance personae assume the same functions as 'real' people in the media has much the same effect as the flowing together of various levels and types of meanings on television, but on a larger scale. (Auslander 1992: 77–78)

By developing personae that could take up positions in multiple cultural discourses, performers could engage productively with the information flow of post-modern culture without being wholly absorbed into it and equally without pretending it was possible to step outside of it to more stable and traditionally defined positions.

My analysis of the use these performers made of personae harmonizes with Stig Hjarvard's somewhat later work on mediatization. Hjarvard (2008: 113) defines the mediatization of society as "the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic". He distinguishes two kinds of mediatization: direct and indirect. *Direct mediatization* refers to situations where formerly non-mediated activity converts to a mediated form, i.e., the activity is performed through interaction with a medium. A simple example of direct mediatization is "the successive transformation of chess from physical chessboard to computer game" (Hjarvard 2008: 114). As a further example, popular music has been mediatized in this sense since the late 19th century as first sound recordings, then radio broadcasts, then television and music video replaced live performances as the primary forms in which audiences consume music. The work of performers like Anderson and Gray, which originated in live performance but was translated into media forms, underwent a parallel mediatization.

Hjarvard (2008: 115) defines indirect mediatization as occurring "when a given activity is increasingly influenced with respect to form, content, or organization by mediagenic symbols or mechanisms". If the appearance of performances by Anderson, Gray, or any performer not only as live performances but also on audio recordings, video, film, and so on exemplifies direct mediatization, the ways in which media influences and has infiltrated not just the means by which audiences access performances but also *the form of the performances and the nature of the performing in them* exemplifies indirect mediatization. One example concerning form comes directly from Williams's discussion of television, where he notes that commercial television programs are not autonomous texts that are artificially segmented and interrupted by commercial breaks. Rather, the programs are designed

to accommodate segmentation and interruption; they are designed to accommodate these characteristics of the broadcast flow (Williams 2003: 92–93). The construction of personae designed to function within a particular media environment epitomizes indirect mediatization at the level of performing. As Hjarvard (2008: 115) indicates, this is the more subtle of the two processes because “indirect mediatization does not necessarily affect the ways in which people perform a given activity”. To the extent that performing itself can reflect the internalization of mediatization, one may be watching mediatization at work even in a live performance that involves no use of media technology.

Current examples of both the use of persona as a way of navigating mediatized culture and the indirect mediatization of performance can be found in the work of Nicki Minaj. Minaj is an American popular musician, primarily a rapper, noted for spectacular, highly theatrical, often provocative performances and for portraying multiple characters in her recordings, onstage, and in other public appearances. Some of her songs are understood to be in the voices of the characters she embodies in performance through costume, wigs, physical comportment, voice, accent, and even language, such as Roman Zolanski and Harajuku Barbie, while others are sung by the persona Nicki Minaj (not the artist’s name at birth). Some of Minaj’s characters, such as the Spanish-speaking Rosa, do not perform music but appear in other parts of Minaj’s life as a celebrity: Rosa, for example, has given interviews in Minaj’s place (Rosa). It is nothing new for a popular music performer to employ persona as a performance tool and a means of constructing dramatic narratives; Simon Reynolds (2013) has suggested that Minaj is connected, genealogically if not by direct lines of influence, to such other performers who exploited the possibilities of persona as David Bowie and Madonna. But Minaj has pushed this possibility to extremes, almost to the point of implying that she is driven by a dissociative identity disorder.

When Minaj appeared in person at a Macy’s department store in New York City as Barbie for the launch of her signature perfume, Pink Friday, in 2012 she was available to a live audience in the way that is traditional for events of this kind (Nicki Minaj). Nevertheless, Minaj’s presence as Barbie reflects the impact of mediatization on her performing, even in live appearances, and reflects the continuing influence of television. Minaj’s Barbie is, after all, a character based on a mass-produced doll created in 1959, at the end of the Golden Age of Television during which the medium established itself as an indispensable part of American culture. Barbie herself is mediatized in ways that go beyond her immediate life as an object. Her ever-evolving identity derives as much from the television commercials in which she appears as from the changing appearance of the dolls themselves (Tennery 2009) and the fact that there are multiple Barbies at any given time (at present, Barbie is available in a fashionista version, an African-American version identified as a future US President, a pop star version, and many others). Minaj identifies closely with Barbie – she encourages her fans to call themselves

Barbies (or Barbs), and she has reenacted scenes from the life of Barbie as both an object (Minaj has appeared as a doll in a life-size box of the kind Barbies are sold in [*Get Up*]) and a character in a series of lifestyle narratives. The story of Barbie in television commercials frequently leads up her marriage, which Minaj's Barbie has also performed (The Harajuku Barbie). Even when Minaj appears live as Barbie, her performance is mediatized by all of the televisual, advertising, and commercial referents that are intrinsic to the character. Mattel, the manufacturer of the Barbie Doll, produced one in Minaj's likeness to raise money for charity (Kattalia 2011), thus closing the circle: Minaj modeled her character on the Barbie Doll, which in turn is now modeled on her character.

Minaj is different from Spalding Gray in that she enacts multiple characters rather than a single persona, but each of her characters functions culturally the way Gray's persona did. For example, when Minaj is interviewed, it is distinctly possible that the entity responding to the interviewer's questions will be a character like Rosa, functioning for the occasion as a stand-in for Minaj herself. In addition to appearing at the store in her Barbie character to launch Pink Friday, she portrayed the same character in the online commercial for the perfume in a more benign version of *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (Nicki Minaj-Pink Friday). Not confined to any particular song or performance text, Minaj's characters are free to roam the earth, showing up in commercials and music videos, on the concert stage, as the subject of interviews, at product launches, and so on.

I believe my perception of postmodern culture as mediatized culture made sense twenty-five years ago and is still valid. It is evident that our society and culture have continued to move ever more rapidly in the direction of mediatization since then. Although mediatization is a permanent condition of modern societies the particular forms it takes on are historically contingent. Mediatization is not an abstraction but the concrete social and cultural impact media has on other discourses and activities. The processes of mediatization derive from the workings of the culturally dominant media forms of a particular time, and it is quite clear that in the quarter century since I first started formulating these ideas there has been a significant shift. Television is no longer what it was and no longer occupies a position of uncontested cultural dominance. Although it remains commercially important as an advertising medium and a source of news, information, and entertainment, it has largely ceded its position as the dominant medium in the cultural imaginary (at least from a US perspective) to the far more ubiquitous digital media that are now intimately woven into the fabric of our daily lives. The question is, what difference does this difference make?

In 1973, Williams ([1973] 2003: 21) envisioned broadcast technologies – first radio, then television – as windows on the world situated in the private home through which inhabitants could receive “news from ‘outside’”. This news came in the form of flow, a figure that connotes a system William Uricchio (2009: 32) describes as “a temporally sequenced stream of program units [that] constantly

issues forth from the programmer, and audiences may dip in and out as they choose". Turn off the television and you are no longer connected to the outside, though you can reconnect at any time since the flow is continuous. As Uricchio (2004: 166–167) points out, the stream Williams experienced in 1973 and which formed the basis of this theorization of televisual flow probably consisted of programming generated by at most six channels, a mere trickle when compared with the amount of material made available today by television in its various forms (broadcast, cable, satellite, online) alongside of and interlaced with the material available through such other devices as computers (both desktop and portable) and smart phones.

Whereas broadcast technologies originally offered experiences that were largely confined to a single location (usually, though not necessarily, the private home) and a fairly limited flow, the technologies we use for information, entertainment, and productivity today are with us all the time and offer many times the amount of material anyone can actually handle. Television itself participates in this ubiquity – no longer confined to the home or places of leisure activity, television is now regularly present in bars and restaurants, medical waiting rooms, airports, subway stations (I have seen giant screens on the platforms of the Milan Metro, for instance) and many other places (McCarthy 2004: 183–184). Obviously, other technologies are even more ubiquitous: the smart phone in your pocket or purse is potentially a communications center from which to make calls, do email, send faxes, and surf the web; an entertainment center that incorporates the functions of television, radio, cinema, stereo system, and game console; an office where you can write, run numbers, maintain contacts, and so on; a navigator; a personal assistant, and too many other things to enumerate. Rather than a discrete flow, the information made available and the functions performed by these technologies constitutes "an immersive sea" in Lynn Spigel's (2004: 11) well-chosen phrase from which it is far more difficult to extricate yourself.

The changes that have come about over the past twenty-five years through the growth of digital technologies are both quantitative and qualitative. The translation of every cultural form and function into digital information makes it possible for us to own, do, and experience more of everything more easily than ever before. The qualitative dimensions of these changes pertain both to our uses of these technologies and our sense of our relationship to them. The degree to which we feel ourselves to be in control of the media we use is one of the primary vectors of change over the last twenty-five years. Williams's experience represents an initial moment in which broadcasters structured televisual flow and viewers experienced it as something with which they could choose to engage or not, but over which they had very little direct control. But this picture changed with the arrival of the remote control and the videocassette recorder, both of which became standard equipment in the US television home in the course of the 1980s. By zipping, zapping, and moving between broadcast and recorded materials, viewers constructed

their own flows, even if they were limited to the materials offered by broadcasters (Uricchio 2004: 168–170).

Although television itself remains essentially in this situation today, albeit with a far larger menu of offerings from which viewers can put together their own flows, the Internet and social media offer us ways of being present in the flow that television never did. In 1936, Walter Benjamin (1969: 231–232) observed,

For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press ... an increasing number of readers became writers – at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for ‘letters to the editor’. And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character ... At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer

All this can easily be applied to the film, where transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade. In cinematic practice, particularly in Russia, this change-over has partially become established reality. Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves and primarily in their own work process.

I don’t know if Benjamin could have anticipated the opportunities afforded by the Internet and social media, but they certainly justify his claims. Now more than ever, anyone can publish by starting a blog, posting comments on any of the seemingly infinite number of websites that provide space for such feedback, or by tweeting, or posting on Facebook or any number of other social media sites and feeds. If you want to appear in a film, you can make one yourself (you don’t even need a camera – use your phone!) and post it on YouTube, Vimeo, or other similar sites. Readers and viewers are no longer just consumers but potentially writers, producers, and critics as well, as expressed by the term *prosumer* (Toffler 1980: 265–288).

The blurring of the distinction between production and consumption this term implies is something we enact every day in the multiple uses we make of our devices. As Spigel and Dawson (2008: 283) point out, “Mobile technologies conflate activities of leisure and labour so that, for example, the cell phone watcher may at any moment receive a business call or the PC user can switch between watching a *Buffy* rerun and figuring out earnings on the latest stock reports”. Kathleen Oswald and Jeremy Packer (2011: 282) have proposed to extend the concept of flow to the trajectories we construct among the many screens we use, arguing “the traditional accounts of what television did continue, but across more devices”.

In our conception, flow is the process by which subjects and attendant data move seamlessly through the world in unison. Numerous and varied screens (television, computer, tablets, mobile phones) work in concert to network and extend the self in whatever ways are necessary

to link and guide the constant flow of the self's social, governmental, economic, and biopolitical data in ever-present and in ever-useful means. (Oswald and Packer 2011: 277)

While Oswald and Packer's rehabilitation of Williams's concept for the digital age is salutary, it raises the question of whether our ongoing negotiations with various devices for varied uses that often conflate work and leisure, production and consumption actually *extend* the self in various directions to accommodate it to this environment as they suggest. Oswald and Packer seem to assume that while our screens have multiplied, the self remains singular as it traverses the flow it negotiates across many screens. But Spigel and Dawson's description of the multitasker who must *switch between* roles and activities at a moment's notice implies a different analysis. The multitasker they describe is a television viewer until the business call comes in, at which point he or she must become a businessperson. Perhaps, then, the environment created by digital media does not so much extend the self as demand that the self morph continuously to assume the different social roles necessary to respond to the different demands negotiated between us and our screens. Employing Erving Goffman's (1959) notion of self-presentation as performance, Corinne Weisgerber (2011) points out that we present ourselves differently, perform different roles, in different digital contexts:

Facebook Corinne and Twitter Corinne are not the same persona. And they're also slightly different from Corinne, the blogger. I'm a lot pickier about who I let join my Facebook network and I rarely let mere acquaintances in. If you want to connect with me on Facebook, I have to know you fairly well. As a result, you'd probably get to see a much more unfiltered version of Corinne than you would on Twitter. Twitter Corinne is an engaged professor and researcher, tweets in a number of languages and aside from the occasional (but justified) rant about AT&T's dismal phone service, tries to present a very professional image.

It is historically appropriate that the concept of flow suggests analog systems in which bits of information succeed one another smoothly. By contrast, Weisberger's description suggests digital systems in which the switching of identities according to platform (Facebook Corinne versus Twitter Corinne) does not represent the extension of the self envisioned by Oswald and Packer so much as the necessity of enacting a series of different, perhaps even mutually exclusive selves that evoke the on/off logic of the digital. The multitasker does not move from *Buffy* to business and back again in a smooth flow but is pulled from one task and one identity to another (and sometimes from one screen to another) in series of discrete engagements that require not just multitasking but *multiselfing*: morphing and switching among identities to fulfill the multiple social roles demanded of us by our screens. Multiselfing is nothing new; it is fundamental to Goffman's analysis of self-presentation that we always present ourselves in different guises in different contexts (Meier 2010). What is perhaps new is the frequency and velocity of the changes we are called upon to make in order to navigate the "immersive sea" of digital information that surrounds us without drowning in it.

Oswald and Packer (2011: 283) nominate the “on demand model” as the best description of our current mediatized situation “and a new model of flow” to update Williams’s. I agree, as long as it’s understood that demand flows in both directions: the world is available to the prosumer on demand, but we as subjects must also be available – on demand and in a suitable identity – to the myriad of opportunities for communication and interaction that hail us through our screens. Direct mediatization is basic to this on-demand culture: online shopping, e-books, and digital library research are but three examples of activities and artifacts with which we now engage by means of technologies that have replaced, or nearly so, traditional means and that often make things available more rapidly than before. Indirect mediatization is manifest at one level in the assumptions that govern our behavior. We now tend to assume, for example, that everyone is available to everyone else pretty much all the time, whether by cell phone or text or email or instant messaging, and we become impatient when we can’t get in touch with someone instantly or an email goes unanswered for several days. Not only is our communicative behavior mediatized, but the social expectations surrounding interpersonal communication are as well.

For Williams, one of the primary functions of television was to serve as a window on the outside world. Now, we carry such windows with us as we move through the world. The small windows of our cell phones can show us what’s going on in the places we’re not; relative to any position we assume, there are still a “here” and an “elsewhere”, but there are no longer an inside and an outside in the sense Williams had in mind. Similarly, there is no longer a limited and controlled flow of information emanating from a small number of sources into which we can tap or from which we can withdraw at will. Rather, we are now immersed in an overwhelming sea of data originating from an astronomical number of points known and unknown from which it is far more difficult to withdraw. Communication within this flow is no longer primarily one-way from the media and cultural workers to their audiences. Now, anyone can participate in the media and the making of culture and respond directly to those in dominant positions. Whereas it seemed twenty-five years ago that performers could engage productively with a culture understood in terms of flow by creating mobile but essentially stable personae that could take up multiple positions and perform multiple functions within the flow, performers today must address the terms of an on-demand culture that requires all of us to morph ourselves continually (and discontinuously) to respond to the demands we wish to make and those that are made of us.

In the music video for the song *Va Va Voom* (2012) Minaj enacts this kind of morphing on demand by portraying four distinct characters all based on female archetypes found in fairy tales or fantasy novels, including a blonde coquette who cavorts with unicorns, a red-haired Snow White (who still sings while asleep; there is also a second red-haired but masked character who may or may not be different from Snow White), an Evil Queen dressed in a high-collared black dress and

adorned with a black pageboy haircut, and a figure who may be the Evil Queen's opposite number who appears in white. It is important, however, that all of Minaj's characters ultimately are visually assimilated to a single persona. Although each has a different color and style of hair, is costumed in a different extravagant outfit, and appears in a different setting and scenario, they all conspicuously have the same face, adorned with the exaggerated false eyelashes and the Pink Friday lipstick Minaj favors. Different as they are, all are readily recognizable as variants on Minaj's primary performance persona and it is that persona's appearance that provides Minaj's parade of characters with continuity, as does the fact that they all come from fairytales or similar stories. The song itself reinforces this continuity since it is a continuous narrative of the protagonist's attempt to seduce a man rapped and sung in a consistent voice. The relationship between the song's structure and that of the video also suggests a pattern underlying Minaj's multiple guises in that each character appears as the protagonist of a particular verse and, until the end, the same character (the white-clad figure) appears to articulate the chorus.

By contrast, Lady Gaga, another pop music artist to emerge in the late 2000s who is noteworthy for her constantly shifting appearance, lavish performances, and connections to the world of fashion, seems to disappear behind her costumes and make-up, in large part because her face – her eyes in particular – is often at least partially hidden. So different from one another are the multiple visual manifestations of Lady Gaga in performance and the media it is possible to imagine that many of her fans do not know what she really looks like. Both Minaj and Gaga are adept at navigating our mediatized cultural landscape in ways that go beyond simply producing and performing music. For example, Minaj's characters are defined as much by statements she makes through her Twitter feed as by her music, stage performances, and videos. Gaga, too, is often cited as an example of an artist who uses the web and social media very cannily in building her fan following and brand (see Hampp 2010). But whereas Minaj arguably follows an established approach in carving out a presence in mediatized culture by constructing a versatile persona as a base from which to morph into different identities, Gaga seems to be charting new territory by constructing a chameleon-like presence that never resolves into a stable image or identity.

As a performer, Lady Gaga makes use of a very broad range of platforms, including live performances, sound recordings, television appearances, music videos, fashion shows, museum events, websites, and social media. Like many celebrities, she is active on Twitter. Inevitably, she also appears in a vast number of contexts over which she has little control such as gossipy television programs like *TMZ* and videos concocted by fans and posted on YouTube. She juxtaposes an enigmatic, always changing public persona with ostensibly more personal communications, particularly in the form of home videos aimed primarily at her fans who she calls "little monsters".

Gaga acknowledges and encourages her fans' prosumerism. Richard Hanna, Andrew Rohm and Victoria Crittenden (2011: 265) write, "consumers are no longer merely passive recipients in the marketing exchange process. Today, they are taking an increasingly active role in co-creating everything from product design to promotional messages". As an example, a small, inexpensive-looking toy plastic unicorn with an illuminated horn given to Gaga by a fan appears in *Gagavision* No. 44 (April 28, 2011), one of the home videos Gaga makes for her fans, where she claims to seek inspiration from it and names it Gagacorn. According to Gagapedia, "Lady Gaga also has a tattoo of a unicorn on her left outer thigh with a banner reading 'Born This Way,' a tribute to her album. Gagacorn is known to be the mascot of Gaga's third studio album, titled *Born This Way*" (Gagapedia). Four different versions of Gagacorn appear on key chains for sale on Lady Gaga's official website. Each reflects one of Gaga's many guises by sporting different blond hair styles and, in one case, what appears to be a steak on its head, a reference to the notorious "meat dress" designed by Franc Fernandez that Gaga wore to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards ceremony. Gaga creates a feedback loop whereby her fans are treated not just as passive consumers of her music and product lines but as potential co-creators of her mythology (in which Gagacorn is now totemic), her merchandise, her music (inasmuch as Gagacorn was Gaga's mascot during the making of an album), and even, possibly, her body (depending on when she got her unicorn tattoo).

Lady Gaga is often accused of lacking originality. In a virulently anti-Gaga screed, Camille Paglia (2010) describes her as "a ruthless recycler of other people's work. She is the diva of déjà vu. Gaga has glibly appropriated from performers like Cher, Jane Fonda as Barbarella, Gwen Stefani and Pink, as well as from fashion muses like Isabella Blow and Daphne Guinness." Even pro-Gaga commentators agree. Nicole Sia (2010), writing for an MTV.com blog, states that while she is "definitely an innovator, Lady Gaga is maybe not always the most original". Alexander Cavaluzzo (2011), writing in the online journal *Gaga Stigmata*, a publication described by its founders as "the first mover in Gaga studies", calls her an "editrix" whose art consists in selecting and combining things that already exist rather than original creation. This is observable in her music, which draws extensively both on today's electronic dance music and the dance music of the 1980s and 1990s exemplified by Madonna and Britney Spears, as well as big-voiced pop divas as various as Cher and Carly Simon. It has also been noted that the infamous "meat dress" revisits Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* of 1987.

I suggest that Gaga's practice of appropriation and recombination positions her as a cultural prosumer, a knowledgeable consumer of contemporary popular music, art, and fashion whose production as an artist derives largely from her ability to cull from what has gone before and recombine the things that interest her. Francesco Bonami (2012) argues that this aspect of Gaga's work reflects her

generational affiliation (she turned 27 in March of 2013): “Lady Gaga belongs to a generation of *mutatis mutandis*, that is to say those who build their own identity by changing things that already existed but that needed to be changed in order to continue to exist”. One of the chief strategies and forms that has emerged from this generation is the *mash-up*, both an artistic practice and a way of thinking about culture as “configurable” (Sinnreich 2010). The term mash-up is used primarily in reference to either music, in which case it denotes the practice of combining two or more recordings, usually quite different stylistically, into a new work, or web pages, in which case it refers to a page that juxtaposes material from several sources (e.g. a Google map and a YouTube video). Lady Gaga’s fans are creators of mash-ups; one, for example, combined Blondie’s *Call Me* with Gaga’s *Electric Chapel* to make *Call Me to the Electric Chapel* (DEADgamer 2012). Arguably, the song *Electric Chapel* is a kind of mash-up to begin with, since it must be a reference to Jimi Hendrix’s description of his music as being an “electric church.” The music video for Gaga’s song *Bad Romance*, discussed further below, is a different sort of mash-up since it re-presented all of the outfits seen on the catwalk during Alexander McQueen’s runway show for Paris Fashion Week in 2010; it is thus a mash-up of a music video and a fashion show. Gaga’s aesthetic as bricoleuse or editrix is perhaps better described as a mash-up aesthetic in which she appropriates materials from a broad range of cultural contexts and combines them into new expression.

Since 2008, Gaga has made a spate of web videos, first under the rubric Transmission Gagavision and later called Monstervision. The Gagavision/Monstervision videos are circulated through the Littlemonsters.com website Gaga maintains as a fan community site (through which she offers lengthier messages to her fans than is possible on Twitter) and through YouTube and other video sites. They purport to provide a “backstage” view of Gaga as she rehearses, travels, plays with her dog, talks with various people, engages with her fans, works on recording her music, cavorts with her entourage, and so on. The backstage quality of these videos is emphasized by their common title sequence. It shows Lady Gaga being made up; only fragments of her face appear. This sequence suggests that the construction of Lady Gaga, the stage persona, is taking place before our eyes while the rest of the video will show us what lies behind this construction. The videos typically appear to be shot with a somewhat shaky handheld camera (Gaga is sometimes seen holding a camera and shooting members of her staff) and are informal, grainy, and low resolution. They contrast sharply with Gaga’s music videos, which are immaculate state-of-the-art productions.

This bifurcation of the slick and the amateurish in Gaga’s use of media points first of all to the way she adjusts her identity to the setting and audience. There is no singular Lady Gaga whose presence is extended across these many platforms; indeed, the only continuity between Gaga, the young, hard working woman presented on Gagavision, who seems accessible if sometimes a bit overwrought, and

the carefully constructed versions of Lady Gaga that appear in her music videos is that they are different manifestations of the same human being. Gaga thus manages the trick of presenting herself in some contexts as not that different from her fans – she, like so many others, seemingly makes low quality, somewhat disjointed, overly chatty home videos of her everyday life and posts them on YouTube – and in other contexts as an otherworldly being whom the same fans admire for her audacity, outrageousness, and alterity.

Like Minaj, Gaga pushes the idea of discontinuous identity to extremes in the visual manifestations of her identities as musician and celebrity. When offstage but in public, her appearance can vary so much that she does not appear to be the same person from one time to another. The color and style of her hair change continuously, and she frequently wears hats, make-up, sunglasses, or prosthetics that occlude her eyes, sometimes her entire face. Even the shape of her head appears to change, sometimes seeming vertical and ovoid while at other times appearing to be round. In one of her most dramatic transformations, she appeared at the MTV Video Music Awards ceremony for 2011 in male drag as a character called Jo Calderone who claimed to be Gaga's lover. Calderone actually made his debut the year before as a cover model for the September 2010 issue of *Vogue Hommes Japan*. At that time, Gaga did not admit to being Jo but it was widely rumored (Gagapedia). At the awards ceremony, Gaga created a moment of self-reflexive meta-theatricality through this portrayal as Calderone applauded Gaga for having achieved stardom while simultaneously accusing her of never being out of the spotlight and never acting "real" (Mitchell 2011). In short, a clearly artificial entity created and enacted by Gaga accused her of being an artificial entity created by fame. He also revealed that she refuses to look at him when she's having an orgasm; perhaps this was a covert way for Gaga to suggest that her tendency to hide or radically alter her face and features symbolically marks the limits of the intimacy she is willing to offer her public. Even in the Gagavision videos, she often (though not always) appears in dark glasses or shrouded in shadow.

One of Gaga's logos is an image of a headless female body. When she appeared on the cover of *V Magazine's* issue for the summer of 2011, she portrayed a kind of three-headed human Cerberus. These images would seem to be two sides of the same coin: three heads are the same as none. The proliferation of identities in which Gaga is engaged is tantamount to having no identity at all – Bonami (2012) describes Gaga's body as "a stage on which you can set up a new scenography each time". Troy Carter, Gaga's manager, discusses their strategy for partnering with other businesses by saying that she will not engage in traditional endorsement deals: "You won't see her face plastered on any packaging or anything" (quoted in Hampp 2010). Of course not: which face would it be? That Gaga's strategy in this area contrasts strongly with Minaj's is apparent from the way each markets her signature scent. Pink Friday, Minaj's perfume, comes in a bottle modeled as a bust of Minaj in full Barbie regalia. The box also features a stylized

illustration of Minaj. Lady Gaga's perfume, *The Fame*, comes in an elegant egg-shaped bottle with a designer cap that recalls Art Deco. The box is black and bears only an image of the bottle. Whereas Minaj follows a more traditional strategy of marketing an image based on her own in which her fans can participate through consumption, Gaga serves much more as an *éminence grise* for her brand than as its cover girl.

Gaga has emerged as a champion of LGBT causes and the rights of the disenfranchised generally, especially through her Born This Way Foundation. The song for which the foundation is named is a rousing anthemic declaration that it's perfectly all right to be whoever you are regardless of what anyone else thinks – the line “I was born this way” is the key line of the chorus. Ironically, Gaga's whole approach to self-presentation seems at odds with the essentialism she embraces in the song. Whatever way she was born (there is no mystery surrounding this since one can trace Gaga's entire life from when she was a little Italian-American girl in New York named Stefani Germanotta who exhibited a talent for playing the piano up to the present day via photos and videos readily accessible on the Internet) has no bearing on the multiple, shifting identities she assumes at an ever-more frenetic pace.

One of the identity issues surrounding Lady Gaga concerns the cultural sphere to which she properly belongs. She has strong presences in the worlds of music, fashion, and art and the question of whether she should be considered a pop musician or a performance artist comes up regularly (see D'Addario 2011). Although Gaga sometimes bridges the gap by referring to herself as a “pop performance artist” (*Lady Gaga Talks*) she works this dichotomy by constructing different personae for each context. The launch party for her perfume *The Fame* took place in the fall of 2012 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Gaga prepared a performance piece called “Sleeping with Gaga” for which she was seen to be sleeping inside a giant replica of the perfume's signature bottle next to a large digital clock that seemed to be counting down fifteen minutes. People could come up and touch her hand. In the second part of the performance, she received a tattoo of a cherub on the back of her neck (Anru 2012; Lynch 2012). Although Gaga gained the opportunity to market a perfume because of her fame as a pop musician, there was no direct connection between this event and the music that made it possible. Gaga did not perform as a musician at the Guggenheim and seems, in fact, to have remained silent. The recorded music that played during the performance was not hers. Even though the event treated the museum primarily as a site of commerce rather than art, the performance was framed by appropriate art world references, including the obviously Warholian clock and a possible reference to Ron Athey in the tattooing section. Gaga's stillness and relative vulnerability may have been her rendering of qualities she perceives in the work of Marina Abramovic, for whom she has expressed great admiration (*Lady Gaga Talks*). Lady Gaga, performance artist, was present at the Guggenheim, not Lady Gaga, pop musician.

Gaga's music video for her song *Bad Romance* from 2009 offers a striking dramatization of her strategy of shifting appearances and identities. In the first minute of a video that runs slightly less than four minutes, Gaga appears in four different guises, each keyed to a particular setting. In the first scene, which corresponds with the song's harpsichord-like introduction, she is seated at the center of a tableau of eerie masked and otherwise disguised figures in a blonde wig, gold dress, and opaque eyeglasses with lenses that suggest bullet holes. In the second scene, a group of mysterious figures dressed in skintight white latex emerges from clamshell coffins. All but one have their faces hidden but their legs exposed; the remaining one's legs are covered but the lower part of her face, including very red lips, is visible. The figure that is singled out may be Lady Gaga – it's actually impossible to tell. Two other figures placed in other settings are intercut with these: a wide-eyed naïf with disheveled light orange hair in a white bathtub and a black-clad evil queen-like figure in a darkened room who is gazing at herself in a mirror with a heavy ornate frame. As attendants torment the woman in the bathtub, a blonde woman with very pale skin shot in tight close-up who looks like a glamorous movie star playing a woman in distress appears. As if to emphasize the fragmentary nature of these identities, normal rules of cinematic continuity are ignored. In one shot, for example, the orange-haired innocent is conspicuously wearing ear buds. The next time we see her, they have disappeared only to return in a subsequent shot.

In the remainder of the video, nine more versions of Gaga appear and two of the earlier ones reappear. Although specific images (a twisted hand, a pair of bizarre shoes, a distinctively shaped bottle) are repeated in different scenes and settings these repetitions do not create narrative links between them. Each action, setting, and the version of Lady Gaga that goes with them is discrete – each exists in its own context that does not overlap or connect to the others. They are unified solely by the song, as the characters move and dance to its rhythm, which also defines the rhythm of the video's editing, and lip-synch its lines.

Ronnie Lippens (1998: 24) describes our "hypermodern everyday life" as "JIT-life," where JIT stands for Just In Time. In JIT-life, everything is immediate and provisional, constantly in flux, and incoherent, including our JIT-identities: "Individual selves are being splintered and are splintering themselves reflexively, looking for fitting identities/differences, trying them out, abandoning them in dissatisfaction, reaching out for alternative identities, ever rhizomatically" (Lippens 1998: 28). Lippens's concept of JIT harmonizes with other terms I have nominated here as key descriptors of our present cultural condition, including "on demand", "multiselfing", and mash-up. Together, they suggest the urgency and frequency with which we must adjust our self-presentations to the multiple platforms on which we continuously perform them. JIT alludes to both the immediacy with which we must respond to the demands made upon us (the instant switch from leisure to business demanded of the cell phone multitasker, for instance) and the temporary

quality of the resulting self-presentations whose utility is completely limited to their contexts.

It is well known that Gaga's enterprise is conducted with the help of the creative team known collectively as The Haus of Gaga, which includes choreographer Laurie-Ann Gibson; several fashion designers, including Hussein Chalayan and the late Alexander McQueen; high fashion milliners Philip Treacy and Nasir Zahar; eyewear designer Kerin Rose; and photographer Nick Knight, Gaga's co-conspirator in the creation of Jo Calderone (Residents of the Haus). It is crucial in the present context that the key figure in the Haus of Gaga is Nicola Formichetti, who is a stylist and fashion director, not a designer (working for Gaga is but one of his many positions – he is also fashion director of both *Vogue Hommes Japan* and Uniqlo, a Japanese clothing line, and artistic director for the DIESEL brand.) As described by Jennifer Anyan and Philip Clarke (2011: 3, 6–7) stylists don't design: they stage the designs of others, “construct[ing] a fictitious scene using available resources”, “sourcing, collecting and combining predesigned objects”, a process that often involves “making fast-paced, often spontaneous, last-minute” decisions. In other words, the stylist is a mash-up artist who brings together the work of fashion designers and photographers: the perfect associate for a performer noted for her own commitment to bricolage and who is taking the JIT world by the horns.

The density, velocity, and incoherence of Gaga's abrupt changes of identity in the *Bad Romance* video are both products and an image of this cultural condition. Commenting on the way “Gaga is always clad in apparel usually seen only on Fashion Week runways”, Victor Corona (2011: 8) notes that her “aesthetic challenges the potency of [vestmentary] regimes” that tell us what we should wear when “and affirms the hypermodern imperative of individual self-expression ...”. Pace Corona, I argue that Gaga's aesthetic challenges the very notion that there is an individual self to express by distributing multiple selves across a field of infinite and unpredictable variations.

In this respect, Gaga confounds the schema for analyzing musical performance I mentioned earlier: how can one sustain an analytical distinction between persona and character when an artist's persona is manifest only as a seemingly infinite proliferation of characters? To quote Gilliam Schutte (2013), “Gaga, it seems, is indefinable”. Schutte goes on to pose the provocative question, “Could it be then, that Lady Gaga is an avatar and not a human being – at least in the collective imaginary of her huge fan-base?” Schutte is referring to the way Gaga seems to function as a projection screen for her fans to whom she can mean what they want her to mean and “allowing many to believe that they have some hand in her creation”. This is a valid point. In fact, “Lady Gaga” is not a human being, though she is played by one. Lady Gaga is every bit as much a product of the Haus of Gaga as her perfume, *The Fame*, is a product of Gaga Laboratories, Paris. But Lady Gaga is neither a persona nor an avatar. Gaga asks her fans to identify not with an identity but with the ability to produce ever-changing identities in response to

different settings and circumstances. Lady Gaga is a randomized algorithm (Karp 1991) that continuously generates, on demand and just in time, the personae Stefani Germanotta portrays.

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