

# Far From the Shallow: Lady Gaga's Hypermodern Revolution

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The aim is to examine Lady Gaga's revolution regarding gender, sexuality, and politics with the focus on her songs, videos, and live performances. The main argument indicates that Gaga's pursuit of an enduring cultural presence is a response to hypermodern pressures not as the girl-next-door. Her elaborate performances and sartorial experimentation are deployed to create visual impressions that generate greater spectacles. The making of the hypermodern memory is complemented by the attempt to link herself to categories of Otherness as a celebration of the monster or the misfit in various manifestations, which builds a sense of subcultural membership among fans.

*Keywords:* Lady Gaga, hypermodernity, pop culture, sex, gender, sexuality, politics

## Introduction

The American singer, songwriter, and actress Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta—known as Lady Gaga—rose to prominence in 2008 with her debut studio album, *The Fame*, and its chart-topping singles *Just Dance* and *Poker Face*. The EP *The Fame Monster* (2009) brought the hits *Bad Romance*, *Telephone* (which features R & B and pop star Beyoncé), and *Alejandro*. Her second full-length album, *Born This Way* (2011), explored techno-pop and electronic rock. After the album *ARTPOP* (2013), Gaga released the jazz album *Cheek to Cheek* (2014) with Tony Bennett and the country pop and soft rock-influenced album *Joanne* (2016). She also played leading roles in the miniseries *American Horror Story: Hotel* (2015–2016), for which she received a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress, and the critically acclaimed musical drama film *A Star Is Born* (2018), co-starred by actor Bradley Cooper. Her contributions to the movie's soundtrack, which spawned the chart-topping single *Shallow*, made her the first female artist to win an Academy, Grammy, BAFTA, and Golden Globe Award in one year. Gaga returned to her dance-pop roots with her sixth studio album, *Chromatica* (2020), which yielded the single *Rain on Me*, featuring pop singer Ariana Grande. Gaga's activism focuses on mental health awareness and human rights. In 2012, she founded the Born This Way Foundation, a non-profit organization to improve mental health and prevent bullying. Gaga—one of the world's best-selling music artists—is known for her image reinventions, musical versatility, and an endless stream of avant-garde fashion in videos, performances, and public appearances. Although Gaga's critics see empty spectacle, she has succeeded in creating a glam-pop aesthetic that lasts in popular memory and celebrates Otherness (Corona, 2013; Jesus, 2017c).

Gaga's quest to produce the memorable and celebrate the freakish highlights the degree to which pop spectacle has been affected by the unprecedented connectivity among consumers and cultural producers in hypermodernity, an accelerated state of capitalism characterized by the culture of the fastest and more

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profitability, performance, flexibility, and innovation (Lipovetsky, 2005). The accelerated business cycles of creative industries (Figueiredo, Jesus, Robaina, & Couri, 2019; Jesus, 2017a; Jesus & Kamlot, 2016; 2017; Jesus & Dubeux, 2018) may generate the recombination of aesthetic material that can shock audiences. In this sense, the cultural bricolage in Gaga's work may open enduring terrains of theatricality in pop culture (Corona, 2013). Gaga's fame is related to her artistic abilities as a musician and performer, as well as marketing, activism, the way she works with gender and sexuality, and the multiple artistic styles Gaga has been engaged in (Deflem, 2017).

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### **Gaga's Revolution and Hyperculture**

In the hyperculture, celebrity success is linked to the anxieties of the historical and social contexts in which fame is acquired. The forms of aesthetic appreciation cut across individual media. Gaga's fame has largely been sustained by technologies, like Twitter, YouTube, and camera- and video- enabled phones, with which fans can almost immediately capture and upload news and images of celebrity sightings and compulsively use interactive technologies to connect to the artist's aura (Corona, 2013). The intense online participation of Gaga's fans showed how internet helped build fan communities and create the new economy of fandom, which can be seen in the artistic scene and sports (Jesus, 2011b; 2014c). Empowered fan communities use the democratizing potential of social media to communicate with artists. Fans may even become artists' sponsors or collaborators, co-creators of added value, and participants in collaborations, for example (Galuszka, 2015).

Gaga's hypermodern theatricality challenges the strength of disciplinary regimes and affirms the imperative of individual self-expression (Corona, 2013). Gaga aims to be a parodic subject and a sexy object at the same time, which unsettles ideas about presumed naturalness of gender and desire and invokes the monstrous and the marvellous. The camp effect of her performances denaturalizes them through irony and excess with outrageous costumes, stage design, and choreography. The constant change of costume undermines the heteronormativity through enacting outrageous inversions of aesthetic and gender codes (Medhurst, 1997), as in *Alejandro's* video. She has contrasted her electro-dance numbers with piano interludes and a capella versions of some songs and re-invented disco-anthems as moments of acoustic musical performance. Her use of camp operates as a metamorphosing operation which attacks norms of behavior to revel in their artifice (Horn, 2010).

### **Gaga's Political Sites of Resistance**

Since *The Fame's* release in 2008, Lady Gaga has enthusiastically played with the idea of monstrosity, usually connected to human rights abuses, war, oppressive politics, and economic exploration, for example (Jesus, 2011a; 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b). Nevertheless, Gaga addresses her fans as little monsters, a term

which they eagerly use among themselves. Gaga has cultivated a compelling relationship with her fans, preached a consistent message of unity and self-acceptance, and urged them to be themselves (Bennett, 2014). The re-articulation of the negative connotations of monster enabled fans to use Gaga as a mirror to reflect upon and embrace their differences from mainstream culture through messages of empowerment and equality that contribute to the organization of their emotional and narrative lives and identities, such as the lyrics to *Dance in the Dark*, *Born This Way*, *Hair*, and *The Queen*. Through their involvement with the community built around Gaga—seen as “Mother Monster”, little monsters have re-appropriated the word monster by re-articulating its outsider status to inner strength and originality (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013). Gaga’s claims to monstrosity appear to be accommodated under a strategy of hyper-differentiation (Rossolatos, 2015; Jesus, 2020b).

The word monster also becomes a metaphor for the maddening swirl of images, anxieties, and fads in hypermodern life. It was visible in her 2009 MTV Video Music Awards live performance of *Paparazzi*, in which a Romanesque stage draped in pink and white was the place of a bloody simulation of her demise. In *Paparazzi*’s video, she is thrown from a balcony by a lover trying to ensure that paparazzi capture a photograph of their embrace. She somehow survives, fatally poisons the lover, and is arrested at the conclusion of the video. The *Bad Romance*’s video is built around a story in which Gaga is sold to the Russian mafia but ultimately destroys the man who purchased her. The blending of the beautiful with the monstrous in Gaga’s lyrics, videos, and live performances has touched upon a hypermodern disenchantment and appetite for the raw. Through her art, Gaga can associate subcultural membership with her music and thereby activate enduring allegiances (Corona, 2013; Horn, 2010; Varriale, 2012). Although the monstrous became less visible in *Joanne* and the *A Star is Born* soundtrack, it came back strong in *Chromatica*, in which Gaga explores mental health issues more explicitly than in her previous works, particularly the videos for *Rain on Me* and *911*.

Gaga is actively engaged in the construction and differentiation of audience groups, in terms of style and taste, and the authentication of their elevated position (Marshall, 1997). Camp may open mainstream cultural production for queer readings as in the case of Gaga, whose highlighted artifice of pop performativity becomes a queer act, which shows the awareness of the performativity of the everyday life. Her parodic device can be defined by irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor and questions a given pretext’s status as natural. According to Butler (2008), gender parody may be a powerful tool in the deconstruction of gender norms and normality as a practice of subversive repetition. Her performances incorporate hegemonic discourses and serve as reminders of how powerful and ubiquitous these dominant discourses are, while simultaneously point out their incongruities (Horn, 2010; Jesus, 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2011c; 2014a; 2014b).

Gaga has also engaged in multiple activist actions, such as raising HIV/AIDS awareness and funding, charitable contributions to relief efforts for natural disasters in Haiti, and funding for youth homeless shelters. She has worked to address her fans as fellow partners in these activities (Bennett, 2014) and talked openly about her teenage experiences with bullying, bulimia, and rape. In 2010, she attended the MTV Video Music Awards with gay and lesbian service members in a raw meat dress, an act designed to support the US Congress’ consideration of the repeal of US military’s policy Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. The movie *A Star is Born* and her album *Chromatica* deal with mental health issues and try to raise awareness about them. In 2020, Gaga expressed her opposition to the US president Donald Trump—in 2021, she performed the US National Anthem in Joe Biden’s inauguration—and collaborated with Global Citizen to plan the One World: Together At Home livestream concert, aimed at celebrating health care and essential workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaga is a political role model for fans who feel marginalized from mainstream culture, and social

media inspires them to develop supportive social networks (Bennett, 2014; Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2017; Jesus, 2017b; 2018a; 2018b; 2020a; Jesus, Kamlot, & Dubeux, 2019; 2020).

### Final Considerations

The sense of authenticity built through social media makes celebrities, such as Lady Gaga seem more accessible and approachable, and many younger Internet users play a more active role in seeking out celebrity-oriented information and engage with other like-minded people and advocacy groups. They assert that online celebrity advocacy has the potential to encourage young people's engagement with political issues (Thrall et al., 2008). Important aesthetic and technological changes in the political process make these dismissals seem outdated (Wheeler, 2013). The meaning fans see in celebrities stems not from the object of fandom itself, but from the fans who use the celebrity content to examine and extend their senses of self (Sandvoss, 2005).

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