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'Some of Us Just Like to Read': Lady Gaga's Pastiche and the Rhizome

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT

"'Some of Us Just Like to Read': Lady Gaga's Pastiche and the Rhizome" explores intersections of network theory, new media, contemporary art and visual culture, and post-modern critical discourses. It attempts to characterize the productive tendencies of contemporary pop culture, using Lady Gaga as a lens through which these tendencies can be observed. It pays particular attention to the correlation(s) between the structure of the Internet, the exchange of texts and images within such a structure, and how Lady Gaga embodies this dynamic. This paper demonstrates, through both a critique of the concept of pastiche under current cultural conditions and a close examination of some specific performances, that Lady Gaga’s is a pastiche informed by a historical and cultural awareness, which turns pastiche into an affirmative, indexical reaction to the socio-cultural condition of the digital age. Ultimately, I argue that Lady Gaga’s tendency to pastiche reflects the structure of the current cultural moment; and that, by embodying a pastiched image, she encourages multifaceted interpretations of her music, fashion, and performances from an equally multifaceted audience.
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'Some of Us Just Like To Read': Lady Gaga's Pastiche and the Rhizome

I've overheard your theory: Nostalgia's for geeks.
I guess sir, if you say so. But some of us just like to read.

—Lady Gaga, "Applause" (2013)¹

Introduction

Since her emergence on the popular culture stage in 2008, Lady Gaga has frequently been compared to such iconic pop figures as Madonna, David Bowie, and Prince. The careers of these performers, undoubtedly the quintessential postmodern pop culture pantheon, have been shaped to a great degree by digital technology and new media and its capacity to create a vast and expansive social interconnectedness. Mid-century philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called this cultural phenomenon rhizomatic, a condition of pure, nonhierarchical connectivity.² This condition reflects and informs cultural production and dissemination to a great degree. As a result, we have entered into a post-postmodern cultural era: digital technology and new(er) media have made us even more interconnected socially, politically, and most important, culturally.

Current critical writing about contemporary popular culture does not account fully for the schism that the digital age has created between postmodern and contemporary modes of production, dissemination, and reception of pop culture. Theorists of the postmodern cultural condition such as Linda Hutcheon and Frederic Jameson have recognized the dual concepts of

parody and pastiche as the dominant methods of postmodern cultural production, prevalent throughout the second half of the twentieth-century. However, these theorists and critics often refer to pastiche in the pejorative, with an overall negative connotation, while privileging parody as having a critical capacity that far exceeds that of the former. As a result of its ability to be critical, parody is considered a meaningful method of production; conversely, pastiche is too often considered meaningless. This paper argues that the concepts of parody and pastiche are methods of cultural production with different capacities for being meaningful—and that difference is one measure of the “schism” between the postmodern and the present.

Lady Gaga is a star born of the digital age — still able to recall the condition of postmodern pop culture but not quite able to relive it — and she employs methods of artistic production accordingly. Those who have taken on the task of untangling the visual, textual, and linguistic — i.e., cultural — references present in any given Lady Gaga performance refer to parody as the dominant method of artistic production employed by the performer. While this might be the true, I suspect that most uses of the word are defensive: a deflection against charges of plagiarism, theft, unoriginality, and meaninglessness so often associated with Lady Gaga’s rampant cultural borrowing. However, Lady Gaga notoriously eludes neat categorization and simple interpretation, and so we should explore the possibility that the performer can in fact be meaningful even if she mobilizes a pastiche in the creation of her fashion, performances, and music videos.

This paper will demonstrate, through both a critique of the concept of pastiche under current cultural conditions and a close examination of some specific performances, that Lady Gaga’s is a pastiche informed by a historical and cultural awareness, which turns pastiche into
an affirmative, indexical reaction to the socio-cultural condition of the digital age. This indexing project generates multiple meanings through her efforts to catalog historical and cultural information. This also allows her to communicate with and appeal to a diverse audience, further supporting a discourse of indexing. Ultimately, I argue that Lady Gaga’s tendency to pastiche reflects the structure of the current cultural moment; and that, by embodying a pastiched image, she encourages multifaceted interpretations of her music, fashion, and performances from an equally multifaceted audience.

**Will the Real “Gaga Studies” Please Stand Up?**

During the earliest stages of this project, beginning in the fall of 2012, the topography of scholarly writing on pop culture phenomenon Lady Gaga was rather unremarkable. Not taking into account the massive body of journalistic literature or the expansive blogosphere, an academic database search of the key term “Lady Gaga” could hardly be considered fruitful. However today, just one year later, the same search yields evidence of a lively and diverse discourse. This nascent field, referred to here as “Gaga Studies,” does not hew to a singular academic field of study. Rather, the discourse is essentially interdisciplinary, including written work by scholars of music, sociology, literature, art history and visual culture, critical theory, and business. Unsurprisingly then, there are also a number of predominant themes which help to form the foundation of this critical body of writings about Lady Gaga: performance, fashion,

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3 This term was coined by the editors of *Gaga Stigmata*, an electronically-published journal dedicated to disseminating critical writings about Lady Gaga across all disciplines: music, history, visual culture, and gender studies most frequently. The term “Gagaology” also circulates as a way to describe this area of study, however it is my view that this term implicitly limits the scope of academic interest in Lady Gaga’s artistry.
and queer theories, visual body politics, and interestingly even brand marketing in the digital age. To examine these discursive themes requires us to consider further trends in this scholarship: How is agency factored into an understanding of Lady Gaga and her pop culture project? To what extent should we differentiate between Gaga the person and Gaga the project? How do authors describe the dynamic between Lady Gaga and her pop culture predecessors? And where is Lady Gaga placed with relation to a socio-historical context, itself characterized by trends in the production of (popular) culture?

Not all of the works found in a search of the phrase "Lady Gaga" are motivated by scholarly agendas. In fact, the two most robust sub-bodies of Gaga publications are journalistic, amateur or professional, and non-fiction biographies geared towards the interests of a general public. To underscore the extent of media attention on Lady Gaga, consider that, since the release of her first single "Just Dance" in 2008, she has been featured three times as *Rolling Stone Magazine*’s cover story.⁴ Also, just over 3,000 links show up in the magazine’s digital archive, again using the keywords “Lady Gaga” to filter the results. Repeating the same method, this time with *The New York Times* and *The Huffington Post*, the results number in just over 6,000 for the former and 800,000 for the later.⁵ Included in these links are pieces written by journalists and contributing writers; but these are not the only non-academic authors contributing to the body of Gaga literature. Fan sites, blogs, and an electronically-published journal also participate in Gaga studies, albeit in a different way. These sources are largely written by non-authorities (with the exception of *Gaga Stigmata*, an electronically-published

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⁴ June 2009, July 2010, and June 2011.

⁵ Of course these figures do not represent the products of a systematic, empirical study. Instead they are intended to highlight the massiveness of Lady Gaga’s media presence.
journal), and so the content often looks like a repository of facts and figures that might otherwise go unacknowledged by mainstream media coverage because they are comparatively insignificant. Want to know who designed the jacket that Gaga wore through the airport terminal in Tokyo last week? Any Google search will provide hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of hits to scour through for an answer, but luckily there exists an online treasure chest of over 150,000 Gaga images compiled by some of the most dedicated fans; patiently search through The Fame Gallery and your efforts will almost certainly be rewarded.6

Gaga Stigmata occupies a unique position in the topography of Gaga studies. At once a source of scholarly inquiry and investigation, it also functions entirely in the non-professional realm of blogs and fan-sites.7 Featured articles are certainly of an academic quality, in that they provide systematic analyses of cultural meaning provided by Lady Gaga and her project. However, the authors are not entirely divorced from their deeply personal affection for Lady Gaga, which also links their work to a well-developed fandom.

This is not to say that the work featured on Gaga Stigmata is in any way lessened in effect because of a personal motivation for written work; rather I understand a purist’s hesitance to call it “scholarly.” In fact, it is not uncommon for current participants in Gaga studies to claim a personal stake in the field. In Richard Gray’s preface to the first academic print publication dedicated entirely to the cultural significance of Lady Gaga, the editor thanks

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6 The-Fame.org is partnered with LittleMonsters.com, Lady Gaga’s official fan site.
7 Gagajournal.blogspot.com is an online journal edited by Kate Durbin and Meghan Vicks, Ph.D. Roland Betancourt, Doctoral candidate in the History of Art at Yale University, is the site’s most frequent contributor, as well as Eddie McCaffray, a doctoral candidate at Arizona State University. According to its homepage, The American Scholar Magazine says the online journal has “churned out the most intense critical conversation on [Lady Gaga].”
his family for putting up with his “Lady Gaga obsession every day.”

It is fair to say, then, that his edited volume was born out of a personal interest in and passion for the artistry of Lady Gaga, and all that represents. While efforts similar in motivation have preceded Gray’s anthology, he is quick to point out that most published books have been biographical accounts of Lady Gaga’s rise to fame and that “none of these books [treat] ‘Lady Gaga’ as an academic subject of study.” He and thirteen other authors worked together to change – to establish, really – the foundation for Gaga studies.

The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga: Critical Essays (henceforth referred to as Performance Identities) features thirteen articles in addition to Gray’s preface and introduction. Gray writes that the collection “examines the notion of performance identity,” utilizing Lady Gaga as a backdrop in order to shed light on identities as socio-cultural constructs. According to Gray: “Lady Gaga is performance.” And for this very reason she is the premier lens through which we can begin to examine the performativity of social identities. While all of the scholars approach this subject from the same sociological perspective, they incorporate specific areas of cultural studies as well, including 20th century avant-garde art, Romantic and Gothic literature, post-war cinema, and postmodern popular culture, in order to highlight themes of “gender and sexuality, consumerism, visual body rhetoric, imitation and parody, and racial politics.” From

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9 Ibid. 11.
10 Ibid. 8.
11 Ibid. 11
the beginning, as Gray makes clear, the development of a “Gaga studies” has been an interdisciplinary endeavor.

Out of necessity for lack of extant literature, as well as to keep in line with an inclusive model to define the field, Gray et. al., make use of popular histories of Lady Gaga, the person and the project. Of these biographies, Maureen Callahan’s *Poker Face: The Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga* provides a poignant account of Stefani Germanotta’s transformation into Lady Gaga, and Lady Gaga’s transformation from “a celebrity to a superstar.” Callahan identifies two events as points of origin: the first when Stefani Germanotta was introduced to music producer Rob Fusari; and the second Gaga’s 2009 performance at the MTV Video Music Awards. In addition to these unclear demarcations, the fact that Callahan runs back and forth between presenting Gaga as a divine creation and Gaga as the result of a marketing prowess underscores a problem that scholars have faced since the earliest traces of Gaga studies appeared: How much agency should be granted to Lady Gaga as a person, versus as a performance? If we accept that Gaga as a person is the product of her own imagination and creative energy, then a great deal of agency need be afforded to her for conceiving and adopting this persona. However, as Callahan points out, there are many influences that have and continue to shape the visual manifestation of “Lady Gaga” the performance.  

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13 Callahan emphasizes the impact of stylist Nicola Formichetti on what has come to be considered a key aspect of Lady Gaga’s artistry: fashion. “Before Nicola, she could not get in with high-end designers; no one would loan her anything. He took her from a costume-y, gimmicky look to the high-fashion eccentricity, and today designers fight for the honor of dressing her.” *Ibid.*, 191.
The extent of these influences, though, should not be overstated. In her book *Monster Loyalty*, Jackie Huba argues that a major factor of Gaga’s celebrity is her prodigious use of social media to create visibility and maintain accessibility.\(^\text{14}\) Huba acknowledges her as a powerful businesswoman, suggesting that Gaga does in fact exercise considerable creative control over her project(s): “Her crazy stage performances, during which she lights a piano on fire or pops out of an egg, and her weird outfits, such as the infamous meat dress, create a smoke screen that masks a more serious business sense.”\(^\text{15}\) When Callahan writes about Gaga’s “makeover” after meeting Nicola Formichetti, she explains that “prior to Formichetti, there seemed to be no top-down decision-making regarding her aesthetic.”\(^\text{16}\) This observation implies that the current, post-Formichetti model of Gaga’s aesthetic is in fact a top-down process. It does not claim that project Gaga is a one-woman show; rather it places Gaga at the apex of a collaborative system that, for practical reasons, has a pyramidal structure where figures towards the top exert more influence over the creative process.

While Callahan works to detangle the web of influences amalgamated in any given Gaga performance, and identify its component parts, she also claims that the employment of this type of amalgamation — what we will call *pastiche* — should not surprise us. According to Callahan, and further asserted by Huba, Gaga as a person, as an artist, as a businesswoman, and as an overall representative of popular culture in the digital age is fundamentally and inevitably informed by the Internet: “What’s remarkable about Lady Gaga is that she’s the first star born in and of the Internet age” to portray herself as “a creature of self-invention, an object of

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 7.
emotional projection and wish-fulfillment. Prince pulled it off, Bowie, too, but both did it before
the Internet. In the current topography of Gaga studies, it is obligatory to identify Gaga’s
various references to Madonna, Warhol, Bowie, and Prince, among other postmodern
producers of popular culture. However, as Callahan asserts, the identification of these
references is not enough to understand the role that these historical sources play in Gaga’s
artistry. We need to further understand how Gaga accesses historical popular culture, difficult
because pop culture is socio-historically specific, and how she incorporates it into her projects.
Where does Gaga’s originality come from, supposing that it does exist? And how does it
function within her creative process?

To whatever extent Gaga asserts herself in the conception, production, and
performance of her projects, we must keep in mind that she exists in the realm of popular
culture. Evoking a distinction made famous at mid-twentieth century by American art critic
Clement Greenberg, we might best understand pop culture as the product of a collaborative
effort, as opposed to the supposed heroic individuality of an avant-garde artist. Lady Gaga
embraces the collaborative character of pop culture, and while she certainly does not claim to
be an avant-garde artist, she does reject the implied derogation of a devalued position for
popular culture: “Pop culture is art. It doesn’t make you cool to hate pop culture....” It is the
position of this paper to expand on Callahan’s (somewhat passive) assertion that the Internet
accounts for an enormous difference between herself and her pop culture predecessors, to

18 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,
19 Emily Herbert, Lady Gaga: Behind the Fame. (New York: Overlook Press, 2010), chapter 4. Cited in The
Performance Identities of Lady Gaga: Critical Essays.
whom she is undoubtedly indebted. From this investigation, it will become clear that the face of Gaga’s historical debt is multifaceted and infinitely shifting.

**Lady Gaga’s Pastiche and the Rhizome**

While it is certainly exciting that critical scholarship in Gaga studies has grown richer and denser over the past couple of years, a healthy skepticism must be retained. Efforts to characterize Lady Gaga and her artistry have maintained a suspicious loyalty to postmodern models of cultural production. Postmodernism’s theoretical poster child, “parody,” can be found at every corner in the Gaga studies topography to describe the tactics which generate meaning in Gaga’s artistry. I suspect that authors who subscribe to this understanding of project Gaga do so to defend her work against the many implicit and explicit charges of being “a cultural thief, a plagiarist, or just another Madonna wannabe.”

There is a well-developed history of critical intolerance for the borrowing of past images, inaugurated and sanctified by the (seemingly ever-present) dominance of modernist utopian avant-gardism. Meaningfulness and originality have thus been conflated. As a result, scholars of Gaga studies, who are sympathetic to image-borrowing, are compelled to evoke the underlying tenant of postmodern theory: parody, which “links the modern to the postmodern” through ironic play with originality, as a defense against

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Amber Davisson, Matthew Turner, Rebecca Lush, and Ann Torrusio all mobilize parody in their description of Lady Gaga’s meaningfulness.23

How would project Gaga be understood to operate if we put aside the allure of “parody” as a defense against meaninglessness? Gaga’s pastiched image reminds us of the historicity of this type of cultural production. As Ingeborg Hoesterey makes very clear in her book *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, and Literature*, “pasticcio” has an artistic pedigree dating well back to the early Modern era.24 But the meaning in Gaga’s project-wide pastiche will not be revealed by arguing their status as ironic commentaries on past styles; rather it is her situation within a specific (read: contemporary) pop culture context. Gaga’s pastiche reiterates the rhizomatic structure of this context, where the images making up this pastiche were first reintroduced and reproduced, then finally disseminated by Gaga. Rhizomatic pastiche is an unprecedented mode of cultural production. Never before has an information-disseminating structure with a vastness and capacity comparable to the Internet existed, and neither has an artistry that finds value in this supersaturated visual economy. Gaga constructs her image by selecting from, and stitching together an almost infinite, inexhaustible array of other images.

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Pastiche is not a product of the digital age, nor is it by any means singular to project Gaga. It has, though, been revolutionized by the performer.

Authors of postmodern theory have wrestled with pastiche as the proposed antithesis of parody for decades. For this group, affection is usually awarded to parody; disdain is all too often expressed for pastiche. Margaret Rose summarizes the relationship between these terms and their theoretical applications: "...while [parody, satire, and irony] have traditionally been associated with some comic intent, pastiche has until recent times been used largely to describe the conglomeration of counterfeit images in a visual art work." Here, the definition of pastiche hinges on "conglomeration" and "counterfeit." There is no room for further meaning in this understanding of pastiche – what Frederic Jameson decries a "degraded historicism." Jameson's pejorative dictates that pastiche is a sort of parody that has missed its critical mark; a parody that knows no history, that has no politics. Linda Hutcheon locates the "political efficacy" of parody in its ability to establish an "ironic critical distance" from the text with which it is engaged. It is in this distance that there is room for the parodist to be ironic, where "two voices are layered into a performance" and meaning ("politics") is generated by critical engagement between the two. Following this logic, pastiche, as a "conglomeration of

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25 Margaret A. Rose, *Pictorial Irony, Parody, and Pastiche: Comic Interpictoriality in the Arts of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2011), 3. Rose continues on to suggest that the theoretical dominance of parody over pastiche has since been challenged by scholars of visual culture.


28 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985; reprinted 2000), xii. As a literary theorist, Hutcheon describes the function of parody in terms of "texts." The term will be used here very broadly to include images, "histories," and models of information dissemination – e.g., the Internet.
counterfeit images" lacks the spatial capacity required to be ironic, and therefore is withheld from the Marxist privileges of being meaningful, political, and progressive.29

I take issue with this theoretical binary of political parody versus an intrinsically apathetic pastiche.30 In her forthcoming book, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian*, Nancy Troy explores the possibility that pastiche can, and does, function differently, and with considerable effects, according to various socio-cultural situations.31 In her book, Troy traces the dissemination and appropriation of the Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian’s Neo-plastic aesthetic through various realms of material and visual culture. Focusing on the iconic haute couture dresses designed by Yves Saint Laurent, Troy argues that the ways in which Mondrian’s paintings were absorbed into popular material culture reflect a larger system of cultural information dissemination (fig. 1). Saint Laurent was introduced to Mondrian through a series of print reproductions of the artist’s iconic abstractions. However, as Troy points out, Saint Laurent’s interpretations of Mondrian’s aesthetic were misguided.32 In advertising his designs, Saint Laurent described them as youthful and energetic, while we know that Neo-plasticism did not advocate a renewed vitality in the art world. In flipping through the pages of this book of images, Saint Laurent seems to have somehow missed the words that contextualize the paintings. Appropriating images which are divorced from their “political” context, Saint

32 “Misguided,” as used here, simply means that they are inconsistent with the standard avant-garde history that Mondrian is written into. Admittedly, this statement raises questions about (the nature of?) historical writing and what would be a more “correct” interpretation. But addressing these issues is for another project.
Laurent's designs were then, as Troy notes, "essentially pastiches." Yves Saint Laurent's method of appropriation and dissemination is fitting for a pre-Internet moment: systematic, even if misguided, and rather direct. He saw the paintings, thought they would translate to an interesting and appealing design, and so printed them onto the jersey fabric of his cocktail dresses. This sort of image exchange still happens today. Lady Gaga participates in such transactions, although she is invested in a much larger book with many more images: the Internet.

The entire discourse of post-modern information dissemination is predicated on a sense of distance. At the height of postmodern critical theory, where systems of information dissemination were much different than they are currently, perhaps there was no need to consider a system where this distance is eliminated. Let us think for a moment about what kind of structural model would best describe the postmodern paradigm of cultural production: What does it look like? How does it function? Thanks in large part to the rise in network theory over the past two decades, there are scholars and artists who have addressed just such questions. The model of appropriation and dissemination that Troy implicitly describes is what network theorists call the "Tree" model. Manuel Lima, curator of Visualcomplexity.com, has made a career out of "information visualization," which he describes as "understanding data – i.e.,

But does this "desecrate" Mondrian's legacy, as someone in the audience claimed? I will go as far as saying that while this might be the case, it is only an issue if the value of a cultural product is measured directly against the Marxist grand narrative of historical progress and leftist avant-gardism.

David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 24. It is interesting that the history of network theory (largely within the field of architecture) employs metaphors from natural phenomena to explain the most un-natural systems: "Since the 1990s, architectural discourse has established an array of computer-enabled biological metaphors to theorize emergent form."
discovering patterns, connections, and structure.” The roots of this field stretch to the nineteenth-century with the advent of pie charts, bar graphs, and other models of data analysis. However since then — and even before — the tree has persisted as “a metaphor for the classification of the natural world and the meanders of human understanding.” According to Lima, trees visualize “a hierarchical ordering in which all divisions branch out from a central foundational trunk.” This centralized model of information categorization forms a linear, systematic model of dissemination. It was not until the latter half of twentieth century that philosophers and theorists began to condemn the tree for its affected universalities: centralism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, absolutism, finalism, and essentialism.

Opposed to the “theoretical rigidity and unidirectional progress” of the tree model, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari famously crafted a model of information dissemination which they called “the rhizome.” Lima reports that the rhizome is an “acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system” that has the ability to be “detachable, connectable, reversible, [and] modifiable, [with] multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.” Made up of an infinite amount of nodes that are interconnected to an immeasurable extent, the rhizome promotes proximity and interconnectedness in a radical deviation from the standard, historical

36 Ibid., 25.
37 Ibid., 21.
38 Ibid., 44. The last two universal — “finalism” and “essentialism” — were added to the list by: Guillaume Lecointre and Hervé Le Guyader, The Tree of Life: A Phylogenetic Classification, trans. Karen McCoy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
tree model. Surprisingly, visualizations of the Internet—yes, they exist—look exactly like what
the philosophers were describing. Probably the best visual example of the Internet-as-rhizome
was produced by Barret Lyon in 2003 (fig. 2). His Opte Project shows quite clearly that the
rhizomatic structure of the Internet is made up of millions of nodes, all connected to each other
with various degrees of nodal concentration. Per Deleuze and Guattari, it would be impossible
to locate the nexus of this rhizome; there are no linear properties intrinsic to the rhizome, save
for the pragmatic method of visualizing its connections. The Internet-as-rhizome has no
beginning, no middle, and no end. Unlike the book, the Internet cannot be opened at a
definitive starting point or closed at a conclusive end.

Unregulated exchange of information is typical of the contemporary character of
cultural production, according to David Joselit. His theory of image exchange accounts for the
immense pervasiveness of technological connectedness in what is destined to be called the
Digital Age. In his book, *After Art*, Joselit theorizes that images have a power not unlike any
monetary form of currency, in that they transcend material boundaries as an intangible form of
cultural value. It is "populations of images" that have the power to inform and shape cultural
production "through their capacity for replication, remediation, and dissemination." While
the focus of his writing actually "shifts from art's production...to what images do once they
enter circulation in heterogeneous networks," it is important to acknowledge how the images
were mobilized in the first place. Lady Gaga is one of many nodes (albeit a very large one) that

41 "The Opte Project," accessed October 2, 2013, www.opte.org. Lyon's project used a single computer to map the
entire Internet in a certain amount of time. The prints produced are now in the permanent collection at the
simultaneously withdraws and deposits images into the vast visual economy of contemporary popular culture. She functions within the rhizomatic structure of the Internet as a “bank” which hosts the exchange of these images.

Through her performance of these images, the postmodern distance required to be ironic, and therefore political, is obliterated. But Gaga’s rhizomatic pastiche — a celebrated, valorized, perhaps even nostalgic performance of past popular culture(s) — is not quite the “degraded historicism” that Frederic Jameson describes as central to postmodern cultural production. Gaga relays her pastiched images from within a system that prohibits distance and fosters proximity, for the sake of appropriation. The rhizomatic Internet does not allow room for Gaga to politicize her pastiches according to the postmodern preference for parody, or “to piece together other people’s ideas in a way that communicates a new message.”43 Instead, she repeats through performance at least a similar, if not completely identical, message that was initially associated with an image because it is relevant and worthwhile to restate.

Between May 2011 and September 2012 Gaga authored a series of seven memoranda, “From the Desk of Lady Gaga,” for V Magazine. The articles are published as if they were vintage office memos — crafted to look like they were composed on a typewriter (fig. 3). Curiously, Gaga has listed “Piet Mondrian & Library Cards” in the subject line of the first essay. Other subjects include “Extreme Critic Fundamentalism,” “Remodeling the Model,” and “I Don’t Speak German but I Can If You Like.”44 These faux memos are addressed to a particular audience, as indicated by those who appear in the carbon copy list: Haus of Gaga, Andy Warhol,

Little Monsters, Art Historians and Intellectuals, the New York Public Library, and The World, among others. Considered collectively, these essays suggests that Gaga is aware of, and participating in a discourse about herself. By doing so, she intervenes in her own critical reception in an unusual way. Furthermore, the subject matter of the V Magazine articles demonstrate that Lady Gaga possess a considerably developed and nuanced historical awareness, something that more traditional critics do not otherwise acknowledge. Of her creative process, Gaga has said: “The past undergoes mitosis, becoming the originality of the future.” Mastering the art of pastiche does not mean that Gaga has forgotten her history. Rather, she has “done her homework” and intends to test her audience, challenging them to follow suit. We can take her seriously when she suggests that nostalgia is not for geeks, because “some of us just like to read.”

And Tonight on Project Gaga...

It was an eventful evening at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards. Nine million people tuned in to see Kanye West unleash his colossal ego onto a helpless Taylor Swift, Janet Jackson perform a tribute to the recently passed King of Pop, and Beyoncé win big with her already iconic “Single Ladies” music video. Unknowingly, though, viewers would also experience a spectacle unlike any other in MTV Video Music Award history: Lady Gaga’s on-stage performance of “Paparazzi,” which culminated in her body dangling above a troupe of dancers as a bloodied-up bride, obsessed with and willing to do anything for her partner, Fame (fig. 4). Arguably the most provocative show in recent MTV award show history – the “Britney and Madonna kiss” seems
prudish in retrospect – this performance was the first in what was to become a staple of digital age music award shows: an elaborate, Gaga-centric performance. Whether at the Grammys, the VMAs, or the more recent YouTube music awards, since 2009 it is as if Gaga has been at the center of them all – especially the MTV Video Music Awards. The VMAs have become enough “her thing” that Gaga is now synonymous with the show’s recent, theatrical visage. She is particularly known to stage elaborate costume changes. In 2010, Gaga went through three gaze-grabbing ensembles by the end of the show, capping it off with the controversial Meat Dress (fig. 5). A year later, at the 2011 VMAs, Gaga sent her enigmatic yang, Jo Calderone, to perform and present on her behalf (fig. 6). As she was busy on tour, hosting the worldwide Born This Way Ball, Gaga was not in attendance in 2012. But at the most recent ceremony, which aired in August, Gaga reclaimed the VMAs for herself when she opened the show with a performance of her newest hit single “Appaluse” (fig. 7).

Of all these events, Gaga’s 2010 appearance reveals the most about her tendencies to pastiche in such a way that reflects the current conditions of cultural production – that is, rhizomatically. By appearing in three different outfits and a number of personas throughout the show, Gaga embodies a complex network of images and encourages a distinct polyvocality in critical writings about herself and her image(s). Before heading inside to sit with the crowd of pop culture artists and celebrities, Gaga strutted down the red carpet in an Alexander McQueen gown and was accompanied by four members of the armed forces who were honorably

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discharged when their homosexuality was brought to light (fig. 8). Upon winning the award for Best Pop Music Video, Gaga appeared on stage in an all-black leather custom Armani gown (fig. 9). At the climax of this one-woman fashion show, Gaga again appeared on stage to accept an award, only this time she was dressed in something like fifty pounds of raw meat (see fig. 5). As "original" as these costumes may seem, they in fact owe a great deal to images and art works from the past. The most obvious example is probably Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic* (1987), now in the permanent collection at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (fig. 10). Although one could just as soon draw parallels to Carolee Schneemann's orgiastic *Meat Joy* (1964), as Danielle Pafunda does (fig. 11).47

To claim that Gaga's pastiche is somehow less meaningful than a parodic alternative assumes that Gaga does not know, or does not expect that at least some of her audience will catch these references. Gaga's goal is not to rip-off the cultural figures who have no doubt informed her artistic maturation. Rather, as Meghan Vicks puts it particularly well: "By copying familiar and not-so-familiar images, Gaga embodies the body that is a product of its culture."48 Here, Vicks illustrates that Gaga does not operate under some malicious intentions to claim borrowed images as her own, contrary to claims often made by some of her harsher critics. With these notions set aside, we can see that Gaga's pastiche is a reflection of the current cultural condition.

Nevertheless, in borrowing multiple images and concepts from historical sources, and embodying them for performance, Gaga creates what Amber Davisson calls the “layers” of parody.49 Echoing Linda Hutcheon, Davisson suggests that parody layers one “voice” over another, whereas the “distance between the two” distinguishes “the original and the interpretation.”50 But if parody requires distance – between competing voices, according to Davisson – then Gaga cannot be parodic. Through the act of multilayered embodiment, Gaga not only eliminates this distance but also layers more than just two competing “voices” into a visual form: when she wears three different outfits to the VMAs, Gaga presents herself first as Lady Gaga, pop superstar at an award show; then as Lady Gaga in outfit number a, b, or c; and finally, as a cohesive set of bodies which are meaningful “in that one’s perception of her changed with each wardrobe she wore, and what she was doing and saying.”51 In other words, one “reads” her differently according to each individual visual component (image), the whole that they together represent (body), and the relationship between these various wholes (cultural bodies).

While it is certainly the case that Gaga constructs her image(s) through layers of visual references, we should hesitate to equate this meaningfulness with a simple “parody.” For this to be the case, the parodying and the parodied images would need to be immediately identifiable, and their relationship neatly outlined. However Gaga resists this reductive reading not only when she wears three different outfits, but also when we realize that there are various

50 Ibid.
nodes of meaning waiting to be explored in any one of her many images. Furthermore, as we have seen though her series of writing for V Magazine, Gaga is aware of—and to a degree caters to—the discourses surrounding her. She engages with her own critical reception by providing the opportunities for multiple readings of her adopted images and their networks of meaning, in turn encouraging those participants of Gaga studies to create a critical landscape that lives up to her philosophies of inclusion, diversity, and multiplicity.52

At the most basic level of investigation, Gaga provides the opportunity to identify the visual sources and cultural references that she works from. Maureen Callahan does this when she spends an entire page cataloguing—with a certain tinge of nostalgic longing—all of the postmodern pop culture references she could discern from a Monster Ball Tour concert in Dublin.53 Roland Betancourt does this in effect when he identifies the medieval image printed on the Alexander McQueen gown that Gaga wore on the red carpet at the 2010 Video Music Awards as both commemoration and conceptual component.54 Betancourt accurately identifies the image-via-gown as the late Gothic artist Stephen Lochner’s Altar of the Three Magi in Cologne (fig. 12).55

54 British fashion designer Alexander McQueen died on February 11, 2010, just a few months before the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. Gaga and McQueen had a well-established friendship and professional relationship: Gaga wrote an ode to serendipitous love titled “Fashion of His Love” wherein she equates her friendship with McQueen to the feeling of a perfectly fitted ensemble; also, her smash hit “Bad Romance” debuted at McQueen’s final fashion show—Plato’s Atlantis, Spring/Summer 2010.
At a deeper level of investigation, Gaga provides us with the opportunity to relate seemingly exclusive images to one another, forming our own connections within her microcosmic rhizome. Upon first (parodic) glance, it might seem that Gaga’s costume changes are a standard practice for any stage performer, and therefore she is calling attention to her own status as a celebrity, a pop star, a performer, etc. This entirely legitimate interpretation is not the end of the line, though. In a transcribed conversation about the “meaning” of the Meat Dress (which Gaga has stated was about the federal policy “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” that prohibited openly gay men and women from serving in the armed forces) Cheryl Helm astutely observed that Gaga’s three ensembles are chronologically and thematically connected to what were then recent magazine covers (figs. 13, 14, 15). Appearing first in the McQueen gown accompanied by the four retired soldiers, Gaga is a regal “Lady Liberty” figure surrounded by her protectors. After changing into her custom made, black leather Armani gown Gaga is the same metaphorical figure, only now she is “mourning for the equality we do not have” as the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy is in effect. Finally, with the Meat Dress, Gaga tells us in her characteristically provocative manner that this policy should be repealed because it limits the experience of American values: liberty, equality, and freedom. Helm notes that at a rally in Maine on September 20, 2011, Gaga said that: “equality is the prime rib of America,” and suddenly the interpretative connections are clearer.56 In this whole process, Helm looks for the “meaning” of not only the Meat Dress but also Gaga’s entire 2010 VMA fashion repertoire, and

demonstrates the critical possibilities of image-to-image, image-to-body, and body-to-body interpretations of project Gaga.57

It is no surprise that the Meat Dress saw its very fair share of backlash. Animal rights activists as well as other artists and celebrities were outraged over her blatant disregard for vegan sensibilities.58 Some non-fans and critics were understandably repulsed (even more so) by Gaga with flank steaks hung from her shoulders and a T-bone flopped on her head. Never one to shy away from controversy, she embraces these reactions. In fact, she encourages them. When she first walked on stage, Gaga shamelessly asked Cher to hold onto her beautifully-marbled clutch, giving off a sense of confidence that sounded more like nonchalance than arrogance. She just as effortlessly slipped on a “kale outfit” given to her by primetime TV’s favorite vegan, Ellen DeGeneres. This carefree attitude persisted through the entire time she wore the dress; never mind that it was cold, slimy, wet and, well, made of raw meat. This speaks not to the power of her stomach or a convenient ignorance, but to the fact that she understands the critical discourses surrounding her, and embraces its multifariousness; she is bound to receive a range of reactions to any given performance. As Eddie McCaffray puts it: “Plenty of people will dismiss the dress, but plenty of others, Gaga fans or not, of all political stripes, will want to find out why she wore the Meat Dress. And if they find out, they might end up learning about DADT.”59

57 Denise Winterman and Jon Kelley, “Five Interpretations of Lady Gaga’s Meat Dress,” BBC News Magazine, September 14, 2010, accessed October 5, 2013. Gaga herself has stated that the Meat Dress “could mean anything" according to who is looking at it and from what angle. This is clearly not the transparent discourse that O’Neill warns against.
It is the act of searching for, and eventually locating meaning that allows people to understand both the seemingly absurd array of images from unrelated sources and Gaga as a nodal body that hosts and connects them to various effects. In the processes of locating meaning, there are no “right” or “wrong” interpretations. Only there are interpretations that provide more or less opportunities for further discussion, and in this regard various methods for finding meaning are the product of a socio-cultural condition which is structured to promote interconnectedness, the unregulated exchange of information, and a distinct polyvocality.

Fast forward almost exactly two years to arrive at another major site of Gaga’s rhizomatic pastiche. In August 2013, fans rejoiced over the highly anticipated release of her most recent hit single “Applause.” With the beginning of a new era – an ARTPOP era – Gaga continues her legacy of frenzied image borrowing. The music video for “Applause” is one giant Cirque du Gaga, an anthem for spectacality, and it is chock-full of cultural references. In the video, which represents the ARTPOP era so far, Gaga’s pastiche becomes even more blatant, vast, tangled, and unapologetic. It is thus the paradigmatic example of Gaga using her body as a site to foster discussion and debate.


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demonstrates that Gaga’s body is a host for images that have been reproduced from the past. Betancourt openly acknowledges Zafar’s critical presence when he notices that her “florilegium of sources [is] fascinating” because it previews “a form of scholarly, academic production that [is] self-reflexive on both the medium of its circulation (pop), and the content it [addresses] (pop).” In other words, Zafar marries the form and content of the discourse within which she works; the popular media site Buzzfeed hosts an article about pop culture phenomenon Lady Gaga, and yet has a critical edge that not just any blogger can reproduce.

Each of these authors essentially sets out to index the horde of cultural references in the “Applause” music video. At certain times their results are complementary, and quite divergent at others. Betancourt observes figures from Disney animation, Greek mythology, and American Pop art. Zafar provides a much more extensive list of cultural references including: German expressionist films by Fritz Lang and Robert Wiene (figs. 16, 17), allusions to her “Alejandro” video, Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal (1957), Warhol’s Marilyn Diptych (figs. 18, 19), the comedia dell’arte stock character Pierrot (figs. 20, 21), Greek mythology, Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2008 collection, contemporary artist Cindy Sherman, Renaissance painting à la Botticelli (figs. 22, 23), Disney animation, Janet Jackson’s 1993 Rolling Stone cover (figs. 24, 25), choreographer Alvin Ailey, Hindu iconography, and vintage costume jewelers


Hutt’s inventory covers much of the same material as Zafar’s, except he also sees Duchamp’s *Fountain*, Jean-Paul Gaultier’s costumes for *The Fifth Element* (1997), the photography of Loie Fuller, *Les Vampires* (1915), contemporary Japanese artist Kazuo Shiraga, Picasso’s “minimalist drawings of animals,” Tracy Emin’s *My Bed*, John Galliano’s Fall/Winter 2009, and Monet’s *Water Lilies* (figs. 26, 27).

This vast array of visual sources speaks just as much to Gaga’s cultural intelligence or historical awareness as it does her position as a site of cultural embodiment. In one sense, she embodies images from past cultural references, and in another she embodies culture in the larger sense. When she localizes largely distinct images, she provides a site of discourse for her fans. Gaga then becomes a “guide” for cultural studies, but we have to be willing to do more than play the “Name that Reference!” game. What one might be inclined to call the most prominent visual feature of “Applause” is up for debate. Betancourt suggests the same when he writes, “the imagery and structure of the video is perpetually familiar” and yet when one tries to locate a singularly “familiar” element, their attempts “ricochet upon endless targets.”64 This is because there is no single best – i.e., familiar – image to illustrate project Gaga at any stage or in any form.

Writing about the lyrics to “Applause” with Lacan’s concept of hysteria in mind, Jacob Glazier argues that “there is no one secret meaning that [she] wants us to hear; she wants us to

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hear legion meanings” such that we will be purposefully caught up in her visual and linguistic ambiguity. He points out that the often misquoted line “One second I’m a Koons and suddenly the Koons is me” has led some critics to reduce the song to “a victim of a ‘bad mix.’” It is not uncommon for first or even second time listeners – myself included – to hear kunst (German for art) instead of Koons. Phonetically, the words are similar enough that the confusion is quite understandable. Furthermore, since the line is followed up by “Pop culture was in art, now art’s in pop culture in me,” conflation between the German word and the contemporary artist’s name suddenly seems less accidental. In fact, Glazier argues that it is rather the opposite. He claims that a significant aspect of project Gaga is intentional ambiguity, to the extent that she bolsters a “hardcore polyvalence of signifiers.” In other words, Koons cannot be confused per se with kunst because, for all intents and purposes, they are the same thing (figs. 28, 29).

Gaga’s meaningfulness in the “Applause” music video and at her 2010 VMA appearance is the product of her tendency to borrow images that are either imbued with or already possess a “meaning”; this, in turn, reflects the current, rhizomatic cultural condition. But this characteristic ambiguity is also important for Gaga’s self-reflexive image. It is without doubt that, by the time of ARTPOP’s release, Gaga had become aware of the ever-present questions: Who is Lady Gaga? Why do people like her? What is she doing? And more than just being aware

66 Ibid.
67 Lady Gaga collaborated with artist Jeff Koons on her latest album ARTPOP. The album cover features a statue of Gaga (by Koons) in what appears to be a birthing position, with her legs spread on either side of a Koons “Gazing Ball.” See Aylin Zafar, “Lady Gaga’s Jeff Koons-Created New Album Cover is a Literal Work of Art,” Buzzfeed.com, October 8, 2013, accessed October 10, 2013.
of them, she attempts to answer them in her typically enigmatic ways. Not content with simply
giving away the sources of her imagery — and therefore her meaningfulness — she encourages
her more critically-geared audience members to find and evaluate the meaning behind, in front
of, and within her image(s). Repeated almost incessantly, the titular single "ARTPOP" fancies
that "My artpop could mean anything."

I have attempted to make the case against the postmodern pastiche-as-pejorative, on grounds
that the Internet's ubiquity brought on a whole new system of cultural production and
dissemination in the aptly named digital age — a system realized as Deleuze's and Guattari's
rhizome. Gaga dresses up in images that she has borrowed from past cultural references,
inviting her audiences to discover and interpret them. As we have seen, there have been
impressive examples of meaning-location performed by Gaga fans, critics, bloggers, and
scholars alike. In the process, Gaga becomes a site of localization, an embodiment. Some would
argue, it is culture in the most general sense that she embodies. Yet her process takes for
granted that audience member(s) will have the know-how to first identify the images, and then
to understand their "meaning." What happens if no one in the audience recognizes a certain
image? Does it become wholly Gaga's? This hardly seems right. Who is responsible for making
sure that elements of Gaga's pastiche do not go unnoticed? And who is to blame if — no, when —
this happens? These are exactly the uncertainties at the center of a recent, underpublicized
exchange between Gaga and the French artist Orlan. Since the start of her career in 1964, Orlan
has used photography, film, sculpture, and the written word to document her bodily
performances. Certain aspects of Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” music video bear a striking resemblance to two of Orlan’s artworks.

Charges of plagiarism, theft, and unoriginality have persisted since the earliest moments of Gaga’s artistic career, and probably rightly so. However, when Orlan’s attorney filed suit with the French subsidiary of Gaga’s record label Universal Music in June 2013, he cited forgery as the civil complaint: “But notice that we’re not attacking Lady Gaga for having copied Orlan’s look, which is an ethical and not a legal issue. We’re accusing her of having forged her artworks, that is, of reproducing them illegally.” The distinction between the ethical and the legal is in this case, like most others, a messy one. And it brings to light the problematic nature of the “copy.” To say that something is a copy implies the existence of an original, a type that supplied the cast for a secondary, identically-produced type. But suppose that the original produces more than just this secondary type, and it begs the question, which Rosalind Krauss asks in “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition”: At what point does the original become the copy? And how is that distinction conceived?

Cited as forged copies in the lawsuit against Gaga are Orlan’s *Femme Avec Tête* (1996) and *Bumpload* (1989), both of which are part of the artist’s bodily oeuvre (figs. 30, 31). Lady Gaga is not accused of attempting to pass them as her own (which would be more like plagiarism), but as having cast them identically from Orlan’s original type, to use them on one of the *Born This Way* promotional album covers and in a scene from the music video (figs. 32,

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70 The issue, as of this writing, is unresolved.

It is undeniable that both of Gaga’s images look like Orlan’s, but whether or not they were fashioned according to her works directly is up for debate. Surely, parallels abound; one need only flip through ORLAN: Carnal Art to see the similarities between many of Orlan’s work and project Gaga. According to this exhibition catalogue, a major part of Orlan’s project also involves turning to other artists and the past for inspiration: “[Orlan] looks simultaneously to the past (through frequent references to art history and to her own artistic history) and to the future (drawing new inspiration for her art from the realms of medicine and biotechnology), and she subverts, in ironic fashion, the very ideas and words she moves in.”

So it seems that Orlan’s play with “unoriginality” is justified on the basis that she looks both backwards and forwards. Orlan’s significance (read: meaningfulness), according to these writers, lies in her ability to overlay a past voice with a future one, or vice versa, and in the process to make a commentary “in ironic fashion.” Meaning is granted on the basis that irony, the “rhetorical miniature” of parody, has the ability to communicate a historical sensibility.

Orlan takes for granted that her aesthetic is the only one at work in the “Born This Way” music video. In fact, many have made the claim that there is a robust surrealist-inspired aesthetic present in the BTW music video – far more so than those who have pointed to Orlan’s visual influences. For example, Gaga showed up to the 2011 Grammy Awards encased in a Dalí-inspired egg, and was carried down the red carpet by a group of shirtless servant-men before

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73 Ibid., 7.
74 Ibid.
appearing on stage to perform the now ubiquitous “liberation anthem” (figs. 34, 35). Gaga’s Grammy appearance was in line with the whole of *Born This Way*’s aesthetic atmosphere.

Richard Gray II, John Rutzmoser, and Willow Sharkey all identify Surrealist references in the “Born This Way” music video. But Gray takes things a step further when he claims that “Lady Gaga is the living embodiment of twenty-first century Surrealism.” This can be taken one of two ways; either to suggest that Gaga’s project is continuous with the historical project of Surrealism (in which case he would be strikingly off-base), or we can take Gray’s statement less literally and consider that he intends to show how Gaga plays with some of the same themes that figures like Francis Bacon, Salvador Dalí, Antonin Artaud, Max Ernst, and Alejandro Jodorowsky worked with to “challenge the status quo of their own age.”

Perhaps Rutzmoser’s interpretations are more illustrative of Gaga’s strand of surrealism. He adopts a Deleuzean approach to understanding Gaga’s prevalent use of heads and faces in the “Born This Way” music video to symbolize human identity, or lack thereof. Deleuze looks at Francis Bacon’s paintings to theorize that the head and the face are (falsely) conflated to represent identity. The face signifies presence of identity; the head without a face signifies animalism. In this essay, Rutzmoser suggests that Gaga parodies Bacon’s work; this type of formalism – also an aspect of Gray’s argument, to a degree – is only problematic because, as we

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have seen with the Orlan case, there a number of “directly” visual references at work in the music video.

Sharkey’s essay is less concerned with comparing Surrealism vis-à-vis Lady Gaga in terms of formal elements. Instead, she examines Surrealist-inspired imagery in the “Born This Way” music video in order to suggest that Gaga engages with the twin concepts of love and violence in the same that the Surrealists did, only within a different socio-political context. The avant-garde Surrealists felt that “love and desire” were “under attack” from the destruction, alienating forces of twentieth-century modernity and so they “sought to champion and embody [these] values” as a sort of humanist revival.80 Lady Gaga, on the other hand, explores love and violence together at a cultural moment when – in the midst of heated same-sex marriage debates – it could be understood that love is equally threatened. Sharkey claims that while there are Surrealist influences which inform “Born This Way,” it is not only in the visuals. This is true to Gaga’s “style” in that she is more concerned with directing us “her thematic concerns.”81 This should not be taken to suggest that Gaga is entirely unconcerned with the visual, because this is clearly not the case. It does however support the claim that Gaga is concerned with the visual insofar as it has the ability to host, just like her body, culturally relevant meaning up for excavation by her viewers.

Upon the release of Gaga’s “Alejandro” music video, social critic Camille Paglia wrote a scathing essay that denounced Gaga as a “ruthless recycler of other people’s work” and “the

81 Ibid.
diva of déjá vu.” Paglia’s “concern” is the question: What kind of culture are we living with that someone like Lady Gaga is allowed to become a celebrity? (And, what happened to Madonna?) Paglia is distressed over the idea that the digital age represents something unfamiliar. David Panagia argues that Paglia suffers from a severe lack of cultural presence (also to mean present-ness): while she understands that “Lady Gaga is the first major star of the digital age,” she does not seem to realize that this is the answer to her own question. According to Panagia, Gaga does not work towards an homage to her cultural predecessors, but rather attempts to “[put] into view what the digital age affords.”

Ultimately, Panagia argues that Gaga is a celebrity born of the digital age, and her artistry reflects the characteristics that distinguish this age from the pre-Internet era. He uses the term “index” to describe what Gaga does; I call it rhizomatic pastiche. While some might share Paglia’s lament, the Gaga phenomenon represents neither a simple reiteration of postmodern pop culture nor degraded history.

Conclusions

In 2011, Adam Gopnik wrote that, “the technological shifts in communication we’re living with are unprecedented.” His essay in The New Yorker outlines three ways of thinking about new

media that he argues can be observed at various moments in the history of information and communication technology. From the printing press to the Internet, Gopnik proposes that we all subscribe to one of three critical perspectives in our thinking about technological innovation, classified as the "Never-Betters, Ever-Wasers, and Better-Nevers." These phrases summarize attitudes that range from celebration to neutrality to apprehension, disdain, or lamentation. Gopnik concludes his essay by suggesting that, regardless of these attitudes, technological innovation affects us all the same—that "it gets inside us." In other words, we are each in some way or another confronted with what digital technology has (or does not have) to offer, and that this pervasiveness is inherent to the structure of the current cultural condition.

The digital age offers an unprecedented capacity for connectivity and collaboration. To suppose that this capacity is immediately "pervasive" implies a value judgment of sorts; nevertheless, it is true. As digital age cultural consumers in the Western hemisphere, we are constantly situated vis-à-vis images, texts, and their combined histories. Accordingly, some say our appetite for images, texts, and information is insatiable. We crave different things for different reasons; however each of our appetites stems to our hunger for culture writ large. It follows then that there would have to exist some cultural output that at least keeps up with these very large and diverse appetites. Lady Gaga provides just such output.

Social media and search engines capable of providing millions, even billions of hits from a single keyword combine to contribute to the current digital age, inadvertently structured like a rhizome. Different from the trunk of a tree or the stem of a plant, the rhizome is first a botanical term that describes the subterranean activity of root systems. Once picked up by a pair of mid-twentieth century philosophers, the rhizome becomes a metaphor for structuring
philosophical discourse around values which draw from the properties of the botanical rhizome: interconnectedness, non-hierarchy, and decentralization. The philosophical rhizome is a model of discourse that shares many traits with the character of the current digital age. Roughly speaking, the Internet is a realization of the philosophical rhizome, and a manifestation of the properties of the rhizome.

Despite such harsh criticism as Camille Paglia’s, many scholars have demonstrated that it is possible to find meaning in Gaga’s work. However, they often do so by aligning her work with postmodern models of meaningfulness. These interpretations position Gaga in relation to postmodern models of cultural production that are not entirely relevant. And, with a tinge of nostalgia, they tend to lament the “desecration” of postmodern idols. From this perspective, Gaga becomes a mere “recycler of images” who has no potential for meaningfulness because she is preoccupied with *discovering* sources of inspiration rather than creating them. These positions understate Gaga’s knowledge of historical discourse and her use of already-present meaning in her “recycled” images.

Stefani Germanotta now exists only on paper, if at all. In reality she has transformed into the ubiquitous pop culture phenomenon “Lady Gaga” — her celebrity is her artistry, and her artistry is her passion. A self-educated expert on the cult(ure) of fame, Gaga knows the pop culture game inside and out, from the postmodern condition to today. This knowledge, paired with a cultural situation in and of the digital age, allows Gaga to produce and disseminate pop culture as a pastiche of the postmodern condition. Full of meaning, Gaga’s pastiche is meaningful not because of ironic criticism, but because it indexes historical referents otherwise lost in the infinite, deflated connections of the discursive rhizome.
Figures


4: Lady Gaga, 2009 Video Music Awards, “Paparazzi” performance

5: Lady Gaga, 2010 Video Music Awards, Meat Dress by Franc Fernandez

6: Jo Calderone (Lady Gaga), 2011 Video Music Awards

7: Lady Gaga, 2013 Video Music Awards, “Applause” performance
8: Lady Gaga, 2010 Video Music Awards, Dress and shoes by Alexander McQueen

9: Lady Gaga, 2010 Video Music Awards, Dress by Armani

10: Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic* (1987), Walker Art Center

12: Stephen Lochner, Annunciation, Altar of the Three Magi, Cologne Cathedral, ca. 1440

13: Lady Gaga in Alexander McQueen, Vanity Fair September 2010

14: Lady Gaga and Marc Jacobs, V Magazine, Fall 2010

15: Lady Gaga in the meat bikini, Vogue Hommes Japan, September 2010
16: Lady Gaga, “Applause” music video still, directed by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

17: Promotional Poster, Fritz Lang, Metropolis (1927)

18: Lady Gaga, “Applause” music video still, directed by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

19: Andy Warhol, Marilyn, 1967, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
20: Lady Gaga, “Applause” music video still, directed by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

21: Severin as Pierrot, ca. 1896

22: Lady Gaga, “Applause” music video still, directed by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

24: Lady Gaga, “Applause” music video still, directed by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin


26: Lady Gaga in House of Lavande, “Applause” music video still, directed by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin


29: Jeff Koons, Gazing Ball, 2013, David Zwirner Gallery, New York City


32: Lady Gaga, “Born This Way” music video still, directed by Nick Knight

33: Promotional poster for the single “Born This Way,” Haus of Gaga
34: Lady Gaga, red carpet appearance, 2011 Grammy Awards, The Fame Gallery

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