MASTERARBEIT

„Like a Queen: Madonna & the Stage as Court in the Era of Social Media“

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Dedication:

For my dad, the philosopher;
my mom, the steward;
my sister, the arbiter;
& my brother, the hero.

“I wanna be different, I wanna be on my own.
But Daddy said listen, you will always have a home.”

- Madonna, Keep It Together
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The following project began over twelve years ago, when a little boy infatuated with resilience first encountered the work of a fellow, headstrong Leo.

Thanks, M.

“\text{I’m too busy surviving / whether it’s heaven or hell, I’m gonna be living to tell.}”

Madonna, \textit{Survival}
Notice / Hinweis:

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Introduction:

“To Rule the World”

On her new album’s lead single in 1992, the by-then media-anointed Queen of Pop declared “I want to put you in a trance”. In hindsight, it seems like simply part of a larger progression of events or – perhaps – merely a clarification of method. It was less than ten years prior, when asked about her intentions, that she had told Dick Clark on American Bandstand that she would, “rule the world”. That comment, skimmed of its hyperbole, had basically come to fruition well before 1992. By the time she was releasing Erotica, her fifth studio album, Madonna was the most successful female entertainer in the world, and exactly twenty years after that, at the age of 55, she remains the most successful female recording artist of all time. But how?

Previous scholarship on Madonna has often anchored itself quite squarely in the auspices of feminist argumentation. That discourse has, as one may expect, featured both skeptics of Madonna, who argued that her artistry was too quickly lauded by their counterpart feminist academics, as well as unapologetic champions of her. Camille Paglia, for example, is one of the later; in 1990, she cooched her elevation of Madonna to true feminist within her thesis that second wave feminism had reached a point of tiresomeness. Paglia proclaimed then that, “feminism says, ‘no more masks.’ Madonna says we are nothing but masks.” Paglia not only intimated, but went so far as to argue explicitly that Madonna was “the future of feminism.” Another strand of scholarship on Madonna has centered itself in the argument that her artistry, or star persona, is paradigmatic of the post-modern. Incidentally, Paglia’s comment above hints at that strand as well. These arguments tend to site Madonna’s proclivity for pastiche, including how she utilizes the images of others as her own, providing them with new meaning and, in a sense, claiming ownership of them. Such scholarship has included analyzing Madonna as relative to Marilyn Monroe or

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6 Ibid.
extrapolating academic arguments about self-portraiture rooted in Madonna’s affinity for Frida Kahlo. Various other projects have focused on aspects of Madonna’s body of work as exceedingly specific as the cowboy persona she inhabited in the Don’t Tell Me music video as relative to an analysis of the film Brokeback Mountain, as well as such wide-reaching aspects of her body of work’s affect as the extent to which she “shocks”.

Or rather, shocked.

This paper addresses two gaps in Madonna scholarship, one of which concerns a marked reduction of academic interest in the star as Madonna’s commercial success has waned over the past decade. The vast majority of the scholarship referenced above, for example, stems from the early 1990s. This commercial waning of Madonna’s career, however, is mostly limited to radio play and record sales. (Madonna’s last Number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 was Music, from the summer of 2000). The parallel lack of academic interest in the star over this same period ignores the stratospheric success that her five post-2000 tours have concurrently enjoyed. Taken in account with falling record sales and a lack of airtime, the success of her tours suggests that, rather than pronouncing the death of Madonna’s relevance as a pop artist – whether that be for fans or academics – it may be more accurate to borrow a phrase from political science: Madonna has solidified her base.

And what a base that is. Her last two tours, Sticky & Sweet and The MDNA Tour, crisscrossed Europe, North and South America, and the Middle East, selling out both arenas as well as stadiums, and in doing so they became the two highest grossing tours by any female artist of all time. This phenomenal touring success speaks to the second, more specific gap in Madonna scholarship that this paper tackles: her stagecraft. Madonna has been (or perhaps, was) the focus of intense theoretical debate for academics with regard to 1) her standing as a so-called feminist artist as well as 2) for her role as a supposed, salient representative of the postmodern. The actual content of her tours and stage performances, however, has rarely been the expressed focus of scholarship. In fact, the present study could not find one piece of cultural studies scholarship that has focused entirely or even primarily on her stagecraft. It seems logical that any attempt to end the recent draught of Madonna scholarship should start by focusing on the part of her career that remains in full swing: commercially viable, artistically productive, and quintessentially Madonna.

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Chapter 1 focuses on a recurring semiotic and thematic trend that has emerged in Madonna’s stage productions over the course of the last decade, namely the ways in which Madonna has come to self-fashion herself as a queen. It borrows terminology that Kantorowicz conceived of in the 1950s for defining the machinery of power that historical monarchs had wielded over their subjects; specifically, the *body natural* and the *body politic*. This paper argues for their applicability with regard to Madonna’s creation of her own unique brand of *queenliness*, especially given the method and manner that her self-fashioning as a queen has developed over time. More specifically, it places emphasis on the unique role that her stage shows have played in this self-fashioning, and why concerts – as a unique type of public performance for a star, one in which *body natural*, *body politic*, and fan (or, subject) are all present. Finally, zooming out from the specific notion of Madonna-as-queen, this chapter also borrows from Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and simulacra. Specifically, it concludes by employing the term “imagination station” as a way to make sense of a concert experience, such as Madonna’s, in the postmodern era, and intimates the repercussions thereof for pop artistry and celebrity culture.

The second chapter takes a specific case study, namely 2012’s *The MDNA Tour*, and uses it to explore the star machinery that has allowed Madonna’s star persona to develop, self-reference, and survive over the course of thirty years. In attempting to answer the question “How?”, it also develops a new term for describing the dominant thematic strands that have laced their way through Madonna’s body of work: *Madonna-ness*. It proposes that *Madonna-ness* is a scale, a gradient on the order of the adjective, by which Madonna’s cultural output can be seen to embody or evoke intertextual chains that have been developed over time as her star persona has been constructed. Moreover, Chapter 2 also outlines three primary strands of *Madonna-ness*, namely an embodied, eroticized narcissism, a re-occurring vulnerability, and celebration as a means of catharsis, and explores the ways in which those three dominant strands were used or evoked in the past as well as in *The MDNA Tour*. This chapter also expounds upon the very real commercial realities of stardom and the prerequisite that a star persona be both artistically unique as well as commercially malleable, inspired by Barry King’s thesis on the modern fan and star “elasticity”.

Last but not least, the present essay concludes with a nod toward the future. In short, it expands upon the role that the rise of social media has played in the outsourcing of Madonna’s star persona construction as of late. It explores Madonna’s official social media presence, as well as – and more importantly –

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the unofficial presence that Madonna’s star persona enjoys on social media. On a more broad scale, it also traces the ways in which social media platforms are not only sites of consumption, but also of production with regard to stardom and celebrity culture. This, in turn, hints at the applicability this research could have on not only future scholarship with regard to Madonna, but also to other artists. Social media, after all, provides another way for reducing (or seeming to reduce) the proximity between fan and star.
Chapter 1

Like a Queen: Madonna & the Stage as Court

Introduction: The Queen of Pop

Large hand-held feathered fans, propped up by local volunteers, pull back, unfolding to the clearly enunciated, almost breathy rap-like pacing of the question, “What are you looking at?” It echoes in the hollow bowl of Lucas Oil Stadium, both an invitation as well as an admonishment. What we as television viewers are looking at is Madonna, and the question, as always, announces the song "Vogue." Gone, however, is the Old-Hollywood glamour associated with the song’s 1991 music video and underscored by the song’s rap-chant, in which Madonna recounts a litany of Hollywood stars of the past. In its place is an ornate scene, a pastiche of Elizabeth Taylor’s arrival in Rome from the film "Cleopatra" and a potpourri of citations to classical warfare. At the center of the scene sits a robe-draped empress, perched alone atop a gilded throne. A hundred scantily outfitted warriors tug thick ropes to pull their Minerva toward a main stage. Large banners rise behind Madonna, simultaneously framing her body natural and underscoring a kind of body politic. They alternate between gold and black, the latter of which emblazoned with a vaguely free-masonic “M” logo. The camera angles are low and the cuts painstakingly orchestrated, an imposing mise-en-scène at the outset of a thirteen minute, four song tour-de-force performance.13

Reference juxtaposition has always been Madonna’s bread and butter, a star whose relative cultural power has emanated more from her prowess at pastiche than the singularity of her singing capabilities. Like a postmodern mixologist, an apt term given the oft celebratory theme of her music, Madonna has re-imagined and re-purposed the figures as well as the work of Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich, and Frida Kahlo.14 15 In doing so, she has, “expose(d) the pretense at uniqueness of those stars” and “reveal(ed) that they (as well as Madonna’s own multi-faceted and changeable image) are constructions.”16 This is most readily apparent in the Super Bowl performance’s nod to Taylor’s "Cleopatra." Madonna, however, has played with much more than the construction of modern celebrity. She has also utilized much broader Western cultural myths and tropes, including the archetypal

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16 Curry, p. 25.
cowboy, pimp, vixen, and whore. Additionally, and much to the repeated chagrin of the Roman Catholic Church, she has also taken artistic license in her use of Jesus Christ, the Christian God, and her own namesake on a host of occasions. All of this allows Madonna to lay claim, or partial ownership, to parts of her pastiche:

Madonna’s success as a songwriter/rock star lies in the timely appropriation of iconography. (...) To do this is to politicize, to seize the power of the objects and make it her own. The culture demands (...) that its sacred symbols be part of the carnal world: the cross hanging down into the bustier.17

The sheer breadth of subject matter that her work has addressed, toyed with, re-imagined, and exploited underscores one of Madonna’s practical legacies: the unapologetic evocation and, often, critique of taboo themes. In some academic circles she has been championed as an “empowered performative female identity” by “successfully encod(ing) sexiness, beauty, and power”.18 Nevertheless, the singer’s knack for juxtaposition does not mean that her body of work is in anyway jumbled, absent of uniformity or directionality. Particular citations, such as Catholic imagery and S&M culture, have recurred time and time again. The repetition of these particular themes, as evidenced by an ever-increasing self-referentiality, allows today’s Madonna to benefit from the labor of yesterday’s Madonna. The music video for 2012’s Girl Gone Wild is grounded in the pastiche of three distinctive, previous Madonna looks.19 This not only helps the singer define her legacy, but also helps to legitimize her earlier work. When the singer pays homage to her Marie Antoinette-themed 1990 MTV Video Music Award’s performance of Vogue in her 2004 Re-Invention Tour opener, the performance does not simply reference the popular image of Marie Antoinette, but also Madonna herself. The performance alludes to the singer’s entire body of work and, by extension, helps to define her legacy.

I mention Marie Antoinette not without reason. More than any other, an evocation of queenliness has become an integral aspect of Madonna’s star-image in recent years. All four of her most recent tours [Re-Invention (2004), Confessions (2006-7), Sticky & Sweet (2008-9), and MDNA (2012)] have featured opening sets in which Madonna emerges on stage as a queen-figure. Touring has become disproportionately important in the creation of recent incarnations of her star-image, and with this turn to the stage has come the ever-increasing deployment of aspects of queenliness: re-appropriating images evocative of historical queens, such as Marie Antoinette and Cleopatra, to be

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17 Miller, p. 225.
18 Freccero, p. 163.
sure, but also by utilizing the trappings associated with monarchy and, most profoundly, by constructing the stage as her court.

This essay approaches the extent to which queenliness is evoked in Madonna’s body of work, particularly its prevalence in recent tours. It presumes Madonna as a paradigmatic postmodern artist, and it argues that Madonna’s self-styling as a queen figure is fostered by Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra”. Furthermore, it proposes that her concerts promote Madonna not only as a self-styled queen, but also as the leader of a postmodern religion.

Queen on the Throne

Madonna’s 2012 Super Bowl performance was the heteronormative, masculine blessing of the aging pop star, as reflected by the venue, its temporal proximity to the football game, the game’s widespread dissemination on public television, and the relative cultural weight that the Super Bowl holds in dominant American society. It was also a re-declaration of Madonna’s cultural relevance, supported largely by means of queen imagery, and a highly visible one at that. Ratings for the 2012 Super Bowl made it the most watched telecast in US history, with the halftime show’s audience larger on average than that of the game itself. Madonna’s set list for the evening was perhaps most revealing with regard to not only the longevity of her career, but also the often fraught exercise of mixing past success with current endeavors and forward commercial momentum. The set consisted of three Billboard Number 1 songs from each of the last three decades: Like a Prayer (1988), Vogue (1990), and Music (2000). It also featured the lead single of her then-upcoming album MDNA, Give Me All Your Luvin’. It would find success as well, if only on the Billboard Dance Charts, several weeks later and become Madonna’s 41st Billboard Dance Chart topper.

Poignantly, the Super Bowl performance does not merely frame Madonna as the queen in repose that I outlined in the introduction. She is also a warrior. Apropos her reputation, the show finds Madonna on both offense as well as defense. The relatively safe song selection evokes Madonna’s past commercial

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success, but the performance’s imagery is cheekily and pointedly aggressive. From the off, quick camera cuts to the main stage reveal backup dancers donned in Roman battle armor and outfitted with swords and crossbows, announcing their warrior queen’s arrival to the main stage by trumpet. When the camera cuts back to Madonna, she is standing atop the throne. The suffocating floor length and bib-like solid gold robe has disappeared – replaced by a more fluid, sportive cape, thick belt, and armored skirt. Mobility, rather than sublimity, takes the reins. At this moment, the directionality of the dynamic between viewer (us) and actor (Madonna) changes. Climbing atop her monarchical prop, Madonna announces her agency, the body natural overtaking the initial sublimity of the body politic. The banners fall away, and the spoken word introduction to the song progresses, with the following line pointedly remixed and shifted to the front of the song from the bridge chant: “Don’t just stand there / don’t don’t don’t just stand there”. It is both an order and a raison d’être. This battle cry coincides with her stepping off the throne, each syllabic emphasis synched to the precise, jolted choreography, and it is repeated twice as she reaches the main stage. After its first iteration, Madonna makes a fist in the air with her right hand. At the conclusion of the second iteration, Madonna kicks her heeled thigh-high black boot in the air as the sound of an imagined sword slashes from off-camera, a wink to the homage being made to Vogue magazine on the field by computerized projections as well as a foreshadowing of the extent to which violence and fashion will be juxtaposed in her upcoming tour. This is much more than a pastiche in the vein of juxtaposed citations, but a well-orchestrated, aggressive protection of a brand.

A Turn to the Stage

Since the turn of the century, Madonna’s financial success has stemmed disproportionately from touring. This shift away from radio-play, movie roles, and record sales has marked a dramatic shift in her career. From 1985 to 2001, Madonna completed four headlining tours, each of which consisted of between 39 and 57 dates. Since 2001, or over the last eleven years, Madonna has headlined five tours, each of which has consisted of between 47 and 88 dates. Each tour increased in length over its predecessor. Her last two tours, Sticky & Sweet (2008–9) and MDNA (2012), grossed over 300 million dollars each and are the two most successful tours ever by a female recording artist.

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24 The Bridgestone Super Bowl Halftime Show.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Waddel, “Madonna Closes Tour in Tel Aviv; 2nd Highest Grossing Trek Of All Time”.

This dramatic increase in touring has coincided with both weak record sales and tepid radio play. For her most recent album, \textit{MDNA}, the singer skirted a traditional promotional campaign, instead interacting directly with her extensive fan base via social media, including joining Twitter on two occasions for question and answer sessions and hosting a live, Facebook-supported and internet-only interview with comedian Jimmy Fallon, during which fans could ask the star questions.\textsuperscript{30} With the addition of the Super Bowl performance, this was the extent of \textit{MDNA}’s (and its coinciding tour’s) promotion.\textsuperscript{31} The strategy’s results were mixed. While \textit{MDNA} debuted at number one in the United States, it fell from the charts almost immediately. Its drop from number one to number eight, with an 87\% sales decline, is the largest percentage drop in sales for a number one album from week one to week two since Nielsen Soundscan began tracking such data in 1991.\textsuperscript{32} On the contrary, tickets for the 2012 \textit{MDNA} tour sold out in minutes in the United States and throughout the world, with an average ticket price of $140.\textsuperscript{33} The aforementioned increase in touring, non-traditional promotional techniques, and \textit{MDNA}’s chart performance corroborate to suggest that Madonna’s fan base, while more or less stable, remains relatively loyal.

While Madonna’s early tours, especially 1990’s \textit{Blonde Ambition Tour}, were both financially successful as well as inflection points for Madonna’s star-image, they by no means represented a disproportionately large aspect of her artistic output. Furthermore, and more importantly for the sake of this essay, they remained only equally as fruitful as pop music videos, film roles, and album artwork as a medium for the production of the images, silhouettes, and themes that, thread together, form an introductory visual montage to Madonna’s star-image. 1990, perhaps the apex of her commercial success, was rife with what would become classic Madonna iconography. Several emanated from \textit{Blonde Ambition} (hereafter \textit{BA}), but many can be traced to other projects. Madonna’s extensive pastiche of Marilyn Monroe began with 1984’s \textit{Material Girl} music video, and its reemergence in the early 1990s coincided with her role

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ibid. \\
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as the blonde thirties-era temptress Breathless Mahoney in 1990’s *Dick Tracy*.\(^{34}\) It lived on in the title as well as in her promotion of the tongue-in-cheek *I’m Breathless*, an album inspired by the film.\(^{36}\) The tightly curled blonde ringlets featured in both the film as well as on the album artwork not only predict Madonna’s hairstyle for *BA*, but also reference the tour’s title. The same blonde curls are also present in the music video for *Vogue*, which is another product from 1990 and, along with *I’m Breathless*, pre-dates *BA*.\(^{37}\) The conical Jean Paul Gaultier bras, famously featured on a pink corset in *BA*’s opening set, were featured first in 1989’s music video for *Express Yourself*.\(^{38}\) Though many of these images are associated with *BA*, it would be more accurate to say that they run throughout her artistic production during this era of her star-image cultivation.

The cultivation of a star-image rooted in queenliness, however, has as of late emanated almost exclusively from touring and stage performances. Album artwork and pop music videos, especially of an album’s first single, had been prime indicators of the subsequent personae that Madonna would inhabit during a given album’s era. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is 1992’s *Erotica*, wherein Madonna assumed the role of dungeon mistress “Ms. Dita” for the entirety of the album’s promotion as well as its transformation into 1993’s *The Girlie Show World Tour*.\(^{39}\) The relative lack of commercial success of recent albums, however, has coincided with the ascendance of a less cohesively themed album rollout and personae inhabitation. Such was the case with both 2008’s *Hard Candy* as well as 2012’s *MDNA*, with their tepid commercial success, disparate thematics, and milquetoast (or absent) personae. Her concerts, with their four or five distinctively themed sets, have become less so promotional extensions of the theme established by the album or era with which they are associated, as was the case with *BA* or *The Girlie Show*, and instead both opportunities for the conceptualization of new iconography as well as occasions for self-reference.

Like a Queen: The Stage as Court

In many ways, the Super Bowl Halftime Show performance is indicative of the expected methods by which one may presume any artist would invoke queenliness. Her utilization of the trappings of monarchy – queenly props, if you will – has been extensive, as has her evocation of historical queen fashion. Thrones, crowns, orbs, scepters, and traditionally royal colors, such as purple and gold, figure prominently and throughout not just the Super Bowl performance, but her recent tours as well. *The Re-Invention Tour*’s opening performance of *Vogue* features both a proto-throne platform, raised high into the air, as well as a deconstruction of the late-eighteenth century gowns worn by and popularly associated with Marie Antoinette. While Madonna’s gold, inverted bustier invokes an updated bodice-piece from the period, the exposed hoop boning of her female backup dancers’ wide, unadorned *panniers* completes the wink as the singer vогues both in front of and alongside them. By deconstructing and separating the look onto different bodies, Madonna’s remains mobile. Moreover, her cleavage, opalescent leg musculature, and thigh-high black leather boots emphasize her body in a way that a more faithful reference could not have. Even with an eighteenth century fashion reference, she remains the woman-as-sexualized-object that a twenty-first century audience can recognize.

Two tours later, *Sticky & Sweet* makes extensive use of a throne and scepter in its first set. Its underwhelming-by-Madonna-standards first number does not simply evoke monarchy, but also shows the singer playing reverence to its props while maintaining control of the manner by which she repurposes them. A three minute long video foregrounds the opening number; it consists of a computer-generated sequence of a gumball’s creation and its pinball-like journey along a stylized, Wonka-esque factory assembly line. The video concludes by spelling out the word “CANDY” in large, bold letters three times before one of the stage’s LED screens swivels on its axis to reveal Madonna perched suggestively on a throne, her right leg sprawled atop its armrest, a *mise-en-scene* for the glorification of her crotch. The candy-themed projection behind her continues, a kaleidoscope of pink hued close ups of what is cheekily presented as animated hard candy, a wink to the title of her 2008 album, but altogether vaginal in shape. Her high collared, asymmetrical black coat is vaguely militaristic and paired with a sequined mini-skirt before the former’s quick removal by a courtesan-like backup dancer’s choreographed assistance. The cocktail that results is equal parts stage-commander, pimp, and queen at court. She winks before launching into *Candy Shop*, dispatching orders in song

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form. She asks her audience to, “say which flavor you like / and I’ll have it for you,” promising later to be our “one stop candy shop” and that her “sugar is raw.” Madonna wields a scepter-like pimp cane as she steps off her throne, revealing that its seatback is formed by two large overlaid “M’s”. Reminiscent of 1985’s *Open Your Heart* video, itself presented as a stage performance, the *Candy Shop* performance supports the continued “visual assertion of her sexual power” and its ability to “attract but also control.” Both *Re-Invention* and *Sticky & Sweet*’s opening numbers demonstrate the way in which Madonna’s self-fashioning as a queen in no way detracts from the strand of embodied, eroticized narcissism that has been present throughout her career (and to which I will return in the second chapter), but is rather built into and upon it.

As evidenced by both the commitment to detail in Madonna’s Super Bowl performance as well as the examples above, the architecture of her self-fashioning as a queen goes far beyond fashion as such. While the costuming of her body, as well as those of her back up dancers, is integral, the stage itself is just as if not more elemental. Theatricality, procedure, song selection, audience interaction, choreography, and self-reference play equally important roles to costuming, but only assuming the dynamic between audience and performer foregrounded by the stage is present. Queen Elizabeth is purported to have remarked that, “we princes…are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world dulie observed; the eyes of manie behold our actions.” Stephen Greenblatt extrapolates upon this, declaring that Elizabeth’s power actually resided in this notion; it “depended upon its privileged visibility.” With regard to Madonna, the linguistic nature of Queen Elizabeth’s statement changes from passive to active, as the star’s stage presence does not stem from inheritance, but instead her celebrity. What is more, Elizabeth’s metaphorical stage is, for Madonna, often quite literal, a physical construction consisting of trapdoors, lighting rigs, large props, and moving platforms. At its essence, a concert space is rife for construction as a royal court; it literally makes Madonna more visible. It is here, by placing a special emphasis on spatiality, that Madonna concerts can be seen to make extensive utilization of the king’s – or in this case, the queen’s – two bodies. The bright, illuminated body natural is, more often than not, front and center compared to the other physical bodies on stage. It’s contrasted with those of her dancers not only spatially, through choreography, but also racially; Madonna is usually the palest body on stage. Nevertheless, while Madonna’s body natural may make reference, through costuming and choreography, to queenliness, it is not always physically present on stage. Much of the extent to which her self-fashioning as a queen is accomplished lies in the manufacturing, celebration, and visibility of a body politic, one that is present

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43 *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, Track 2.
44 Curry, pp. 19, 25.
46 Ibid., p. 46.
through iconography and video projections from the moment the audience arrives and, through merchandise and album sales long after they have returned home, regardless of Madonna’s whereabouts.

At this point, it is necessary to take a step back from the stage itself to address the procedural elements of Madonna’s shows, as they adhere to an established framework and promote Madonna’s self-fashioning as a queen, especially in the context of a larger body politic. Each tour consists of a two-hour show that is strictly choreographed and portioned into four or five distinct acts. Each act is built upon a central theme, and Madonna performs from three to six songs per act. For example, *The Confessions Tour* (2006) consists of four acts: equestrian, Bedouin, glam-rock, and disco. Finally, there are no spontaneous encores, as the finale is built into the set list and always performed. Thus, a finale (or ‘intentional encore’) is from the outset an aspect of the show’s narrative arc.

Between each act is an interlude, consisting of a yet-unreleased Madonna video performance (to either a remix or a song that is not performed in the show), an animated video sequence, a dance number performed by her backup dancers, or some combination of the three. These interludes both allow Madonna, who is not on stage, to change costumes as well as provide clear markers for the transition from one set’s theme to the next. Along with the rest of the show, they make extensive use of large LED screens.

One interlude, usually the last, is political in nature, a pastiche of images of world leaders and current events set to a Madonna song that promotes politically leftist ideology. For *The Confessions Tour*, this interlude consists of a remix of *Sorry* and an admonishment of political leaders’ broken promises; the lines “don’t talk / don’t speak” are repeated over and over again as Madonna wails, “I’ve heard it all before.” Provocative, albeit cliché, images (dead dolphins, malnourished sub-Saharan children, barrels of oil, etc.) are projected in quick succession on five large, movable LED screens; they are spliced with those of political leaders, such as then-President George W. Bush and then-North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Madonna’s image is prominently interwoven throughout the montage as she performs the song to camera, anchoring the pastiche and in doing so elevating her presence in the interlude above those of the world leaders. The interlude depicts Madonna as truth-teller, a translator of the world’s multifaceted and complex woes and ailments, a sifter of jargon and conduit for a unique political Weltanschauung: one that is easily digestible, visually entertaining, and presented in laymen’s terms. The *Sorry* interlude climaxes with two dark-skinned dancers’ choreographed fight, possibly a lovers’ quarrel, along the stage’s catwalk. It ends as they descend below the stage via a trapdoor, still engaged in a struggle, covering each other’s mouths.

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48 *The Confessions Tour*, Track 11
with their right hands. The question “Is Anyone Listening?” is projected behind them, a poignant question given that, in an arena of thousands, each audience member present has elected to spend the evening an addressee to a singular, white voice: Madonna’s.49

While at least one interlude is traditionally political in nature, other interludes have toyed with various themes common to Madonna’s larger body of work, including mortality/survival50, femininity51, and concealment.52 Whether an old or new song, the music employed is usually remixed or presented in a new fashion. They employ songs from previous albums and are musically and visually self-referential. They pool from the vastness of Madonna’s body of work and rely upon the audience’s pre-existing familiarity with it.

The Justify My Love (hereafter, JML) interlude on Madonna’s 2012 MDNA Tour comes at the halfway point of the show, a strategic inflexion point that foregrounds a third set composed exclusively of old material and predicated on the thematization of hyperbolic gender roles. Featuring a heavily remixed version of 1990’s JML, it pays tribute visually to its original pop music video, an MTV-banned ode to S&M and sex dens that became a cultural touchstone upon its release.53 Like the original video, it is shot in black and white, and Madonna wears black lingerie throughout. She playfully escapes a motley crew of masked pursuers by locking herself in a well-appointed room, a nod to the hotel room theme in the original video.54 Removing her clothes, the lingerie-clad singer begins to perform the song to camera. Simultaneously, she investigates the room’s various furnishings and props. The cuts between shots are quick, reflecting the sped-up nature of the remix, jumping between Madonna at various states of undress. Unlike the original JML video, there are no immediate sexual partners: this is a solo-sexual performance. She peers through a magnifying glass; she wields a crop; she finds hidden cameras. Upon discovering the latter, her writhing becomes more vulgar, her performance more overt, aware of an undefined voyeur audience. The arousal of performativity is contrasted with the initial reclusiveness, the desire to escape the hoard of pursuers that brought her to the room in the first place. The interlude becomes a performance within a performance, smack dab in the middle of the concert, which is, of course, also a performance. These multiple layers of meaning

49 Ibid.
50 Sticky & Sweet Tour, Track 6.
52 Ibid., Track 6.
making and performance point not only to one another, but also to previous cultural products to form an extensive intertextual chain; just as the outfitting of the body natural in black lingerie links the interlude to the original JML music video’s S&M theme, the interlude’s thematization of privacy and voyeurism invokes the earlier video’s controversial reception and the ramifications that it had on Madonna’s career. Moreover, the original JML video was, much like the MDNA interlude is, an inflexion point that came in the middle.  

Besides referencing these semiotic and thematic intertextual chains, the JML interlude also pays tribute to the linguistic tradition of the imperative in Madonna’s song catalogue. Songs that function as or prominently feature commands in lyric form litter Madonna’s song catalogue, forming an endless invocation of the second person; Everybody, her first single, foreshadows directives to come in Into the Groove, Open Your Heart, Express Yourself, Vogue, Erotica, Music, and Don’t Tell Me. The speaker in JML demands sexual attention: “you put this in me / so now what?” “Wanting/ needing / waiting / for you / to justify my love,” Madonna half orders and half begs over a hypnotic base, more whispering than singing the re-recorded vocals. The song’s anticipatory commands evoke both the inherent-power of a voiced order as well as the tacit ineffectuality of the speaker to bring the addressee to act. It is simultaneously a celebration of the linguistic declarative and a reminder of the inadequacy of sexual self-gratification. In the closing seconds of the interlude, Madonna puts on a death mask. No longer miming the words, she approaches the camera as the remix concludes: “Love me / that’s right / love me.” Her masked face lingers on the projector for a moment after the song has finished, and the opening strings of Vogue begin the third set. The show continues.

Though less readily apparent than monarchical props, concert interludes have a hand in Madonna’s self-fashioning as a queen precisely because the body natural is absent from the stage. This emphasizes the sheer power of the larger, more abstract body politic, and enables self-reference in ways that would perhaps be impossible in a stage performance alone. In both the Sorry as well as the JML interludes, self-reference emphasizes the power dynamic between herself as authority figure and her fans as subservient subjects. Whether a call to political action or a sexual demand, she does not seek their subservience, but rather demands it. Thus, these interludes are unique in that they draw immediate attention to the necessity of a subject-like fandom; by evoking layers of


57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.
performativity (i.e. the site of production), they simultaneously evoke the correspondent audience (i.e. the site of consumption).

Body Politic of an Equestrian Queen

The various aforementioned methods and modes of self-styling culminate in the equine-themed opening to 2006-7’s *Confessions Tour*, a multi-layered pastiche of equestrian, bondage, and disco citations that forgoes the employment of direct references to monarchy. Nevertheless, it establishes Madonna’s unique brand of queeliness. It utilizes repurposed props, projections, and choreography to promote Madonna as a master of not only performance, but also nature, her dancers, and the audience. “I’m going to tell you / about love,” she breathily informs her audience. Once again, the second person is evoked from the off; the song begins with a proclamation followed by an invitation: “Would you like to try?” Similar to the *Sorry* interlude, *Future Lovers* invokes a Weltanschauung as its subject matter seeks to enlighten, to define: “Not controlled by time / future lovers shine / for eternity / in a world that’s free.” Madonna establishes herself as the conduit through which her audience may grasp the notion of love. Elements that foreshadow the *JML* interlude also play an integral role; “Come with me,” she demands, before the song meanders into a sampling of Donna Summer’s 70’s disco hit *I Feel Love*, an invitation foregrounding the disco-themed fourth set.

The *Future Lovers* performance both establishes and welcomes, pleasures and punishes. It’s an explicit invitation, but on Madonna’s terms, to begin the show. The multi-layered tone set by the lyrics extends to the mixed-message of the visuals; Madonna wields a crop, but smiles. On stage, she dons a singular look: an all-black, Gaultier-designed equestrian trainer ensemble. Meanwhile, the introductory video clip features multiple Madonnas. It foreshadows the Madonna-as-horse-trainer motif, but it also casts Madonna as a horse herself, on all fours and complete with a bridle. She tames and is tamed as the opening video sequence negotiates the line between dominator and dominated, between authoritarian leader and faithful subject. The initial frame emphasizes her silhouette from behind, snugly tucked into her form-fitting outfit, and aligning her perspective with that of the audience. Her upper back and arms are visible through a sheer lining of black lace, remaining the eroticized female performer

59 *The Confessions Tour*, Track 1.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., Tracks 17-21.
even as she assumes the additional role of spectator. She approaches a singular white horse that gleams against both her as well as a barren desert backdrop. Her approach is cautious; the playback is in slow motion. Her figure, though dark against the white of the horse, remains centered. Meanwhile, the unbridled, presumably untamed horse’s gaze is fixed past Madonna into the crowd, establishing a trinity in which perspective reveals the duality of dominator and dominated, of performer and audience, of queen and subject.

The allegorical repurposing of the trappings of monarchy is present here as well, though cheekily renegotiated into a pastiche bordering on parody. The choreography’s treatment of the crop emphasizes its whip-like nature as Madonna pretends to strike it against her male backup dancers.\(^{64}\) They are dressed as half-man and half-horse, and their faux-whipping is both a winking nod to the potentiality for violence that was historically invested in a scepter as well a quintessentially Madonna-esque demonstration of embodied female eroticism’s entrancement of the male gaze. It bears noting that while the male backup dancers are dressed as horses, the female backup dancers don a cheapened imitation of the singer’s ensemble, apprentices at the ‘School of Madonna.’ Meanwhile, Madonna’s over-the-top entrance comes in the manner of a massive, crystal disco ball that is lowered from the girders of the ceiling, a camp orb which marks the inversion of history as it holds the queen rather than the other way around. Madonna’s black top hat, oversized, is the crown, and they emerge together as the orb splits open like a clam at the voiced queue “this is not a coincidence.”\(^{65}\)

As the song concludes, Madonna wails a final “I feel love”, holding the last note multiple counts as the video behind her bookends the initial trinity sequence with a topless, blonde Madonna wielding a crop, her arms held high in triumph. The horse, not unlike the crowd and her dancers, is basic, tamed, banal; we have all become merely spectators. Iron bars place the now black horse at a distance from its new master, just as Madonna’s ascendance to the main stage from the catwalk – where hereto forth the entire performance has transpired – places the pop singer out of reach from her audience. As the last notes muddle into the beginning of the second number, the final image projected onto the screen is a completely capitulated, dominated horse – possibly dead – lying on the ground. A spent and smug Madonna reclines on it in black lingerie, its color the last vestiges of her dominatrix trainer outfit, as she slowly puffs a cigarette. Establishing her dominance, it seems, was an altogether sexual release.

\(^{64}\) The Confessions Tour, Track 1.
\(^{65}\) Ibid.
“Like a Prayer”

It is after exploring the strands that run throughout the citations present in Madonna’s pastiches, including voyeurism, performativity, and the role of an embodied female eroticism, that it becomes necessary to zoom out from the immediacy of the stage and even that of her self-fashioning as a queen. Baudrillard’s “Precession of Simulacra” treatise proposes that throughout human history there have been four levels of representation that have culminated in a “hyperreal”, a point at which simulacra bare no association with any reality, in which “pure simulation” prevails. When applied to Madonna’s body of work, it provides a vantage point for comprehending just how the modes of her operation have led to her widespread success in postmodern society. Baudrillard’s famous case study of Disneyland brings his theory to its logical conclusion:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which is Disneyland. (…) Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.

Baudrillard names entities such as Disneyland “imaginary stations”, and true cultural capital is afforded to these endeavors that exist to conceal that their pastiche, their manipulation of images and citations is in fact reflective of society at large. A Madonna concert is also an “imaginary station”, presented as pure entertainment, an escapist evening for those in attendance. This oversimplification, however, ignores the extent of the simulation that exists far beyond the confines of the arena or stadium where Madonna’s concerts take place. There is no escaping the simulation; “(Disneyland) is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere.” Madonna’s regal simulation presumes that the real queens are elsewhere. Baudrillard states that, “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’.” Postulating upon a circumstance in which one would feign symptoms to simulate illness, he poses the following question: “Since the simulator produces ‘true’ symptoms, is he ill or not?” If Madonna’s simulated queenliness can be seen to incite fealty from her audience, is she a queen or not?

66 Jean Baudrillard, p. 3.
67 Ibid., p. 6.
68 Ibid., p. 5.
69 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
70 Ibid., p. 1.
71 Ibid.
*Like a Prayer* has been one of the most often performed songs over the course of Madonna’s touring career (featured in *BA, Re-Invention, Sticky & Sweet, & MDNA*). In Madonna’s last two tours, it assumed a position at or near the climax of the show, wedged into the final set.\(^72\) \(^73\) Lyrically, the song’s title invites the question, ‘What is *like* a prayer?’ Here already, the notion of simulation rises to the forefront. The song presents itself as inauthentic, as insufficient. This, however, is contrasted with the song’s very real affect, whether with regard to its initial commercial success or its appeal as a performance. In the *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, a remix speeds the song up considerably, appropriating it for the rave-themed portion of the show. An overlay of Meck’s *Feels Like Home* replaces the same phrase from the album version of *Like a Prayer*, a pointed lyrical emphasis that evokes not only the physical concert space, but also the esoteric nature of Madonna’s body of work as it relates to the relationship between audience and performer, ‘subject’ and ‘queen’.\(^74\) Citations to various world religions and belief systems tick off behind Madonna as she performs, a confusing pastiche of Hebrew writing, bible verses in English, and quotes in Arabic (presumably from the Quran). Meanwhile, the montage maintains a semblance of cohesiveness with the recurring image of the Eye of Providence, which serves as an almost semiotic *leitmotiv*. Literally standing in contrast to the litany of religious references are two massive, stylized “M’s” that are as tall as the stage, simultaneously flanking and dwarfing all that occurs. At one point, the song slows for a bridge poignantly absent Madonna’s vocals. This coincides with Madonna on the ground, serenaded by a backup singer while she worships at her feet in choreographed yet ‘uncontrolled’ religious fervor, a nod to the original music video.\(^75\) The concert becomes a revival of sorts as Madonna’s simulated religious fervor induces a corporeally manifested exaltation in her fans, a sea of thousands jumping in tandem. As the backup singer departs the stage, the final chorus coincides with the musical crescendo. Madonna, no longer ‘lost’ in religious passion, rises alone, ascending upwards on an elevated stage at the end of a catwalk. Behind her, the names of a multitude of gods are ticked off in quick succession as she sings: “just like a prayer / you know I’ll take you there”, redundantly invoking her plainly visible power to incite.\(^76\) Miller expounds upon the all-too-easy conclusion at hand: “As pop star, Madonna (...) exists in

\(^72\) *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, Track 22.


\(^74\) *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, Track 22.


\(^76\) *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, Track 22.
the form of a Black Madonna, not unlike, for example, the polychrome wood statue in Sierra de Montserrat, in Spain (…) visited by thousands of pilgrims yearly as the patron saint of Catalonia.”

Miller hints at the connection between Madonna’s star power and religious devotion, but places Madonna at the level of first order simulation, of the “order of sorcery” and “malefice” according to Baudrillard. This is misplaced, as Madonna’s body of work operates within the third order of simulation. Its employment, and thus claim to ownership, of religious iconography is no less real than that expounded by the ‘real’ religious bodies / institutions themselves. Thus, Madonna’s body of work defines itself as a religion insofar as its simulation is in no way different than that of any other, with Like a Prayer serving as the penultimate head-fake of Disneyland proportions. In announcing itself as a mere simulation, as not a prayer, and within the confines of a concert, it conceals its own postmodern religiosity, with Madonna herself at the helm.

Conclusion

The Sticky & Sweet Tour’s opening video sequence focuses on the creation of a solitary gumball. Nevertheless, by explicitly referencing the assembly line and manufacturing process it also implicitly suggests the existence of countless other gumballs, unique in all manners of shape and form, of color and taste. Their creation is unending. The clip evokes modern infrastructure, mass-production, and the marketplace; consequently, it also promotes the ubiquity of simulacra, hinting at the extent to which each gumball references, “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”

Paradoxically, however, it also promotes the one, the singular. Its placement at the outset of the concert invites the association between Madonna and this particular, singular gumball. At the video’s climax, it is propelled like a pinball, made to appear as if launched toward the audience before ‘crashing’ into the LED screens from behind, a split-second sound that implies – if not encapsulates – Madonna’s own knack for and history of transgressing mainstream cultural boundaries, whether it be linking embodied female sexuality with agency and power or watering down taboos by making extensive pastiche of religious iconography.

It is precisely a crashing sound which brings us full circle, back to the defensive gilded Empress whose boot slashes like a sword in the Super Bowl performance of “Vogue”; whose assumed roles insist upon their affect, their agency, their ability to incite. She is the gumball; she is the warrior; she is the queen. This crashing sound – the aural aide-mémoire – is a recurring motif of

77 Jane Miller, p. 222.
78 Jean Baudrillard, p. 3.
her stage productions. It reminds us of what is all too easy to forget, that aside any assumed persona or character, Madonna is a singer, and as such quite literally afforded a stage upon which she can be anything she wants to be.
Chapter 2

The MDNA Tour & Defining Madonna-ness

Introduction: Persona, not Identity

Lips parted, a deep magenta; this is post-coital Madonna, flushed and spent. Her eyes, also barely parted, disappear beneath the cavernous shadow of the image’s deep contrast. Orifices are saturated by the same deep puce of the lips; meanwhile, her nose, forehead, and cheeks are an almost jaundiced, blown out porcelain. The cover of the MDNA tour program, which was sold at most shows of The MDNA Tour, consists entirely of this heavily manipulated portrait of Madonna’s face. Superimposed upon her face is an equally large, spiked, and ornate M. Its sharpened points conjure the gothic, spearing her eyes and nose and forming an elaborate, chromosomal cross over her magenta lips. These lips, together with her eyes, form a three-pronged trinity on the cover; each orifice is parted slightly, connoting movement in a static medium and emphasizing the eroticized oral and visual themes in the pages and images that follow. Her mouth and eyes are, yes, quite prominent features of the body natural that writhes and moves on stage. As symbols, however, they are also evocative of something much less literal. They also invoke key elements of Madonna’s star persona, and here, on the cover, (and perhaps not surprisingly) they are quite literally tethered together by the “M” – her brand.

The inherent dichotomy presented by the terms body natural and body politic can, in their application to a post-modern celebrity such as Madonna, imply oversimplification. Before I proceed any further, I would like to address why this chapter will not linger upon the notion of Madonna’s identity itself, but rather speak of her star persona. This is especially worth noting given the previous chapter’s employment of Kantorowicz’s implicitly dichotomous terms body natural and body politic. In employing a term like body natural, which refers to something tangible, and body politic, something inherently intangible and constructed, it may read as if this paper is attempting to dichotomize real and fake, self-evidential and created. It is not. Rather, this chapter intends to explore the machinery behind Madonna’s larger, all-encompassing star persona. It will conclude with an understanding of how these terms fit together.

As this paper will focus on the construction of star persona, it hesitates to dwell on questions of identity. King questions the extent to which “textual dissemination can be applied to human identity or, more to the point, to a commercially valuable persona”, a point that is foundational for this essay’s
Much of the academic writing on Madonna has anchored itself in the language of identity in post-modernity, namely that in being the *sui generis* of postmodern artistry Madonna “epitomizes the postmodern self, a de-centered subject, deeply-reflexive and disdainful of the claims of identity.”\(^8^1\) The previous chapter ends by expounding upon this concept, in which it too is rooted. It is important, though, to re-emphasize the word ‘epitomizes’ in King’s statement; this de-centered subject is applicable to Madonna, yes, but just as much so to her fans and other observers. This becomes a logical jumping off point for understanding the role of the fan in star persona construction:

> It is necessary to recognize that (...) the presence of persona is reliant on the circulation of meaning through acts of viewing, and the consumption of texts and images in secondary circulation. The act of viewing may be a potent source of discrepancies between what is expected from the star’s persona and what is seen. (...) I am in the presence of George Clooney when prior understandings and present performance are roughly consonant. In the empirical case, it can turn out that the encounter leads to re-realisation or de-realisation of persona, but it is the expectation of constancy that underwrites the entire interaction.\(^8^2\)

Two of the concepts outlined by King above anchor this chapter. The first is his eschewing of identity in favor of the notion of *persona*, including his labeling of stars’ performances in all their varied forms as varying ways of “*being in public*.”\(^8^3\) It aligns with this paper’s meaning making in Chapter 1 of Madonna’s tours through *body politic* and *body natural*, rather than relying on any type of false binary akin to ‘public persona’ versus ‘true self’. As already alluded to, it can be all too tempting to delve into problematizing identity arguments as it relates to a ‘real person’ or ‘private life’ of a star, most notably when applying the terminology of *body natural* and *body politic* to celebrity rather than royalty. From a pragmatic perspective, this is especially true when analyzing something akin to an interview, which may involve an artist’s ruminations about artistry, personal life, and the creative process. These interviews, while nominally referred to by their marketers as ‘behind the scenes’ or ‘the REAL Madonna’ are, as King points out, just another type of performance, another way for the star of “*being in public*”.

Thus, this paper intends to steer clear of any contemplation of Madonna’s ‘identity’ – with one exception, and that brings me to the second concept outlined by King above that helps to root this chapter: that a star persona’s presence is tethered to viewing and consumption, that it owes its very

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., pp. 45-61, p. 45.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 45-61, p. 47.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 45-61, p. 45.
apparition-like existence to an “expectation of constancy”. This paper builds on that concept in two ways. First, the present analysis will largely use Madonna’s stagecraft as the site of investigation. A stage performance is conceivably the most literal of settings for exploring consumption as it relates to viewing because it uniquely unites the sites of production and consumption. The performer, singing on stage, and the consumer, feet away, are both physically present, peculiarly united in time and space. Moreover, it is an especially apt choice for interpretation for this analysis as both the body natural and body politic are present. Secondly, this chapter will also track the mouth and the eye, evocative of the producer and consumer, respectively, as semiotic motifs in the MDNA tour book, The MDNA Tour (hereafter, “MDNAT”), and previous projects. Put succinctly, this chapter supports and expounds upon Tetzlaff’s thesis, which is to say that Madonna’s identity “is located where it has always been located. At the point where the postmodernist audience finds meaning”. As we saw in the previous chapter, here again the location of the meaning making is removed from the corporeal sphere of presumed production and migrated to the imagined space between performer and audience, producer and consumer, Madonna and fan. As Madonna aptly quipped at the 2013 Billboard Music Awards, while accepting an award for “Top Touring Artist” for MDNAT, “a showgirl needs her fans”.

From a wider vantage point, then, this chapter is really about uncovering the star machinery at work as it relates to Madonna’s star persona and her commercial success. It will explore these relationships by referencing the body politic and body natural, as outlined by the previous chapter, but it will also develop its own terminology, including Madonna-ness. It will employ one primary case study: 2012’s The MDNA Tour, which was a simultaneously retrospective and generative public performance, a project that built upon and remained true to the core elements of Madonna’s star persona – including female empowerment through sexuality, the advocating of personal agency, an extensive employment of pastiche, as well as the styling or presentation of Madonna as a queen figure. This chapter will not only identify these core elements of Madonna’s star persona, but trace the extent to which they are threaded throughout her many projects – and have been developed, referenced, and reinforced – since her debut in the early 1980s. The mouth and eye, which assume prominence on the cover of the MDNAT tour program, will come to be seen as semiotic leitmotsivs that will draw our attention back to the stage and evoke the roles of performance, voyeurism, sexuality, and spectatorship as they relate to the “quintessential” nature of Madonna’s star image.

84 Or, rather, the body politic is evoked. Its aura is present.
85 Tetzlaff, as quoted in King, pp. 45-61, p. 49.
87 Barry King, 45-61, p. 49.
Introducing *The MDNA Tour*

*The MDNA Tour* looked to the past for inspiration while keeping a foot solidly planted in Madonna’s recent work. As its title may suggest, her most recent tour is the most visually reflective and semiotically self-referential of her career. The name, which is also the name of the album that the tour ostensibly promotes, is a word play functioning on several levels. Perhaps most obviously, the acronym appears to invoke Madonna’s star persona (‘Madonna DNA’) in a more direct way than any of her previous projects, inferring that the album (and by extension, the tour) provide a type of Madonna-specific ‘genetic code’. This, in turn, infers that the album and tour are simultaneously retrospective and generative, invoking the star’s past successes while (at the very least, nominally) providing, or illuminating, the chromosomal building blocks of Madonna’s star persona and, to an extent, the ‘how’ of her success. In short, the title promises to reduce all that is Madonna to its elemental parts. On a more crass and, dare I say, quintessentially tongue-in-cheek note, *MDNA* also hints at “MDMA”, the street name for the euphoria-inducing drug ecstasy, popular in rave and club culture. This later evocation hints at both the musically eclectic nature of the album as well as its utilization of contemporary dance music trends, such as dubstep. In one of the album’s most club-oriented tracks, coyly titled *I’m Addicted*, Madonna repeats “MDNA” over and over again in lieu of a proper bridge. Beyond hypnotic repetition, drug references permeate in more lyrically blatant ways as well: “pulse through my body / igniting my mind / it’s like MDMA / and that’s OK”. On the one hand, the ecstasy reference falls in line with the celebration of spontaneity and release that have been prominent fixtures of Madonna’s music, traceable from her first singles (*Everybody, Holiday*) straight through to more recent tracks, such as 2009’s *Celebration*. On the other hand, the drug reference also reinforces lamentations that the singer strives endlessly toward embodying youthfulness. At a promotional appearance for *MDNA* at the Ultra Music Festival, an electronic dance festival that takes place in Miami annually and coincided with the release of *MDNA*, Madonna re-ignited speculation that her album’s title invoked the recreational drug, posing the question, “How many people in the crowd have seen Molly?” (Molly is another name for the drug ecstasy). It was one of the few things the

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89 Ibid., Track 3.
91 I will return to this point later in this chapter.

star said during the very brief, mostly music-driven appearance. The incident became a media sensation when popular DJ Deadmau5 lambasted the singer for appearing to promote drug use, calling her a “wannabe funky grandmother”, and with that re-catalyzing the seemingly perennial media-discourse concerning Madonna’s age in relation to her profession (and this time, coinciding with her album promotion). Madona later denied she was referencing the drug, and that she had instead been referencing a little known song by a personal friend of hers. Madonna and Deadmau5 made up publically on Twitter a few days later, but by this time the drug-association, which had initially been evoked by the album’s title anyway, had simply become reinforced.

Returning to the former interpretation, though, the MDNAT references semiotic building blocks and re-invents those established visual markers from her career. It invokes characters (‘Dita’, Madonna’s dominatrix character from the Erotica and Girlie Show eras), evocative hairstyles (the Vogue video side part, slicked back and to the side), and wardrobe references (the Gaultier conical bra from Vogue and BAT). Many of these visual markers have not been implemented since their respective heydays. Over the course of the third act’s four song set, Madonna strips a tailored suit off to reveal a lacy black bra and panties before launching into Like a Virgin, a nod to the infamous faux-masturbation performance of the same song from the Blonde Ambition Tour. Much like the earlier performance, this one too evokes an orgasm, climaxing when a backup dancer, performing alongside her, tightly pulls the straps of a corset around her midriff as she moans and sighs loudly.

The tour evokes Madonna’s past in other, less obvious (and less immediately recognizable as semiotic) ways as well, ways in which this chapter in particular finds interest. For those familiar with her tours, MDNAT is recognizably similar in its basic structure to the four post-millennial Madonna tours that have preceded it, consisting of four distinct acts with four distinct semiotic and thematic, though usually not musical, moments. I have already referenced the basic structure of Madonna’s tours in the previous chapter. It is worth noting, though, that this structural repetition occurs on a more detailed level, as well. For example, in the first third of the show Madonna performs at least one song that allows her to play a guitar, which in turn momentarily relieves her from physically demanding choreography. It allows her to catch her breath and, perhaps, not rely as heavily on a backing track for her vocals. Additionally, there is also a speech or some type of monologue, complete with

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
97 This climactic moment was, for the last third of the tour, moved from Like a Virgin to Love Spent.
audience interaction, that occurs in some point in the third act. The third act is also usually the ‘stripped down’ act, where ballads and down-tempo songs would be performed and demanding choreography less emphasized. In turn, this dictates that the opening and closing acts are choreography-heavy, as is the case in MDNAT’s intricate performances of GGW and Celebration. Moreover, as previously discussed in the prior chapter, musical interludes between acts allow for the transition of themes. They signal the change of theme in reassuring and recognizable ways. The stage itself is also worth noting. Each tour’s stage is constructed specifically for that tour, allowing both what it offers (and limits) from a choreography and/or staging perspective to be associated exclusively with its attendant tour. That said, each stage is comprised of one or two distinct aspects, whether it be a catwalk (S&S), a moving belt (RT), or satellite stages (CT). This aspect of the stage design is akin to the requisite ‘shock factor’ performance, the one performance or, as the case was with MDNAT, the one act that draws the most media attention. While both these show-specific stage elements and ‘shock performances’ are unique to each tour, they too thread a line of expected ‘newness’ through Madonna’s tours. All of these structural aspects in Madonna’s tours help to align each of them with previous work (as well as work that will follow). For example, a guitar-heavy, choreography-deficient performance from the first third of the MDNAT, like I Don’t Give A98, evokes similarly placed song performances from previous tours, such as Candy Perfume Girl (DWT)99 or Human Nature (S&S)100. Similarly, those song performances in turn reference I Don’t Give A. By likening performances of old and new songs, Madonna’s tours create a method of organizing her discography that is distinct from the way the songs were originally catalogued (that is to say, by album). In conclusion, the basic structures of Madonna’s tours reinforce themselves, allowing her fans (and the media) to predict a rudimentary outline of an upcoming tour (‘what will be the shocking part?’) and compare similarly placed performances across time. Moreover, for her fandom, the guitar-heavy, stand-and-sing song performance has become, to some extent, self-evident, and the same can be said for other aspects of her ‘tourdom’, such as the lack of a proper encore, her (typically) late entrance, and a strict adherence each and every night to the show precisely as it has been conceived and rehearsed.

Not unsurprisingly, the MDNAT also finds itself strongly within the more recent tradition of Madonna’s self-fashioning as a queen on stage, discussed at length in the previous chapter. More noteworthy, perhaps, is that the MDNAT takes this self-fashioning and complicates it; it too becomes part of an ever-

evolving, self-referential pastiche. In Madonna’s last tour (2008/9’s *Sticky & Sweet Tour*), discussed at length in the previous chapter, Madonna emerges on stage having fashioned herself as a queen. The queen characterization falls in line with the glorification of Madonna’s star image and body politic, promoting such attributes with which observers have come to be familiar: an empowered, erotic female body, self-referentiality, and a tongue-in-cheek presentation. For *MDNAT*, Madonna also emerges on stage dressed as a queen. This time, however, the self-fashioning only begins in the vein of promoting Madonna’s own star image. Rather, it adds layers of meaning to the previously defined queenliness that Madonna has heretofore established. In doing so, the opening segment simultaneously promotes Madonna’s *body politic*, especially when performed in conjunction with the tour’s second act, as well as mocks an alternative queenliness that is presented as ridiculous.

The show’s opening is framed as an invocation. Madonna, assuming the role of a Demon Queen, is summoned by a winding and lengthy Gregorian-esque chant, sung by a triumvirate of men dressed as monks. The Demon Queen is literally lowered from the rafters of the stage, kneeling in a hanging confessional, her silhouette projected by back-lighting onto a white drape that blocks its entrance. A recorded vocal ironically recites the *Act of Contrition*, which serves as the prelude to *Girl Gone Wild* on both the album version as well as in the *MDNAT* stage performance:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{I am heartily sorry for having offended thee} \\
&\text{and I detest all my sins} \\
&\text{because I dread the loss of heaven} \\
&\text{and the pain of hell,} \\
&\text{but most of all because I love thee,} \\
&\text{and I want so badly to be good.}\end{align*}
\]

Glass shatters, the drape falls, and the Demon Queen stands triumphant, though hidden, behind a black, lace veil atop of which her crown is perched. The Demon Queen – having announced her intentions to “be good” – points a machine gun directly at the audience, sweeps it across the expanse of the floor seats, and then removes this last layer of concealment, as well as the crown. Behind her, the hollow expanse of a gothic cathedral is projected on three massive LED screens. Having removed her queenly props, she wears a simple black ensemble, mostly absent adornment. Her dress and the choreographed ‘behavior’ thereafter betray the dramatized intentions laid out by the *Act of Contrition*. She launches into *Girl Gone Wild* with the first sung words of *MDNAT*: “It’s so hypnotic”. The line seems to again tease the acronym MDMA and, accordingly, launches an act that basically begs for a suspension of

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101 *The MDNA Tour*, Track 1.  
102 Ibid.
disbelief (even when compared to other Madonna shows). It aligns pulsing dance beats with gunshot wounds, blood splatter, and viricide. Her entrance and the first act of the show operate within the strictest narrative yet in a Madonna show, as she does not merely arrive on stage following an establishment of, say, a semiotic theme and a bit of embellished, manufactured anticipation, as was the case heretofore, but rather emerges on stage occupying a very distinctive role with an accompanying narrative arc. This is not Madonna-as-queen, but rather Madonna the actress, and as the first act transpires, it becomes clear that the Demon Queen is much more of a role to play rather than a persona to inhabit.

The Demon Queen remains for not only the opening song, but also for the duration of the first act. A vengeful bad girl out to kill, she tramps back and forth along her behemoth stage, lyrically expressing her displeasure with patriarchy (*Girl Gone Wild*, *Papa Don’t Preach*), critics (*I Don’t Give A*), and past and/or future lovers (*Revolver, Gang Bang, Hung Up*). She does all of this whilst reliably drawing attention to the corporeal; the choreography is intricate, physically demanding, and fast-paced. While these aspects are certainly in line with tropes of Madonna’s past endeavors (after all, this is and remains a Madonna show), they are nevertheless countered by new semiotic content, especially violence.

It must be noted that Madonna has never been a particularly violent artist. The subject matter of her music has largely focused on freedom of expression, female empowerment, and escape through dance. Instances of violence in past tours have been either comedic or ironic, as was the case with the highly allegorical second act of 2001’s *Drowned World Tour*. Its medley of *Mer Girl* and *Sky Fits Heaven*, both tracks from the subdued and implicitly-reflective *Ray of Light* album, was particularly metaphorical in its portrayal of violence. For example, Madonna begins by singing the opening verse of *Mer Girl*, describing her haunted past, motherless childhood, and desire to run away, before showing off her martial arts skills as she launches into the performance’s mid-section, which is comprised of several verses from the more upbeat *SFH*. In it, she thwacks her male backup dancers with high kicks and dramatic spins, courtesy of a gurney system that hoists her body high into the air. The performance concludes with a choreographed defeat of those opponents and a soothing yet melancholy return to *MG*’s last line: “I ran and I ran / I’m still running away.”

It is clear that the larger context of the second act and the sandwiching of the violence between the two segments of *MG* demonstrates that the performance alludes more so to the triumph of tackling personal demons rather than to the mere glorification of violence, even though violence is deployed. Moreover, the violence that is deployed during the *SFH* segment is over the top, which serves less to glorify it than to ridicule it; its execution is almost campy as its

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104 Ibid.
articulation of martial arts kicks and karate chops approaches parody. Three years later, the performance for the song *American Life* for 2004’s *Reinvention Tour* referenced violence, but like *MG/SFH*, shied away from promoting or glorifying it. Instead, militaristic in theme and costuming, its critique of the 2003 US-led Iraq War promoted passivism over aggression, peace over war.

By comparison, *MDNAT*’s employment of violence, while equally metaphorical in nature given the songs that were performed (*Revolver, Gang Bang*), was a celebration of gore. For *Gang Bang* in particular, Madonna plays with the imagery of horror movies like *Psycho* and *The Shining*. Most of the performance takes place on a large, motel room diorama that emerges on stage as *Revolver* concludes. Against all choreographed-odds, Madonna proceeds to kill an ever-increasing number of figures that emerge from dark corners and under the bed using an assemblage of machine guns and pistols. At one point, it is intimated that she has shot down a helicopter. Though outfitted with ski masks, their faces concealed, her motel room intruders each bear distinctively broad shoulders and the silhouette of a stereotypical male; this reinforces the lines “bang bang / shot you dead / shot my lover in the head,” which repeat in the chorus. Blood splatters across the large screens behind the prop boudoir. “I have no regrets,” the song continues, before crescendo-ing into the spoken word bridge, “how was I supposed to move on with my life if you didn’t die for me, baby?”

The primary difference between the instances of staged violence in previous Madonna shows and the *MDNAT* case study is that the latter performance glorifies gore in a way that *Sky Fits Heaven/Mer Girl* and *American Life* do not. This is new for a Madonna show, and, subsequently, is noteworthy, especially as we attempt to give meaning to the opening set of *MDNAT* (and its Demon Queen) in relation to both previous tours as well as the rest of the *MDNAT* set.

The six song opening set for *MDNAT* ends with a Nicki Minaj video sequence to accompany the rapper’s contribution to the song *I Don’t Give A*. Effectively, it announces the end of the Madonna-as-Demon-Queen portion of the show, as the set crescendos moments later in an overly dramatic sequence in which the Demon Queen is forgiven for her sins, called back to heaven with the aid of painstakingly well-orchestrated lighting and some rather involved stage props. Minaj ends her contribution by rather explicitly evoking queenliness itself, as if to usher the character queen off stage for good: “there’s only one queen, and that’s Madonna – bitch!”

The comment’s placement in the set is polysemous, however, as it also implicitly references pretenders to Madonna’s more existential pop music crown; both its delivery as well as the rap lyric’s employment of the second person are equal parts defiant statement and public

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105 I’m Going to Tell You a Secret, Track 4.
106 The MDNA Tour, Disc 1, Track 4.
107 Ibid., Disc 1, Track 7.
108 Ibid.
challenge. Minaj’s comment coincides with not only the end of the Madonna-as-Demon-Queen sequence, but also of the violence so heavily evoked throughout the first act. Thus, MDNAT begins with Madonna – who as hereto forth already established her own brand of queenliness (see Chapter 1), pretending to be another, demonic queen, hinted at by not only the multiple layers of concealment at the opening of the show, but also the correlation of Minaj’s words with the end of the act and an uncharacteristic-of-Madonna glorification of violence. All of this transpires under a pretext, which I will highlight in the paragraphs to come, of mocking another, rising and significantly more commercially successful pop starlet.

The opening of the second act compounds the reading I have outlined above, as it begins with a thinly veiled attempt to mock Lady Gaga, whose career seems predicated upon imitating what worked for Madonna to a fan base born when Vogue was on the radio. Madonna’s second emergence on stage during the MDNAT corresponds with her 1989 anthemic hit Express Yourself (EY), augmented with a sample of Gaga’s 2011 single Born this Way (hereafter, BTW). Since Gaga’s rise to fame in 2008, media outlets have been quick to point out the similarities between her ascendance and Madonna’s own, as well as other similarities which seem to unite their personas, followings, and styles of music. Concurrently, and despite their perceived similarities, online exchanges between the two fandoms have become increasingly heated and frequent. In the show, at the exact moment that Madonna launches into the sampling of BTW, Warholian soup can cartoons appear on the LED screens behind her, moving left and right in rows as if on a Ford-ian assembly line in a factory devoted to the creation of pop music iconography, their labels emblazoned with cartoonish drawings of conical bras and blond ponytails.

If the album title MDNA promises to boil Madonna’s star image down to its essence, these cartoons reduce it to mere caricature. As the cans approach the end of the screens, they are mechanically munched away by animated monsters akin to pacmen, another thinly veiled evocation (Gaga calls her fans “little monsters”). Minaj’s harsh use of the second person (“Bitch!”) in I Don’t Give A implies that Madonna’s place in the stratosphere of pop music is not only paradigmatic, but threatened, and the EY/BTW performance that immediately follows serves to bolster this defense. Taken together, the end of the first act and the beginning of the second frame the latter act as a kind of second or true opening to the show – one in which the ‘true queen’ emerges, this time donning a majorette uniform and launching her all-female faux marching band troupe of backup dancers onto the stage and into pop warfare. Madonna delivers the opening spoken-word prelude to EY, (“Do you believe in love? / ‘cuz I got something to say about it / and it goes a little something like this”), employing a rhetorical device that sets up the song’s pedagogical lyrical I as Madonna’s and Madonna’s alone.116 It’s evangelical. Moreover, the line tethers the show’s second opening to the opening of The Blond Ambition Tour, the tour which provides the blueprint for all the Madonna tours that have come since. BA, after all, began with the now iconic conical-bustier clad, bleached blond, Modern Times-inspired performance of EY. EY’s position as the first song of MDNAT’s ‘true opening’ tacitly reminds the audience that, at that time, Gaga was a toddler. And, as if to hedge any bets that the point has not been driven home, EY/BTW concludes with a sampling of the 2008 song She’s Not Me.117 Though Madonna only sings the title of the song, which is the first line of its chorus: “and she never will be”. 

While it is a semiotic mixed bag, reaching into the past as well as creating entirely new personas and iconography, the MDNAT is an overwhelmingly contemporary musical affair – at least with regard to Madonna’s discography. Most of the set list consists of new material, either from MDNA or other songs that have been released within the last five years (Revolver, Celebration, Candy Shop). Of the twenty songs that comprise the set list, only five stem from the heyday of her popularity in the 80s, and only one of those five is performed in an arrangement similar to its album version (that is to say, the version of the song with which casual fans would be most familiar). For an artist suffering from falling record sales and charging upwards of $350 for the best seats118, it is a daringly recent set list. As if to add to the chagrin of casual concert-goers, her

115 The MDNA Tour, Disc 1, Track 9.
116 The MDNA Tour, Disc 1, Track 9.
old material is re-invented, some almost unrecognizably so. This has become a reoccurring trademark of Madonna’s recent tours, as the demand for her classic songs to be performed increases and Madonna’s desire to perform them has (apparently) not. For 2008/9’s S&S, the 80s hit La Isla Bonita was mixed with a traditional Roma melody and stripped of its Latin flair, and Borderline, the playfully implicative 1984 third single from her eponymous debut album, was reconfigured into a rock song, its lyrics made suddenly jaded by a new, guitar-heavy musical arrangement and hard-edged lyrical delivery; “something in the way you love me won’t let me be / I don’t want to be your prisoner / so baby won’t you set me free” went from teasingly coy to outright spiteful. For fans who attend one show and remain ‘spoiler-free’, the excitement of hearing a classic song can be muted by a new arrangement. For MDNAT, the 80s classics Papa Don’t Preach, Like a Virgin, Open Your Heart, and Express Yourself are all augmented, edited, or slowed down, while Like a Prayer, performed second to last, remains largely true to its original arrangement. Like a Virgin receives the most drastic rebirth during MDNAT, however, performed as a six minute long waltz and in no way reminiscent of the early 80s saccharin pop original that catapulted Madonna to fame. Like Borderline, the change in arrangement and delivery reimagines the melancholy that has always resided in the following, oft thrown away lyric, as the (approaching painfully) slow arrangement lingers where it heretofore hadn’t: “I was beat / incomplete / I’d been had / I was sad and blue”. Express Yourself is augmented with the aforementioned sampling of Gaga’s BTW and, as already referenced, Madonna’s own Hardy Candy track She’s Not Me, and Papa Don’t Preach is severely cropped, performed on the catwalk and clocking in at just a little over a minute long. It is used largely to both free the main stage for a moment (to shuffle props) as well as to forward the narrative arc of the first set of the show, whereby the Demon Queen defiantly hints at remorse (“Please / papa don’t preach / I’m in trouble deep”) before being dragged from her violent exploits along the catwalk to the hellish landscape that’s been erected on the main stage. Next, Open Your Heart has been drastically slowed down, mixed with the non-Madonna song Sagarra Jo by a Basque musical group named The Kalakan Trio that accompanies her on the tour (and who also sing the show’s opening Gregorian chant). Lastly, as already discussed in the previous chapter, Justify My Love is also present, though remixed, existent only as an interlude performance music video while Madonna is off-stage. Thus, succinctly put, the show consists primarily of new songs or old songs that have been made new again. Their employment at all seems to be less reflective of their initial or

119 Sticky & Sweet Tour, Tracks 9 and 16.
120 Like a Virgin, Madonna. Etc.
121 The MDNA Tour, Disc 1, Track 5.
122 Ibid., Disc 2, Track 1.
enduring popularity and more dependent on their ability to forward a narrative arc (PDP) or serve some other workhorse purpose in the show (EY).

In summary, MDNAT employs previously established iconography and visual markers to link Madonna’s current music with her past success. However, MDNAT also establishes new personas through costume and narrative, such as the majorette, adding to Madonna’s “wardrobe of identities”. It also creates new iconography, such as the multi-layered meanings of the acronym “MDNA”, which brands the era and adds new visual layers to her star image while remaining in step with its key elements. Last but not least, MDNAT – much like the Super Bowl performance addressed in the previous chapter – is also defensive of the star image and body politic that it promotes. It anticipates competition from other pop stars by invoking the second person and re-purposing the recent tradition of fashioning Madonna as a queen on stage, a point driven home by the short, fifteen second long promotional clips that advertised the first television broadcast of MDNAT with the following: “All hail the queen”.124

The Mouth, the Eye, & Introducing Madonna-ness

Both the visual and musical components of the show coincide with semiotic motifs in the show’s associated tour book, which is comprised of eighty pages of photographs (primarily of Madonna), as well as other key features typical of the genre, including an itinerary, credits, and various acknowledgements. As alluded to at the very beginning of this chapter, two visual motifs stand out the most when one flips through the pages, and seem to – together – anchor the tour book’s semiotics: the mouth and the eye. These, respectively, evoke both the oral (one could also say, per definition, the aural too) as well as the visual elements of the stage production. On the most basic of levels, the eye/mouth motif hints at the structure of all of Madonna’s stage productions since BAT; namely, that her shows give equal prominence to both the musical elements (the mouth) as well as the visual (the eye). Madonna herself has long championed her shows as “not a conventional rock show, but a theatrical presentation of [her] music”. This equal billing has been the foundation for all of Madonna’s tours post BAT, which in turn suggests that the MDNAT tour book’s employment of the eye and mouth only re-enforces the “DNA” interpretation of MDNA, that it promises to contain the building blocks for a type of Madonna-ness.

123 Barry King, pp. 45-61, p. 49.
More specifically, as a tour souvenir, the book also sets an aesthetic attitude. It establishes a semiotic tone for its accompanying stage production: in this case, MDNAT. A tour book, much like a stage production, is intended to be observed. Unlike the actual show, however, a tour book is exclusively visual, evoking thematic aspects of the stage production using the still mediums to which it is restricted, usually photography (but perhaps also drawings or sketches). Lighting and mood, iconography and branding of MDNAT that appear on stage are all hinted at by the images in the tour book. Its photographs’ content, its subjects, as well as visual elements like focus, lighting and repetition, coincide with what occurs on stage. Violence, for example, and guns in particular, is/are referenced in several ways in the tour book. Some of these instances are quite blatant. One entire page, it should be noted, consists of a drawing of a revolver. In one image, Madonna holds a gun, poised to take out an imagined target (perhaps Lady Gaga?), and the tour book’s first spread features a portrait of Madonna opposite a computer-generated image of a bull’s eye. On a later page, lyrics from GGW invite us to “get fired up like a smokin’ gun”. This repetition of quite literal references to guns announces the tour’s violent opening set, which I have already outlined above as out of character for Madonna, unique (as of yet) to MDNAT. The tour book also predicts tour costumes. Stills from the GGW music video, a bulk of which comprise the tour book’s content, foreshadow Madonna’s first and last costumes for MDNAT. Another spread, a silhouette of male dancers in high heels, foreshadows the rhinestone-covered high heels that her support team will don during the opening number.

Moreover, less readily recognizable elements of the tour book also foreshadow the stage production’s less immediately tangible elements. High contrast, alternatingly emphasizing and de-emphasizing contour, and other features of lighting composition (such as filters) reflect the general lighting scheme of the live show. This is especially true of the professional recording of MDNAT, which recently premiered on premium television channel EPIX and was released commercially in September 2013. The professional recording has been placed through several filters. Casual detractors may argue that this was done to soften the signs of Madonna’s aging, but the result ends up uniting the tour book with the recording. The high contrast that softens the lines on Madonna’s face is accompanied by deep saturation, giving the recorded show a rich, colorful, dreamy texture that aligns with the lighting mood foreshadowed by the tour book images. Together, it suggests a level of cohesiveness and – less academically relevant but nonetheless worth noting – premeditation on the part of their creators. These aspects of stage lighting and photo manipulation also

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127 The MDNA Tour Book, p. 19.
128 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
129 Ibid., p. 49.
130 Ibid., pp. 1-2.
highlight the deep purple, red, and blue so prominent on the *MDNA* album’s cover image, which was the first of the triumvirate to be released publically. Taken together, the three corroborate to aid the establishment of a cohesive aesthetic mood for the *MDNA* period, which in turn helps to make it a distinct artistic era in Madonna’s career.

Let us turn away from the eye for a moment and take a look at the tour book’s usage of the mouth. Its employment seems to reference the fact that it is, of course, more challenging to evoke the oral (and by definition, the aural as well) than the visual in a static, two-dimensional print medium. The reoccurrence of the mouth as the focal point of many of the tour book’s photographs quite literally draws attention to a primary sight of production, from whence the notes that form Madonna’s songs emanate. This is underscored by the prevalence of selected, evocative song lyrics from *MDNA* album tracks that accompany the photographs in the tour book, declarative statements that, together, form a treatise that alternates between the defining nature of the first person and the instructive, command form of the second person. Lines like “I’m a sinner”, “I’m leaving the past behind” and “I don’t care what the people say” help to define a lyrical I implicitly made cohesive by the medium.\(^{131}\) On the other hand, commands like “Don’t play the stupid game”, “Let me out of my cage”, and “get fired up like a smokin’ gun” implore the action and subservience of an imagined second person.\(^ {132}\) This latter point evokes the paradoxical nature of the “express yourself” attitude that has been prominent through Madonna’s body of work, which has always existed alongside the prominence of the command form in her music (discussed at length in the previous chapter) and, as of late, the queen/subject relationship reinforced by her stagecraft. Succinctly put, the mouth is the point from which Madonna’s spoken words emanate, the most literal of mediums from which she may express the things for which she stands – or rather, as King reminds us, the things for which she stands to the extent that her fans interpret them to be. By invoking this sight of production, the tour book again explores the complexity of the relationship between the *body natural* and the *body politic* with regard to Madonna’s craft. On the one hand, the mouth connotes the oral, the penetrable, the inherently transgressable threshold to the *body natural*, which implies access and vulnerability. On the other hand, though, the tour book modifies the *body natural*, presenting it in a specific aesthetic tone and alongside drawings and images of religious iconography. In this way, we see how something as corporeal as images of the mouth of a singer is intertwined with and serves at the ready to promote the larger *body politic*.

Returning to the eye, we now must see that its prevalence throughout the tour book is much more complex than to merely foreshadow visual elements of

\(^{131}\) Ibid., pp.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., pp.
the stage production or to highlight the establishment of a uniform aesthetic for the *MDNA* era. Its prevalence also draws attention to the act of observation as such, which is important given King’s assertion that star persona resides not at the corporeal level, but rather in an imagined space between the performer and the consumer, dependent upon “acts of viewing” and an “expectation of constancy”.

Thus, though the tour book ostensibly celebrates Madonna’s unique *body politic* and reinforces the dynamic between queen and subject, it also tacitly recognizes the inherent power of its consumer. The eye motif implicitly recognizes the elevated role of the audience member, the viewer. King elaborates upon this point, stating that “from the perspective of the fan, the star’s persona becomes a presence that is no longer available on-screen in all its desired-for comprehensiveness. It is, rather, an empirical totality that must be reconstituted from a multiplicity of texts and performances.”

King’s argument is enlightening enough with regard to the star personas of film actors, about whom he is explicitly writing, but seems almost tailor-made for a pop singer like Madonna, whose star persona has certainly been shaped by a more tangled multiplicity of texts than that of a movie star (even one who has a considerable catalogue of film roles).

The extent to which an actor’s star persona is developed occurs under the auspices of inhabiting a character dictated by the constraints of the script, which we as consumers perceive to have been largely conceived of prior to (or entirely without) the actor’s involvement. This constraint can be made all the more suffocating, paradoxically, after an actor achieves great success in a so-called breakout role, as King points out is the case with Sharon Stone, whose star persona remains disproportionately informed by the temptress she played in *Basic Instinct*.

A pop star, however, and especially one that is well-established, is more likely to be seen to adopt or inhabit various ‘roles’ absent any pre-ordained ‘script’, and Madonna’s star persona has quite lucratively exploited this concept. The salient aspect of her star persona itself – and this is very important – is predicated upon her re-inventiveness, a point she drove home with the title of her 2004 *Re-Invention Tour* (and to which I will return later in this chapter). She inhabits personas and re-invents her image across time, all of which inevitably may claim some ownership to the larger entity that is Madonna’s star persona. It is with that in mind that the concept of *MDNA* (the era, comprised of the album, promotional appearances, the tour, and the tour book) perhaps betrays Madonna’s success more so than any past project – as it explicitly alludes to the “multiplicity of texts” that have preceded it in Madonna’s body of work. It announces itself, perhaps quite oddly, as both an apex and the next chapter. This, however, is precisely the way each of

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133 Barry King, pp. 45-61, p. 47.
134 Ibid., pp. 59-60.
135 Ibid., pp. 53-59.
Madonna’s eras has functioned prior. MDNA, so to speak, just finally goes out of its way to label itself for what it is. After all, the various, album-specific personas Madonna has inhabited throughout the last three decades (pimp, S&M den mother, queen, cowboy, religious leader) do not occur under the auspices of, say, a film role, but seem altogether self-assigned, which bolsters what I will come to call the Madonna-ness of each and every one of them – and invites us to find the threads that weave them together.

While the large M on the cover image links Madonna’s eyes and mouth in a very literal manner, it also, ultimately, hints at how the eye and mouth motifs are linked in other, more abstract way as well. They work successfully as semiotic motifs for the MDNA tour, in essence, because they represent themes that are true of Madonna’s larger body of work. They are used in the tour book to simultaneously define the MDNA era as a unique chapter while leaving no doubt that this chapter follows its predecessors in the same book. The cover image invites us to examine the extent to which – together – the eye and the mouth evoke other intrinsic aspects of Madonna’s star persona.

**Madonna-ness: Quintessentially Madonna**

In the middle of the MDNA tour book, two men – either twins or the same man digitally duplicated – suggestively sink their teeth into a singular apple that straddles the crease of the spread. The image is cropped such that it emphasizes their faces alone, and, like Madonna on the back cover, their eyes are closed, loss in the bliss of the bite as they face one another. The image is in black and white and, like the general mood of the tour book, the contrast has been elevated to accentuate shadows and contour. Despite the high contrast, filters, and other aspects of photo manipulation, their facial hair scruff is vivid and emphasized. It is a celebration of the corporeal. Moreover, the photo depicts the men as not merely biting into the apple, but outright kissing it. Mouths agape, eyes closed, and lips prominently flayed, fellatio seems implied. (Then again, the apples location along the crease of the page is just as equally evocative of cunnilingus.) In another spread, one man, naked and with a cigarette in his mouth, kisses his own reflection in a large mirror. Here again, corporeal realness is emphasized. The body is sweaty and slick. The cigarette, erect and pinned to the mirror against which he rests his lips, again infers fellatio. Next to him, taking up the majority of the right page, are the words “nobody does it better than myself”, lyrics from the MDNA song *I Don’t Give A*.

Both photos appear to stem from the *Girl Gone Wild* music video shoot, and they showcase an embodied, eroticized narcissism. This, of course, is nothing new in Madonna world. In fact, one could say quite the opposite, that it

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is a recognizable strand that runs throughout her work. I would venture to bet that even the most casual of observers would recognize Madonna’s utilization of her body and sexual themes as recurrent. An academic may suggest that it is a signature aspect of her star persona. Those ruminations aside, though, one thing is certain with regard to this embodied, eroticized narcissism; the 1984 MTV Video Music Awards’ performance of *Like a Virgin* serves as the urtext of this strand of Madonna-ness.

At the time, with the moderate success of her eponymous club-friendly debut album behind her, there was little guarantee of her continued success and little to no indication of any intrinsic staying power. Critics predicted that fellow pop singer Cindy Lauper, with her massive chart success and objectively more powerful voice, would stand the test of time in a way Madonna would not or could not. **Those critiques, ultimately, would prove to be wrong. In hindsight, they dated themselves in their assumption that semiotics would continue to play second fiddle to the music itself. MTV helped to changed that, and Madonna was one of the first pop musicians to embrace the impending rise of imagery as a tool for marketing and promoting both her music as well as her star persona.**

For the Madonna on stage at the VMAs in 1984, looking to promote a new single and its accompanying sophomore album effort, the canvas on which her star image was being painted was still relatively blank. At the very least, the paint was still wet. The same, incidentally, could have been said for the young MTV network as well. MTV’s experiment, using a visual medium to promote a traditionally non-visual medium seemed to almost no one like a guarantee at the time. Its success was dependent upon emerging artists’ willingness to embrace both the new tool provided by MTV (the music video) as well as the possibilities provided by nationally-televised live performances that were absent the censors of the major networks. 1984 marked the very first VMAs, and it is worth noting that while Cyndi Lauper did walk away with the award for Best Female Video, it is Madonna’s performance that is still discussed and, more importantly, widely referenced. **When MTV itself ticks off the greatest moments in VMA history, Madonna’s iconic *Like a Virgin* performance is always mentioned.**

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137 Camille Paglia, “Madonna -- Finally, a Real Feminist”.


139 Arguably, Madonna’s performance of *Like a Virgin* at the very first VMAs began the show’s now rich tradition of the event being a vehicle for artists to perform in an outlandish manner. As recently as 2013, Miley Cyrus’ performance of her summer anthem *We Can’t Stop* became a media cause célèbre on account of her provocative grinding of co-performer Robin Thicke and her incessant ‘twerking’, an *en vogue* style of dance favored by young people that features repetitive gyrations of the hips and buttocks.

Like a Virgin begins with Madonna as one half of a life-sized wedding cake topper. The part of the groom is played by a prop rather than a backup dancer, and as Madonna performs the song, she steps down the tiers of the large, faux prop cake – not toward the presumed and inanimate lover who saved her from the “wilderness”, as the song goes, but rather away from him. As the spotlight follows her, it is clear that the stagecraft of the performance stands in complete opposition to the lyrics of the song; it is he who disappears into the ‘wilderness’. A young Madonna, on the other hand, could not be more alive in comparison to the life-sized Ken doll she has stranded at the back of the stage. She writhes on the floor in her punk rock wedding dress, her waist cinched by a belt emblazoned with the now-infamous words “Boy Toy”. That said, the VMA performance itself – despite the conspicuous placement of the belt - could not have been clearer: the true boy toy is not Madonna, but rather her cake topper beau – a life-sized prop that Madonna has used and, in the course of just the first verse, ditched. A mere forty seconds transpire before Madonna leaves her plastic man’s side, disrupting the iconic re-created still life, one so rife in misogynistic symbolism, of dowries and contracts, the domestic sphere and sexual servitude. She pushes her white veil back as she slowly and suggestively scoots herself down the tiers of the wedding cake. By the time she has reached the bottom, the veil is gone. This G-rated striptease continues as she unpins her hair, shakes her head, and unleashes a gravity-defying 80s mane of dirty blond tangle and hairspray. While the term “boy toy” introduced Madonna to the world, at least nominally, as agentless, sexual catnip, the Like a Virgin performance itself inverted that very dynamic, exploiting the very polysemic nature of the term. It witnesses sexual self-gratification rather than sexual servitude. This aspect of cheeky irony, in addition to a bold, unapologetic sexuality emitted from Madonna grinding herself on the stage, hinted at not only the direction Madonna’s career would take thereafter, but also how the definition of what was considered acceptable would be drastically renegotiated for all of pop music in the decades to follow, and the leading role Madonna’s star persona would play in that renegotiation. Displaying her own body and female sexuality in an unapologetic, winking, and, for a late 80s and early 90s audience, brazenly corporeal manner became not only a solid cornerstone of her own star persona, but the first of many touchstones in this period of renegotiation akin to the way Elvis’ gyrating hips had been thirty years prior. What is more, despite any outrage caused my Madonna’s antics that would come later, including the MTV-banned videos for Justify My Love and Erotica, the relationship between the artist and the network continued to be one of

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mutual symbiosis; Madonna has won more VMA awards than any other artist.\textsuperscript{142}

Between the 1984 VMA performance of \textit{Like a Virgin} and 2012’s tour book image of a man kissing his own reflection, instances of an eroticized, embodied narcissism taking the thematic reigns of her work litter Madonna’s cultural output. In fact, some of her career’s most infamous moments witness this convergence of sexuality and narcissism, including the aforementioned masturbatory performance of \textit{Like a Virgin} during \textit{BA}. Another stand-out example would be the re-appropriated 2003 VMA performance of \textit{Like a Virgin}, featuring Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, in which role reversals put Madonna in the tuxedo and the young stars in wedding dresses, and established Madonna as the alpha dog pop pimp, stripping agency from and dishing direction to the younger stars. That performance featured the 2003 Madonna song \textit{Hollywood}, a cautionary tale of the promises fame seems to provide: “How can it hurt you when it looks so good?”\textsuperscript{143}

Perhaps the most lingering case study, however, stems from her first commercial nadir in 1993, when the lead single \textit{Erotica} from the sex-charged album of the same name shocked America. It coincided with the release of Madonna’s soft core coffee table book \textit{Sex} and her starring role in the widely-panned, sex-charged film \textit{Body of Evidence}.\textsuperscript{144, 145} The triumvirate of sex-themed projects established the era as one in which the dominant thematic strand would be an embodied, eroticized narcissism. \textit{Erotica}’s hypnotic chorus, for example, repeats the same phrase over and over in a high, whimpering voice: “Erotic / Erotic / Put your hands all over my body”.\textsuperscript{146} Its steady house thump bolsters the lyrical repetition, creating a trance-like, ephemeral focus on Madonna’s body. Like many of her songs, it operates in the second person, using the command form to promote a type of imagined proximity between its lyrical I and the addressee, especially in the verses. The opening, whispered first words of the song again infer proximity to the addressee, as well as introduce Madonna as her sex den alter-ego “Dita” over a crackling backing track. “I’ll be your mistress too,” she whispers. The lyrics presume that the addressee is a sexual novice; they intimate sexual instruction, rather than mutual discovery, enriching the song’s S&M vibe by which the addressor and addressee assume the roles of dominate and subordinate: “Give it up/ do as I say / give it up / and let me have my way”, she demands, “I’ll give you love / I’ll hit you like a

\textsuperscript{146} Madonna, \textit{Erotica}, Track 1.
The line “I’ll teach you how to…” follows, drifting off at the end into an audible moan (rather than a spoken or sung word). The instructive tone of the song is pervasive; *Erotica* makes it clear that it is only through Madonna that we will experience sexual satisfaction. It is she who will “put (our) hand in the flame”; who will teach us how to derive “satisfaction from a little bit of pain”. The song’s accompanying music video doubles down on this notion. Alternating between black and white and sepia palettes, the grainy, MTV-banned music video is less explicitly vulgar than one may expect. Rather, it is simply confusing as it re-enforces the Madonna-as-instructor theme. It is a pastiche of blurred edges, low lighting, and quick cuts. It almost dares the viewer to watch it again. Absent a storyline or comprehensible set location, the viewer is left with a single unifying semiotic thread: Madonna’s body in varying states of undress, coyly and suggestively mimicking sex positions and acts. Yes, the music video for *Erotica* is about sex, but it is more about portraying sex through Madonna. The *Erotica* era, complete with the *Sex* book and accompanying movie role, followed up on the themes outlined in the 1984 *Like a Virgin* performance, and brought them to new, illicit heights.

More recently, and perhaps in also more niche instances, this juncture of sex and narcissism has been at the thematic forefront. It threads its way through 2006’s *CT* performance of *Let It Will Be*, the 2008 *Hard Candy* first track *Candy Shop*, as well as its associated S&S tour performance, which I discussed in the previous chapter, and the 2009 track *Revolver*, which featured prominently in the opening act of *MDNAT*. In each instance, the thread of sex and narcissism is apparent, though augmented in each case as it suits the performance. I mention these particular examples because, when compared with *Erotica*, their employment of sex and narcissism, though present, is less blatant.

In Chapter 1, I analyzed how the *Candy Shop* performance that opens S&S serves to glorify her crotch as she emerges, legs spread wide, upon a golden throne. Similarly, *Revolver*’s lyrical I, put to good use in a gun-heavy performance on the *MDNAT*, lauds its own sexual prowess as simultaneously immaculate and lethal: “My love’s a revolver / my sex is a killer / do you want to die happy?”

I would like to take a longer moment to analyze the first of the three case studies that I have laid out above. *Let It Will Be* is neither a widely disseminated, nor well-known performance (or song, for that matter), but evokes and develops key elements of both 1984’s *Like a Virgin* presentation as well as the *Erotica* era. It was performed in the third act of *CT*, the traditionally stripped-down portion of the show. In it, Madonna’s costume is similarly

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148 *The MDNA Tour*, Track 3.
149 It is worth noting that *MDNAT* is the first tour since *BAT* to move the stripped-down, guitar-heavy portion of the show from the third to the second act.
stripped-down for the occasion, a form fitting black t-shirt, black skinny pants, and a shiny black belt. This almost ready-to-wear outfit stands out from the other, more outlandish costumes worn during the show. Nevertheless, its simple lines outline her toned physique, her famously-toned arms are bear, and the belt draws attention to her midsection. At this point in the show, all her backup dancers have retreated backstage, leaving Madonna as the singular figure (other than her band members). She begins the performance by saluting the microphone, placed on a stand in the middle of the stage, before snatching it away in one fell swoop. She then begins to awkwardly dance, wildly and alone, her tresses of blond hair fluidly following her every head thrust. Equal parts rocker and stripper, she moves about the stage in this awkward fashion, grinding herself on metal railings and thrusting her pelvis back and forth. Though choreographed, it is made to look as if her movements are organic, much like the 1984 *LAV* performance; only this time, there appears to be less hairspray. Before beginning to sing, in what would become a signature moment in the *CT*, she sticks her right hand down into the front of her pants, staring all the while directly at the audience, before removing it and placing it in her mouth, suggestively licking her middle finger. The performance as a whole, though, is not as raunchy as that gesture may suggest. Lyrically, it speaks not of sex, but rather of the trials and tribulations that come with stardom: “Now I can tell you about success / about fame / about the rise and fall / of all the stars in the sky”. On the one hand, by singing of those who have fallen from fame, she tacitly reminds her audience of the command that she seems to hold over both her career as well as her fans. While many stars have fallen, Madonna is still on stage. Interestingly enough, the finger-licking gesture codifies that message, as if to taunt the crowd with ‘you can’t lick it, only I can’, a theme that continues throughout the performance, much of which consists of Madonna dancing on a catwalk, intermittently interacting with fans on either side. At one point, she takes a cowboy hat from a fan, wears it for a few seconds, and then disperses of it. So close, yet so far away. On the other hand, however, the inherent power of the observer in the relationship between fan and star is here again referenced: “don’t it make you smile?” she prods her audience accusatorily, when those who have been risen to fame by fans are subsequently brought down by them? Moreover, while the performance places the attention of the audience squarely on Madonna’s body, in effect fetishizing it, it simultaneously ridicules the random nature of modern celebrity. The awkward, grammatically incorrect title of the song (and chorus line) “let it will be” is stiff and embodied by Madonna’s jolted, disjointed movements. The microphone salute at the beginning is cheeky, intentionally sarcastic. In the professional recording of the performance, as the bridge approaches, the editing emphasizes

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150 *The Confession Tour*, Track 14.

151 Ibid.
the allegorical fall Madonna takes at the end of the catwalk, repeating it in slow motion no less than five times.

At the same time, while seeming to critique the socially constructed nature of modern celebrity, the song remains a hopeless anthem for its own cause. It advocates for the very status-quo it denounces; “We got to let it be / oh won’t you let it be?” she croons, before challenging, “just watch me burn”, lyrics which are re-enforced as ironic given the performance’s relatively forgettable position in the middle of the set list. (By the end of Hung Up, the final song of the set, as the glitter falls from the rafters, you will have long forgotten LIWB’s half-hearted critique of modern celebrity culture.) The LIWB performance has the general aura of an undergraduate performance art piece, one that, let’s say, sets the tribulations of Lindsey Lohan’s downfall to music. The song climaxes with the simple message that change is futile, as the language of sex is overlaid upon Madonna’s commentary on fame; “I’m at the point of no return,” she sings. Though there is nothing flashy about the performance, it does command the crowd (or at least, it is made to look so in the professional recording). Thus, an unspoken and largely symbolic message counters the lyrics and mediocre craft of the performance, which is to say that Madonna – even more impressively given LIWB’s lyrical treatise – is still around, still dancing on stage. Moreover, we are reminded that it evokes past performances, like Like a Virgin, in that it adheres to one key thematic strand that runs through Madonna’s public performances: the commodification of her own eroticized body natural, a thread of her Madonna-ness that began twenty-two years prior.

I use the term Madonna-ness in an attempt to gather and define distinctive strands of Madonna’s star persona, and use the term as short-hand for identifying the extent to which any given Madonna public performance or cultural product is recognizable as her own. While I have heretofore focused on her body of work’s continued reliance upon the juncture of eroticism and narcissism, its thematic reoccurrence in her work is by no means the singular, or even necessarily dominant, strand of Madonna-ness. The truth is quite the contrary, actually. For every Erotica, for example, there has been a Substitute for Love152, career performances in which vulnerability rather than defiance takes the primary role in setting tone as well as lyrical or semiotic substance (the extent that semiotics play a role is, naturally, dependent upon the medium of the performance). Despite the extent to which the conical bra and other more brazenly sexual images have come to be associated with Madonna, some of her most commercially successful songs and projects have, in fact, stemmed from this arena. They have been tame ballads that showcase vulnerability, despair, and melancholy, occasionally lamenting the negative aspects of fame or highlighting turbulent interpersonal relationships: This Used to Be My

*Playground*, *Crazy for You*, and *Frozen* are among a pantheon of others, just as many of which (it should be noted) were not released as singles. These performances of vulnerability also occur in the form of the rare, occasionally intimate interview, some of which have touched upon Madonna’s private life and upbringing. Tethered to her ballads, these interview performances, such as 1994’s *Primetime Live* interview, are exactly that: performances. They are another, albeit less-immediately literal, way for her star persona to “be in public”, as King notes. All of her performances of vulnerability (songs, stage performances, interviews, etc.) have helped to develop a gentler, softer side, one that seems to stand quite the contrary to “Miss. Dita”. These moments reference one another and reinforce one another as they form the anchor of the vulnerability root within *Madonna-ness*. One exchange from the *Primetime Live* interview, in particular, forecasts the thematic focus of the studio album that would come on its heels, in effect establishing *Ray of Light*, Madonna’s most critically acclaimed album, as authentically ‘Madonna’ in a way that *Erotica* was not. When asked about the perception that potential lovers may have about her upon meeting her, Madonna employs a protean rhetorical flourish; she shines a light on one aspect of her star persona in order to establish it as a construction, which in effect allows the interview to present another strand of her star persona (vulnerability) as authentic, the ‘real her’ so to speak:

I: This does raise the question of meeting men.
M: *laughs*
I: Is that a problem? Men being the way they are.
M: It’s not a problem meeting them. It’s a problem meeting one of them...someone that’s not an asshole. *laughs*
I: You know there are certain stereotypes that people are going to have to wade over…
M: In terms of me? I know…
I: They think they’re gonna walk into the apartment and there’s gonna be a whip collection on the wall
M: *[sarcastically]* Yes, a couple of cages…burning candles.
I: So do they need to get past that?
M: Yeah, they do. And if they can’t, that’s their problem…cuz I’m so much more than that; I’m not even that. When I meet people and I get to know them they always say, ‘God you’re so sweet. You’re so vulnerable’. You know and...and...and my whole thing is always *God...God...can’t you see that?* Can’t you see that in everything that I do? I mean – I think it’s obvious” (her emphasis)

This dialectical sleight of hand helps to intimate that the songs released after this interview are hers in a way that some of her previous work was not, that they are personal moments of unfiltered emotion – inherently different from her

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153 Barry King, pp. 45-61, p. 45.
more (sexually) provocative work. Implicit in this statement is that she’s “so much more than” Erotica. She’s “not even” Erotica. While we can choose to see statements like this as simply opening the ramparts for her more subdued mid-90s period, the truth is that vulnerability has been present in her work since the beginning, and it has nothing to do with identity, regardless of what Madonna herself professes in an interview. The secret, dirty truth of modern celebrity, of course, is that Madonna is and means (on account of her stardom) so much more than whoever she thinks she is as an individual, regardless of the forthrightness that she may bring to an interview. On that note, the “vulnerable Madonna”, as a thread of her star persona and highlighted by this interview, had been present all along in her body of work\textsuperscript{155}; she just wasn’t highlighted as dramatically before Bedtime Stories, Ray of Light, and American Life. One need not look further than the last track on Erotica, even, to find this thread of Madonna’s star persona; the pensive, melancholy Secret Garden’s lyrical I questions, “where my place is, where my face is,” as it looks for “a petal that isn’t torn / a heart that will not harden / a place where I can be born […] a rose without a thorn / a lover without scorn”\textsuperscript{156} Its looped snare drum and meandering piano don’t obscure Madonna’s voice. Rather, it steps out to the forefront, unadorned and contemplative: “if I wait for the rainbows / to kiss me and undress me / will I look like a fool? / wet in the mess?” Given how little attention the song received, it could be argued that the song was being intentional cheeky. The most secretive of gardens, it seems, is the final track of the Erotica album.

There are, of course, a couple of protean reasons for a star like Madonna to promote vulnerability. For starters, performances of vulnerability decrease the proximity of the star to the fan, in that they implicitly suggest, ‘I’m just like you’. This, in turn, (and perhaps paradoxically given the media frenzy an album like Erotica created) allows for performances of vulnerability to seek public absolution, which Madonna (the business) desperately needed post-Erotica. This illuminates another reason for a star persona to embody vulnerability, namely that it is a more commercially safe channel for a public performance. For example, we are quick to remember the image of Madonna, stark naked and thumbing for a ride, from the pages of Sex\textsuperscript{157}. We are less quick to remember the insidious commercial success of 1994’s Take a Bow, a ballad that commemorates the end of a longstanding, emotionally abusive love affair. The slow, tender song embodied Erotica’s successor, the tame R&B-flavored Bedtime Stories, which also produced the hit mid-tempo track Secret. Take a Bow spent seven consecutive weeks at the Number 1 spot in the United States

\textsuperscript{155} Songs like Love Don’t Live Here Anymore, Oh Father, & I’ll Remember
\textsuperscript{156} Madonna, Erotica, Track 14, Warner Records, 1992.
\textsuperscript{157} Madonna, Sex.
on the Billboard Hot 100 and is, technically, Madonna’s most commercially successful song to date on that chart. I’ll allow you a moment to look it up.

I identify three primary roots that anchor the tree that is Madonna-ness, though I make no intimations that they are the only three, but rather the three most distinctive and reoccurring roots. The first two I have already discussed at length. The third, which I have yet to mention, is her work’s overarching propensity for celebration, or of catharsis through escapism. This is, perhaps, the strongest and most continuously evident of the three primary roots that comprise Madonna-ness. In fact, at the moment of this publication, her discography is bookended by two singles that are striking examples of this: 1982’s Everybody, her very first single, and 2012’s final single from MDNA, Turn Up the Radio. The first, a ditty that lead to her first chart success, could not be further away from the latter in terms of production value (as one may expect), but TUTR demonstrates how the primary thematic thread of celebration, release, and escapism that launched her career (“music makes the world go round/ you can turn your troubles upside down”) has changed little over the course of the ensuing thirty years. TUTR’s pulsing synths embody momentum as they move toward the crescendo of the first chorus. This slow-building momentum is reinforced by the lyrical structure of the opening verse, a condition-laden, single sentence.

When the world starts to get you down / 
and nothing seems to go your way / 
and the noise of the maddening crowd / 
makes you feel like you’re going to go insane / 
there’s a glow of a distant light / 
calling you come outside / 
and feel the wind in your face and your skin / 
and it’s here I begin my story / 
Turn up the radio.

In MDNAT, TUTR was performed as a sing-along song with the crowd. The video package that introduced it consisted of a radio being tuned through static to ‘discover’ various Madonna hits of the past, a less than subtle attempt to place TUTR in the same league with Holiday, Into the Groove, Lucky Star, and Music (among others). The song’s lyrics seem to celebrate not only escapism

\begin{footnotes}
\item[159] Madonna, Everybody, Track 1, Sire Records, 1982.
\item[161] Madonna has employed this technique several times to encourage audience participation, including once with Everybody (when performed in 2005 at the Koko Club in London during a promotional concert for Confessions on a Dance Floor).
\end{footnotes}
and the words that *Everybody* expressed thirty years prior, but also pop music itself. This strand of celebration in the face of challenge, after all, helps to define the dance-pop sub-genre that Madonna’s music career inhabits, and it is by no means the exclusive realm of Madonna’s body of work; see such disparate and salient examples as: Kylie Minogue’s *Spinning Around*, Janet Jackson’s *Escapade*, and Cher’s *Believe*, all of which encourage celebration in the face of adversity. Nonetheless, it has been a prolific thematic strand for Madonna’s body of work, heard most often in uptempo songs and dance-friendly club cuts, often ones with swelling verses that crash into infectious choruses (not unlike *TUTR*). As briefly alluded to in the previous chapter, some of these songs are Madonna’s most iconic and commercially successful: *Holiday*, *Vogue*, and *Music*. The title and lead single of Madonna’s 2009 greatest hits package emphasizes this theme; it is entitled, quite succinctly, *Celebration*. That title, especially as a moniker for a compilation of her hits, doubled-down on the prominence of escapism and frivolity in her music. What is more, as a title it draws attention to the very act of celebrating celebration itself, a point to which I will return in a moment.

This thread of *Madonna-ness* also contributes handedly to the appeal of her live shows, for which it is particularly well-suited. Her live shows are physical manifestations of celebration. They ostensibly exist to celebrate Madonna and are intended as spectacles which allow for the crowd to escape from the quotidien. The tours’ set lists emphasize this basic reality. *MDNAT* climaxes with the aforementioned 2009 track *Celebration* as a built-in encore, and the three-song act that precedes it unites elements of escapism, release, and elation (consisting of *I’m Addicted*, *I’m a Sinner*, and *Like a Prayer*). During *Celebration*, a sparkly, silver Madonna prances and hops in her juvenile Converse tennis shoes along her stage like a kid in a candy store, moving with a lightness and agility that defies her age and the amount of time she has already spent on stage. The iridescent sheen of her top plays along, making her look like a svelte human disco ball. She is, in effect, like a disco ball in this setting; she is the uniting factor, or guiding force, of everyone in the stadium or arena on any given show night, and this is her anthem: “If it makes you feel good / then I say do it / I don’t know what you’re waiting for”. As she sings, she gallops, gazelle-like, instructive and uninhibited along her catwalk. As the song winds down, she and her backup dancers assume positions behind large prop

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162 In later US and South American performances of *MDNAT*, *Celebration* was mixed with the 2008 *Hard Candy* track and 2008/9 S&S tour closer *Give It 2 Me*. The professional recording, filmed in Miami toward the end of the US tour dates, captures that version of the mash-up encore.

163 *I’m A Sinner* closes with several verses of 2000’s *Music* bonus track *Cyber-Raga*, an obscure, fan-favorite sung in Sanskrit (much like *Shanti / Ashtangi* from 1998’s *Ray of Light*).

164 *The MDNA Tour*, Disc 2, Track 11.
cubes that are built-into the stage, ones that can be lifted up or down to create various ‘stagescapes’. Madonna and her dancers each sport a pair of brightly colored headphones, and the cube behind which each stands is risen only enough to obscure their legs. Madonna, of course, assumes a position slightly elevated above her dancers, and in the very middle of the stagescape. The effect of the staging is such that they all appear to be DJs standing behind their respective turntables, with Madonna as the penultimate DJ of the group, dictating the direction of the party. The scene is an apt reminder of the dominant root that celebration has played throughout her career, and her beginnings in the disco scene of New York City in the early 1980s. It is a particularly ephemeral conclusion for a show that begins in a dark, violent place thematically. The Celebration performance could not be more colorful and effervescent, or exude more of the celebratory strain of Madonna-ness. Although MDNAT begins with Madonna guarding her star persona, stepping outside of it to man the defenses, it ends with Madonna having returned within its well-established thematic strands to do what she does best, celebrate herself: “Put your arms around me / when it gets too hot we can go outside / but for now just come here / let me whisper in your ear / an invitation to the dance of life.” Though Celebration is musically and thematically a far cry from Erotica, its lyrics still employ an instructive second-person, delivered in a proximity-imparting whisper. The fan’s participation in any “dance of life” is through Madonna.

It is at this point that it becomes necessary to underscore the fundamental differences between Madonna-ness, the focus of this chapter, and Madonna’s body politic, the focus of the previous chapter. First and foremost, both are related to and inform her star persona. Secondly, her star persona is more conceptually wide-reaching than either Madonna-ness or her body politic. I will return to this point in a moment. Thirdly, Madonna-ness occurs on the linguistic order of the adjective. It is a descriptive gradient. It reflects themes developed over time that have come to be associated with Madonna’s body of work. The presence or absence of those key themes in any public performance, including the three primary roots outlined above, dictates the extent to which a public performance can be described as quintessentially of Madonna, i.e. possessing a high or low level of Madonna-ness. Fourthly, because Madonna-ness is not intrinsically tethered to her body natural, it can exist separate from the star. It may be evoked by another artist (or even a fan). Aspects of Madonna-ness, after all, later became part of a salient star image construction roadmap of sorts for female pop stars who followed in Madonna’s wake. Thus, Madonna-ness can be seen in these other artists’ public performances and star personas. Britney Spears, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Kylie Minogue, and others have all evoked Madonna in their respective bodies of work. It is important to recognize, however, that these evocations are imbued with Madonna-ness regardless of intention, as these and other artists’ public performances can bear resemblances that for the wider audience of pop music are immediately recognizable as
stemming from the “Madonna” brand. Fifthly, looking at the opposite side of the same coin, Madonna herself may perform in a way that is less thematically or semiotically in step with her previous body of work, as is the case with the Demon Queen in MDNAT or even her early-2000s stint as a children’s book author. For Madonna, though, her public performances will always retain an inherent portion of Madonna-ness, given that she brings her physical self to them. Last but not least, Madonna’s body politic is how she herself uses Madonna-ness (and other aspects of her star persona) to promote a kind of wide-reaching, Madonna aura for her own fandom. As we saw in the previous chapter, this aura is suited well to a self-fashioning of one’s self as a queen. When executed properly, it can even approach something akin to religious fervor amongst fans. Thus, Madonna’s body politic, just like that of a historical queen, is a reflection of her star persona’s power as an affective agent on her subjects / fans. It serves to promote itself, and as we have seen over the course of this essay, the stage show – much like a court - is its most effective weapon, a form of public performance that unites body natural, body politic, and the fan in an inimitable and unusual way.

In conclusion, over time each of the three strands of Madonna-ness have developed and been referenced once and again in her work. Each new form of “being in public” that showcases “the vulnerable Madonna” or the “erotic, narcissistic Madonna” or “the celebratory, carefree Madonna” points backwards and sideways in time to those that have come before it or are happening concurrently (as is the case of an album composed of multiple tracks released at once). In turn, a Madonna-ness thirty years into its development is also premonitory, serving to forecast the thematic content of public performances yet to come. Moreover, Madonna-ness’ texture is complex. If we take just the three fundamental strands of Madonna-ness to analyze her work, for example, we see straightaway that the method by which they inform her star persona is not and cannot be simply on the order of taxonomy. Many of the case studies I have outlined above represent the, in political terminology, far left and far right of examples from her work. Some are paradigmatic of celebration, others, sexual provocativeness. Most of Madonna’s public performances, though, take aspects of all three (in addition to other aspects of Madonna-ness that I haven’t addressed in detail) and find themselves somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

The lead single from MDNA, the commercial dud Give Me All Your Luvin’, ranked very high on the Madonna-ness scale, and touches on all three of the strands I have outlined. Its opening line alone embodies a tongue in cheek cadence of narcissism and an instructive, second person command: “I see you coming / and I don’t want to know your name”. Its carefree, celebratory melody continues, swelling into a chorus in which a hint of vulnerability pokes through;

165 Madonna, MDNA, Track 1, Interscope Records, 2012.
Madonna promises the moon if you “don’t lie to me / and pretend to be what you’re not”. Its cheeky chant alone practically gives away how quintessentially of Madonna the song is: “Y / O / U / You wanna? / L / U / V / Madonna”. The song may have been a commercial failure, but it certainly was not because Madonna drifted from the same formula which had brought her fame and built her star persona. As we can see with GMAYL, it is at the junctures and by juxtaposing various strands of Madonna-ness that a textured star persona, complex, multi-faceted, and unique, has developed. It is that very complexity that has lent its continued development well to pastiche, as we saw in the first chapter.\(^\text{166}\) Put succinctly, as time has transpired, Madonna’s star persona, though once wet paint on a largely blank canvas, has become anchored much the way old, knotted roots tether an old oak to the ground. By now, the individual roots are almost impossibly inter-tangled amongst and within one another, creating a star persona that approaches self-evidence in the collective conscience of fans. Meaningful comprehension and analysis thereof is reliant upon keeping this metaphorical Gesamtkunstwerk in mind, even when focusing specifically upon one dominant root of her work. Music fads and commercial success may come and go, or even wane permanently, but the thematic strands of Madonna-ness are very much adhered to by Madonna’s most recent work, as we have seen in this essay’s analysis of MDNA and its accompanying tour. Radio may have given up on Madonna, but as Give Me All Your Luvin’ demonstrates, Madonna certainly has yet to give up on Madonna. And neither have her fans.

**Conclusion:** “All this pretend wasn’t for free”: Love Spent & Lukács

Let’s, for a moment, detour away from the thematics of Madonna’s artistry and explore a more hand-to-mouth aspect of modern celebrity. Let us begin by teasing apart how that same MDNAT tour book functions as a commodity. As opposed to the concert experience, which exists only fleetingly within an assigned place and time (with the exception of the one or two shows that are filmed for professional release), a tour book is a tangible object. It is a commodity in the classic sense. Its use value is derived from several aspects of its intrinsic nature. First and foremost, it is a type of keepsake or memento, memorializing an evening (or, for some ravenous fans, evenings) and serving as a visual aid for the concertgoer’s remembrance of a/the night that they spent in the presence of a star. Moreover, because it seeks to encapsulate and promote, with varying success and to varying degrees, the body politic of that star, it also becomes a type of icon itself. This lends a tour book an additional exchange value for fans that can fluctuate over time as it goes out of print and becomes a

\(^{166}\) Pastiche is, of course, a tool whose successful implementation I have already explored in Chapter 1.
A tour book is not typically sold in stores. This, in turn, makes the tour book an attractive object to own for non-fans as well, such as a music paraphernalia dealer who may be aware of yet unsusceptible to any current or potential sentimental value (on the order of affect) that it may symbolize for fans. For these dealers, the use value is as an investment piece for eventual resale. Finally, if rare enough, a tour book may become a collector’s item that provides its owner with a certain cache within the fan community, one unrelated to any practical use of the book.

Even the above, brief examination of the tour book from this marketplace perspective reminds us that a stage production like MDNAT is, first and foremost, big business. While many of Madonna’s projects are artistic in nature, they produce monetized, tangible goods like a tour book or a CD. Her projects are also monetized in less strictly-tangible ways, such as a concert ticket that promises a type of experience to which the marketplace has assigned an exchange value. The accumulated value of such tickets can reach astronomical heights; MDNAT garnered gross revenue of 305 million dollars.\(^{167}\) Forbes estimates Madonna’s net worth to be around 500 million dollars.\(^{168}\) Thus, Madonna as a business cannot be ignored. The role of business and the flow of capital are pivotal for Madonna’s work to remain visible. Her success as a commercial artist, and as a business, quite literally keeps her on the stage, and it pervades every aspect of her career. Lukács serves as the perennial reminder that capitalism is an inescapable ideological reality:

> The capitalist process of transformation must embrace every manifestation of the life of society if the preconditions for the complete self-realisation of capitalist production are to be fulfilled. Thus capitalism has created a form for the state and a system of law corresponding to its needs and harmonizing with its own structure.\(^{169}\)

Lukács was writing in the 60s to describe the historiographical trajectory of capitalism. He was primary concerned with the practical consequences of the ideology of capitalism, what Marxist theorists label a reified consciousness. This particular excerpt references this concept’s application to the structure of the modern state, but Lukács’ basic premise is equally applicable to star studies. After all, capitalist ideology pervades every aspect of postmodern society, every “manifestation of the life of society”, including celebrity. Stars are neither

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exempt from its ideological restrictions nor its practical realities, and the machinery to which they are constricted, Lukacs and other Marxists would argue, is inherently capitalistic.\textsuperscript{170} Madonna’s very identity, Tetzlaff argues, exists “in the area of exchange and wager in the pursuit of privilege and power”.\textsuperscript{171} This must be kept in mind when analyzing not only a souvenir like a tour book, but also the development, effectiveness, and methodology of Madonna’s star persona. King elaborates on this point, identifying today’s stars, no longer employees, as was the case in the Hollywood Studio Era, as “stakeholders in the enterprise that manages their career”.\textsuperscript{172} As stakeholders of a business enterprise, stars are personally invested in the management decisions that determine their career’s fate overtime. With this comes increased control over artistic direction, film selection, merchandising, and other business decisions, but it also means that stars face more culpability for their failures than they would have otherwise had in the Hollywood Studio system had it persevered. Stars must align their cultural production – film roles, music, merchandise – to meet the current, ever-evolving demands of the entertainment marketplace. At the same time, however, stars must balance precariously upon the star persona that they (and their enterprise as a cohesive unit) have already cultivated and that anchors their brand identity. This reality of star-machinery, King says, accounts for “the paradoxical desire to be protean and yet quintessential in every role”.\textsuperscript{173} Like many of King’s arguments, this one too was written with actors, specifically movie stars, in mind. As before, though, it also befits an interpretation of Madonna’s portfolio and the (practically) salient commercial success her particular star persona has enjoyed overtime.

A key to Madonna’s success (and an aspect of her star persona that is beyond the realm of mere Madonna-ness) can be gleaned from another point King makes about stars with regard to their adaptability on the marketplace: “persona is elastic rather than plastic, closer to a procedure for surviving, a heuristic self, than an essense,” he states.\textsuperscript{174} King’s point is that stars must be malleable enough to learn from the commercial repercussions (both positive and negative) of their work. With a career spanning three decades, it is evident that Madonna’s star persona has survived the very real roller coaster of the entertainment marketplace, but the question remains: how? A considerable chunk of the answer to that question is gleaned by exposing the clever way that Madonna has anchored the semiotic nature of her star persona; namely, while some stars anchor their personas almost exclusively in a unique talent, a particular aesthetic, or an attitude, any one of which may fade in popularity or


\textsuperscript{171} Tetzlaff, as quoted in King, pp. 45-61, p. 49.

\textsuperscript{172} Barry King, pp. 45-61, 49.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., p. 61
be more inherently plastic in nature, Madonna has anchored her star persona in its very own elasticity. An MTV2 special from several years ago is surprisingly enlightening on this particular point; the show, entitled Top Ten Pop Star Transformations, places Madonna at Number 1.175 Its language is hyperbolic, and the narrator insists that it would be an injustice to have given the number one spot to anyone else. The camera cuts back and forth between images of Madonna and other celebrities, in taped interviews, agreeing profusely with the narrator’s assertion that Madonna is, “the queen of transformation (…) the greatest chameleon of pop, a fact no one can dispute.”176 The most fascinating thing about the show is not the praise, though, which is trite and expected given the medium, but rather that the reasoning behind Madonna’s placement on the list is fundamentally different than that of the other stars. Those stars, like Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, and Katy Perry, are described as having experienced singular transformations, such as from “plain pastor’s daughter” to “raunchy pop star with Old Hollywood glamour” (Perry), or “clean teen” to “sexy superstar” (Timberlake).177 Most of these so-called transformations are on the order of a common life event, i.e. growing up. Madonna, on the other hand, is defined by the show as the understood “mother of re-invention”. Thus, the show intimates that while others have transformed, Madonna is transformational. This is a key difference in that the latter imbues agency. While the narrator lauds Madonna, a montage of Madonna’s many looks, from music videos, live shows, and public appearances, flash across the screen. We witness her various personas as a pastiche, absent their chronological order and any context; Madonna the pimp, Madonna the cowboy, Madonna the disco queen, etc. In essence, this cable television show’s half-hour filling, cheaply produced content points out the element of Madonna’s star persona that has allowed for her economic viability for thirty years. Rather than having simply undergone changes in appearance, Madonna is understood to be the star who inhabits intentionally chosen, visually disparate “ personas”.178 Taking a step back, then, it is clear that not only has Madonna fashioned a star persona that is simultaneously layered as well as consistent thematically, as we have already seen, but also one that is understood to be grounded in its own, intentional ability to transform visually. She has not rooted her star persona in a unique and unmatchable musical talent, nor in an aesthetic movement that may fade from popularity, but rather to its own semiotic malleability. As long as she hits the same developed thematic notes, she may inhabit any visual persona she chooses and still be seen as quintessentially herself. (This means that the Demon Queen character, discussed at the outset of this chapter, is atypical not because it is a

176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
new visual persona, but rather due to the thematic detour it represents (violence, gore, revenge) from her brand, i.e. its lack of *Madonna-ness.* Essentially, if we take King’s thesis, namely that a star must be both quintessential as well as protean, we see that Madonna’s star persona has been constructed in a way that maximizes both.

Thus, while *Madonna-ness* is an excellent blanket term for gathering the various thematic strands of Madonna’s work over the past decades, it only addresses the quintessential aspect of her star persona. Her semiotic elasticity, often referred to as her re-inventiveness, helps to comprise the more protean, business-friendly side to her star persona. So far, this chapter’s thematic focus has explored the ways in which Madonna is quintessential. At this point, with Madonna’s elasticity in mind, it becomes possible to analyze the ways in which her star persona succeeds on a protean level as well. To do this, I would like to focus on one *MDNA* song in particular, *Love Spent,* and track its progression from non-single to its late addition to the set-list of the *MDNA.*[^179] This particular case study will demonstrate several things. First, it shows how the interaction between star and fan is complex, with the star – even the most quintessential and stubborn, such as Madonna – from time to time molding her craft to the desire of the fans. Secondly, by analyzing the performance itself, *Love Spent* as performed reveals itself as an interpretation of the multi-faceted power dynamic between star and fan, one that puts money at the forefront in a very literal way.

I focus on the song *Love Spent* in this section as it is unique in Madonna’s catalogue. While there is nary a Madonna song that does not preach love, celebrate release, or expound upon a private heartbreak, there are only a scant few that are explicitly about money. *More,* from the oft-forgotten concept album *I’m Breathless,* is certainly among them: “Got my diamonds / got my yacht / got a guy I adore / I’m so happy with what I got / I want more.”[^180] The song’s tone, however, is sarcastic. Madonna’s delivery isn’t reminiscent of her typical work, and the concept album’s retro-vibe re-enforces it as a playful exception in her catalogue rather than a rule. It is another prime example of how *Madonna-ness* functions as a gradient in her work. *Express Yourself,* especially as stylized in its accompanying music video, in which Madonna’s character breaks out of her gilded cage to throw herself at a muscled factory worker, is another song that explicitly evokes money[^181]. Among the few songs that explicitly reference money, though, is the one that is most tethered to Madonna’s early star persona construction. Since its release, it has been re-appropriated and used widely by the media as a pseudonym for Madonna: the 1985 hit *Material Girl.*[^182] Madonna herself has always argued that the song was meant to be ironic, as evidenced in

[^181]: As well as implicitly evoking just about every Henry James novel heroine.
part by the song’s sassy music video parody of the Marilyn Monroe star vehicle *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, but the line “I am a material girl” – ironic or not – has proved difficult for Madonna’s star persona (try as it might) to leave behind.\(^{183}\) Madonna has expressed her own dislike of the song, and despite its weighty position in her catalogue it went unperformed for over a decade before making a surprise appearance at a 2003 *American Life* release party concert at a Tower Records in New York City. Even then, Madonna insisted that she did not remember the lyrics and made the audience sing a significant portion of the verses. The song was performed live most recently during 2009’s second leg of *S&S*, replacing the aforementioned angst-filled rock version of *Borderline* in the set list and undergoing a similar arrangement transformation.

In 2012, twenty-seven years later, Madonna released the antithesis to *Material Girl*, the ethereal, banjo-tinged, synth-filled and mid-tempo *Love Spent*. The two songs are similar in that they both evoke money in an explicit way, but it is at that point that the similarities end. While *MG* was an international hit, *LS* was not even a single. *LS* imagines an almost complete role-reversal of the relationship dynamics established between the subjects in *Material Girl*. While *Material Girl* establishes a story-telling dynamic that features the lyrical I in opposition to scores of throwaway men, *LS* constrains its narrative to two subjects. Its heartbroken lyrical I laments a soon-to-be ex-lover’s affinity for money over and against the love of his/her partner.\(^{185}\) The song begins with an indictment followed by a question; “You had all of me you wanted more/ would you have married me if I were poor? / just if I was your treasury / would you have found the time to treasure me”. It continues with, “how come you can’t see / all that you need / is right here with me?” before eventually reaching the climactic line of the chorus: “I’m love spent / wondering where the love went”. Critics and fans immediately interpreted the readily apparent autobiographical elements from the song, given Madonna’s 2008 divorce from husband Guy Ritchie (and the considerable sum of her money that he took with him), and the fact that *MDNA* was the first Madonna studio album after her divorce. This interpretation was given extra credence by the subject matter of other songs on *MDNA* (*Gang Bang, I Don’t Give A*) that also had a very personal lyrical I and painted break ups in terms of betrayal and disappointment. *I Don’t Give A* directly references divorce, for example, and *Gang Bang* goes so far as to imagine murdering a lover: “You have to die for me / How can I move on with my life if you didn’t die for me baby?”\(^{186}\) Unlike those two songs, *LS*’s lyrics were considerably more forlorn, rather than spiteful

\(^{185}\) *LS* is gender neutral.
or confrontational, and Madonna’s delivery is melancholic over the ditty’s innocent, infectious melody. *Love Spent* falls into the category of Madonna songs with a tender lyrical I, promoting the vulnerability strand of *Madonna-ness*. Unlike previous songs that showcase vulnerability, however, *Love Spent* also explicitly referenced money – a point which necessitates a reading of the song that goes deeper than an autobiographical divorce narrative.

For reasons about which we may merely conjecture, perhaps given the standout nature of the song’s thematic juxtaposition of betrayal, heartbreak, and money, it became a fan favorite almost immediately. This came despite the fact that it was not released as a single. The song did not make it on the set list of the first *MDNAT* show on May 31st, 2012 in Tel Aviv. During mid-afternoon sound checks while on tour in Europe, fans who had been given early admittance to venues began asking Madonna to sing the song. Eventually, during a Copenhagen sound check on July 2nd, 2012, Madonna sang a few bars from the song, telling the fans present that she “[didn’t] even know the lyrics. Do you know the lyrics?” After declaring the chorus too high for her to sing without reaching, she stopped. At subsequent European dates, one of which I personally attended in Vienna, Austria on the 31st of July, *Love Spent* was requested by those fans who had arrived early enough to participate in the sound check, though Madonna did not sing it.

When *MDNAT* crossed the Atlantic from Europe to North America, the *MDNA* fan favorite still hadn’t been added to the set list. This came as no surprise, though, given that there had only been a handful of instances in which a Madonna stage production’s set list had changed mid-tour. The last instance was in 2001, when *You’ll See*, a track recorded for the 1996 all-ballad compilation album *Something to Remember*, replaced *Gone* on select US dates of the *Drowned World Tour*. In that case, the song it replaced had no choreography and was the closing number of a Madonna-centric set in which Madonna played the guitar while (mainly) sitting. If *Love Spent* was to be added to *MDNAT*, evidence suggested it would either augment or replace an existing song. Furthermore, precedence suggested that it could not be inserted into the show where it would disrupt choreography, a complicated transition between songs, or an existing narrative arc. The aforementioned first act, for example, would be an inappropriate place to insert *Love Spent*; not only does Madonna assume the character of the Demon Queen in that set, the six songs performed all embody a strong, lyrical “I” and voice.

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*Love Spent* did end up on the set list, and no doubt the persistence of her fans’ requests contributed to its addition to the show. Moreover, its addition came before the show’s professional recording in Miami, which means that its performance – though not characteristic of the vast majority of *MDNA*T shows, is now memorialized in an official capacity and will remain part of the collective memory of the standard show, rather than as an exception (as it was).\(^{190}\) The performance comes on the heels of the *LAV* waltz, which I mentioned at the outset of this chapter. Choreography that had been part of *LAV* was moved into the *LS* performance, and *LAV* was (subsequently) abbreviated. Taken together, the lyrics of *LAV* and *LS*, when performed back to back, seem to represent bookends to a singular romantic relationship.\(^{191}\) The performances come at the end of the show’s third act, one in which Madonna strips from a tailored suit to her underwear over the course of four songs. By the time *LAV* begins, she appears naked, fragile; she gives a weighty, emotional performance. At the most apparent level of interpretation, she performs the role of a hurt lover, betrayed by the one she loved, played by a backup dancer, who – to bring this basic interpretation to its logical end - no doubt represents Madonna’s own ex-husband.

That said, there is also a more subversive reading of both the song as well as the performance. When *LAV* ends, Madonna lies on her back at the tip of the v-shaped catwalk. The first dull, deep note of the tour-arrangement of *LS* reverberates in the arena. Fans from the immediate vicinity throw wadded-up cash Madonna’s direction. She grabs some of it, leaving the rest strewn about her. In one hand, she holds the microphone; with the other, she holds a fistful of cash high into the air above her. The scene evokes the very essence of stardom: the protean tool of cash in one hand, the method of vocalization in the other, and a stage upon which to perform below her. Clad in little more than underwear, the performance also falls in line with the embodied, eroticized narcissism strand of *Madonna-ness*. Her proximity to the fans, their bodies fully clothed, their flashbulbs and jeering constant, intimates vulnerability as well a critique of stardom. Nevertheless, it is those fans, who have already paid in the vicinity of 350 dollars per ticket, whom Madonna requests to throw yet more money at her. At one point, she nods her head toward one fan in particular, a come hither demand, prodding him to hand her more money. The fan obliges. Averting her eyes again from the crowd, she sings the opening line of the song; its sentiment vague enough to exemplify both the perspectives of star toward fan and fan toward star: “you had all of me / you wanted more”.\(^{192}\) As she sings, wads of cash continue to rain in from around her onto the stage. Money flows one way; notes flow the other way. On the one hand, the performance’s staging

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\(^{190}\) *The MDNA Tour*, Disc 2, Track 6.

\(^{191}\) Ibid, Tracks 5 and 6.

\(^{192}\) Ibid.
evokes many of the negative aspects of fame, i.e. the lack of privacy, its loneliness, and its attendant, inherent exposure. On the other hand, the lyrics embody both the unyielding need of the modern fan for proximity as well as the inherent financial relationship between fan and star: “I want you take me like you took my money / take me in your arms until your last breath / I want you to hold me like you held my money / hold on to me ‘til there’s nothing left.”

As the song approaches its climax, this performance of the relationship between fan and star is apparent in the choreography as well. A backup dancer appears from the unlit darkness of the catwalk. He brings with him a corset, and approaches Madonna from behind. She does not turn around. He embraces her, unpins her hair, allowing it to fall around her shoulders, and begins to string the corset onto her body. He is literally shirtless. While he is privy to her touch, witness to her exposure, she maintains her gaze forward. Ever the star, she looks toward the direction of the fans in attendance to be sure, but at no one in particular. He, on the other hand, obscure and replaceable, maintains his gaze upon her, much as the fans in the crowd do. As he pulls the long strings of the corset, his action achieves a type of affect on the star; Madonna gasps, a gasp that straddles the line between torture and orgasm, a singular sound to embody pain and pleasure, whose duality complicates any straightforward critique of stardom. Moments later, her dramatic, choreographed collapse onto the stage makes her look like a dog, as the backup dancer remains erect, his tight grip on the corset strings keeping them taut. Using them, he pulls her entire body backwards, physically moving a body that fails to acknowledge him. His affect is undeniable. Finally, as the song concludes, she stands up, pets his face, tucks her microphone into his pants, and turns away. Madonna returns to a piano bench, and disappears beneath the stage. Moments later, an interlude video begins set to the remixed lyrics of the song Nobody Knows Me.

It is poignant that a performance that so aptly summarizes the complex relationship of fan and star is set to a song that invokes love and money as opposing yet simultaneously affective forces. King proposes that his understanding of star persona, to which this paper subscribes, effectively outlines a new type of role for the fan of modern celebrity, one that I see in the LS performance:

Increasingly, though this may be difficult for fans to accept, persona no longer means a definite kind of individual. It is a mode of experiencing, a life force, the essential glue that holds together a series of approximating stabs at self-realisation. The fan’s task, if he or she chooses to accept it, is to comprehend the object of desire by a means that denies closure.

193 Ibid.
194 Barry King, pp 45-61, p. 60.
King characterizes the star in relation to the fan as an “object of desire”, which is most definitely on display in the LS performance. Though inexorably close to her fans during the performance, she remains above them. She stares past them, into their space, in fact outward, but not at them. The relationship between fan and star works in two directions, but it will always be in a limited, scarce capacity from the star toward the fan, and in the other direction - from the fan to the star – the relationship, at least as it is directly concerned, will always be anchored in a financial transaction.

Moreover, with King’s theory at our fingertips, the argument with which I ended the first chapter – Madonna as a religious leader – seems much less like the treatise of a wistful fan. Religion, after all, is the ultimate model institution to which its followers are required to devote themselves “by a means that denies closure”, given that the great promise of most organized religions is an afterlife from which no one has yet reported back to confirm, a notion that stands diametrically opposed to the scientific method upon which our business-driven, results-oriented society – at least in the day-to-day – is largely based. King’s theory has the effect of tacitly uniting religion with entertainment, at least in so far as they are not science or business, that they belong in the realm of the after-work, the weekend, the free moment.
Conclusion:

*Like a Virgin: Social Media & Outsourcing your Star Persona*

I referenced two images in particular from the *MDNAT* tour book in Chapter 2. In the first image, a naked man kisses his own reflection in the mirror. In the other, two men, perhaps the same man digitally duplicated, kiss an apple. Neither of the two features an image of Madonna’s *body natural*, but in effect it doesn’t matter. Both moments reference the strand of an embodied, eroticized narcissism that this paper has come to identify as a prevailing strand of *Madonna-ness*. Thus, these two moments serve to remind us that iconography and prominent themes, once they are associated with Madonna’s larger star persona, alleviate the immediacy of the star’s presence in future work as they become recognizable proponents of her star persona (or, in some instances, her *body politic*). This principle can be abstracted to the underlying mechanism of branding. In that case, all that may remain to convey a given star’s persona is a letter or symbol that has come to be associated with a business venture, as is the case with the various M logos that Madonna has used over the years to brand her projects and eras. This includes the large M on the front of the tour book, discussed at length in Chapter 2. Moreover, understanding how similar the mechanisms behind the tour book photos are to branding, we are again reminded of the practical reality that the marketplace plays in star persona construction, and the ways in which star personas must straddle the line between inimitability and remaining commercially heuristic. When we take this principle to the extreme, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Madonna also need not be present in any form for the creation of content that evokes her star persona or promotes her *body politic*. This includes the ever-growing realm known as social media.

Thus, it is at this point, having already accounted for the subject-like nature of her fandom and with the economic restrictions of the marketplace in mind, that I wish to conclude this essay focusing on the rise of social media as both a place of consumption as well as production. Increasingly, our internet-capable devices have become the primary point of consumption with regard to celebrity culture and stardom. We download music on our laptops and mobile phones, read salacious gossip stories on celebrity-oriented, international blog sites, download and watch films and television shows from both above-board as well as legally-dubious websites, and ravenously consume any other online content created by or related to stardom. Not only has the modern day fan been granted accessibility, but she has also been granted mobility; she possesses all of the aforementioned at her fingertips as she stands on an escalator at the mall, boards an airplane to Buenos Aires, or procrastinates at home. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the internet has become the meeting place for fans, where
they can create communities that would have previously been impractical or unfeasible. Related to that, then, social media has increasingly become a place of production. For Madonna, as with other stars, this happens in one of two ways. The most obvious of ways, of course, are the interactions and public performances (I suppose we should say, digital-public performances) that Madonna herself, or someone on behalf of her acting in an official capacity, has contributed via a social-media platform. Madonna’s MDNA Twitter launch party, in which she interacted firsthand with fans, is an example of this type of social media production. The second way that social media has become a point of production for stars and their attendant personas is reflected in the digital contributions of their own fandoms. These contributions, of course, occur in an unofficial capacity, but as it will become apparent, Madonna’s carefully constructed star persona has enabled fans to mimic her own production. This effectively allows for the potential outsourcing of star persona construction, a topic worth further investigation as the age of social media develops. Thus, social media provides us with a worthy, future-oriented place to end this essay, especially given the assertion by King (informed by Ellis) with which I began this chapter: “the presence of persona is reliant on the circulation of meaning through acts of viewing”\(^\text{195}\). In this way, King points out another reason why social media is a fitting place to end this particular essay; namely, that a stage performance and social media performance are similar. They both serve simultaneously as places of actively occurring production and consumption. Unlike a stage production, however, Madonna’s star persona resides in social media in a way that is consistent and unending, as it is a medium that, international in nature and largely free of censorship, propagates the perpetual “consumption of texts and images in secondary circulation”\(^\text{196}\).

Madonna’s primary social media presence is on the photo-sharing service Instagram\(^\text{197}\). Yes, she has an official Facebook\(^\text{198}\) account as well as a YouTube\(^\text{199}\) channel, but her Instagram account – given that it consists of relatively impromptu camera phone pictures – seems to be more likely under her immediate control. Incidentally, it is of note that she does not have a Twitter, perhaps the most popular social media platform amongst stars, as well as the most intimate given its perception of decreasing the proximity between fan and star. Her Instagram account includes photographs called ‘selfies’, the internet-lingo term for photographs you take of yourself using an electronic device, which gives further credence to the notion that Madonna is intimately involved with the account. Without delving into intentions, it is worth noting that of the various social media platforms I have heretofore mentioned,

\(^{195}\) Barry King, pp. 45-61, p. 47.

\(^{196}\) Ibid.


Instagram is the most inherently prone to pastiche. An Instagram account, over time, is essentially a slow-forming pastiche of images—some wildly altered by pre-selected filters—that creates a social-media imprint that is inherently semiotic in nature. As this paper has already outlined, Madonna’s work employs pastiche often and elevates semiotics (at least to the same rung as music) in her work, especially in her tours. Thus, one could argue that Instagram’s inherent image-centric interface lends itself well to the type of image-construction that Madonna’s career has relied upon. More specifically, Instagram’s many filters for image manipulation allow it to be much more than simply a photograph-sharing software, which coalesces well with Madonna’s star persona’s insistence upon its own shape-shifting prowess. On this note, many of Madonna’s Instagram account photographs are highly enhanced or edited; several photographs are highly contrasted close-ups of one portion of her face. Their editing reminds the viewer that it is through a mediating factor that they have been made public, that they are under the auspices of an auteur. Another image, of the altar of St Michael’s cathedral in New York City, makes that point literal. It is edited such that the portion of the altar visible in the image is visible only through a transparent M; ergo, it is through Madonna’s star persona—her branding—that access to the photographs is permitted. Her Instagram account, in essence, espouses many of the strands of Madonna-ness that this essay has defined, and exists as another form of being in public for the artist. As such, it promotes the “expectation of constancy” of her star persona from the perspective of the fan just like her non-social media performances do.

But what if that constancy is achievable without the star’s presence in any way? Another social media platform, Tumblr, is a blog interface that allows users to post and re-post digital content, and it is a platform on which there is no official Madonna presence. Like Instagram, it is largely visual. Unlike Instagram, Tumblr supports a variety of mediums. In essence, Tumblr allows users to create elaborate pastiches of images, videos, links, GIFs, memes, audio files, and written content like stories, fan fiction, quotes, and even chat-transcriptions. Unlike Facebook or Twitter, Tumblr users usually remain anonymous, with handles that reflect an interest or persona rather than their true identity (i.e. given name). Instead of “friending” someone on Tumblr, a user “follows” other users’ blogs, i.e. the aforementioned collections of images, videos, etc. that a user has either generated or re-posted from another user. A user is not restricted to one blog handle, but rather may create several handles and may assign various thematic focuses to each one as he or she may see fit. Like Twitter and Instagram, Tumblr relies upon user-submitted tags that accompany each post. These tags, or “hashtags”, allows a user to discover content according to theme using the site’s search bar.

A quick search of the Madonna tag reveals that Madonna’s fandom on Tumblr posts an assemblage of (largely semiotic) content. This content includes re-posted audio clips of songs (both old and new), postings of user-generated as
well as official photographs of Madonna, clips from concerts, user-generated memes that rely on official photographs, commentary about her work, parody in any one of the aforementioned mediums available, and much more. Displayed blog-style, and merely according to the time that they have been posted to Tumblr, the content of the posts, to large effect, is absent its original artistic or chronological context. Images from her early career are juxtaposed with those from even a few hours ago, and songs are posted in their entirety without reference to the album from which they came or the date they were released. Official images are similarly jumbled. Madonna the cowboy, Madonna the vixen, Madonna the queen, Madonna the pimp, and Madonna the S&M den mother all exist concurrently – their images floating, untethered to the cultural productions (albums, tours, eras) for which they were ostensibly created. Thus, for Madonna – as well as other stars – Tumblr’s tags are inherently of, by, and for those fans familiar enough with a star’s portfolio to sift through the assorted semiotic stimuli and still make sense of what has essentially become a haphazard, user-created pastiche that exists absent any overarching auteur. It is, in a word, as egalitarian as stardom can get.

Despite this absence of censorship or creative oversight, the vast majority of the content on the Madonna tag on Tumblr seems to either promote or – when it is user-created – mimic Madonna’s star persona in a flattering, promotional, or even devotional way. A recent image posted on the Madonna tag does this exceptionally well, and it is an image with which I would like to end this essay. Though produced by an anonymous fan, the image – which is itself quite simple with regard to the craftsmanship it necessitated of its author – espouses many of the points for which this essay has argued.

The image is a meme that juxtaposes a painting of the Virgin Mary with an iconic photograph of Madonna’s face. The immediate, tongue-in-cheek nature of the photo-shopped meme is the very wordplay that it evokes: Madonna on Madonna, or, Like a Virgin. That wordplay is both blasphemous and erotic, embodying the thread of eroticized narcissism that runs through Madonna’s body of work. The meme also elevates Madonna’s stature to that of Jesus’ mother, explicitly invoking Madonna as a post-modern religious figure. The meme is devotional, to be sure, but it is also defensive. This fan’s elevation of Madonna to the order of the immaculate is no less a blatant defense of the star’s body politic than the Super Bowl performance with which I began this essay. Compounding that, the photograph of Madonna’s face that is used in the meme stems from the photo-shoot which was used for her first greatest hits album, the Immaculate Collection. It is there that the original photo still resides, resolutely staring back at anyone who opens the jewel case. That the

200 Anonymous, Tumblr, 10.3.2013, <http://25.media.tumblr.com/96fa851608e7923bbd0d4e2ee701618a/tumblr_mts95gJ60D1s1wvgso1_500.jpg>.
image has been lifted from that particularly titled project imbues the meme with an added intertextuality that embraces the strain of self-reference that has threaded its way through Madonna’s body of work, and that this essay has repeatedly touched upon. Not only does the *Immaculate Collection* (and by extension, the meme before us) reference the Catholic imagery so prominent in Madonna’s work, but also the immaculate conception itself. With that in mind, the photograph almost announces itself the ideal candidate for this particular meme’s implicit purpose: depicting Madonna as an icon worthy of devotion. Because the meme is fan-created, it is here that we witness how star persona differs from *body politic*, wherein for the fan Madonna’s star persona approaches something with effectual powers, a type of self-evidence, a belief system complete with its own ceremony, traditions, and value sets akin to a historical monarch. What is more, the meme is not only thematically evocative of forms of *being in public* that have occurred in an official capacity, but also, by employing the tools of pastiche and self-reference, in alignment with the very machinery behind those official forms of *being in public*.

In the meme, a cigarette – not unlike the one so prominently pinned to a mirror in the tour book image of the sweaty, nude man – hangs nonchalantly from the center of Madonna’s mouth, a pointed reminder of the eroticism that has laced its way through Madonna’s body of work, but also an indication of the role that the mouth has played as a semiotic *leitmotiv* to connote vulnerability as well as agency and self-expression. Madonna’s face is angled downward, her eyes filled with a dark shadow that highlights and obscures at the same time. Her head is tilted to the side, quizzically challenging the viewer’s gaze: ‘What?’ she seems to be asking. Her lips, a deep red, contrast intensely with the bright white of the cigarette, not unlike the general affront to piety that Madonna’s face lends to the image of the Virgin Mary. The meme stands testament to the notion that – not only has Madonna’s star persona “made it through the wilderness” – but it has done so in so salient of a way as to now, thanks to social media and the rise of the internet, propagate itself in perpetuity absent the star: “no end and no beginning” indeed.\(^{202}\)

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English Abstract

First and foremost, this project traces the development of queen imagery in Madonna’s star image, focusing primarily on her stagecraft over the last decade, including the Drowned World, Confessions, Re-Invention, Sticky & Sweet, and MDNA World Tours. Its primarily semiotic reading presumes Madonna as a practitioner of pastiche, often self-referential, and evaluates her self-fashioning as a queen using Kantorowicz’s Two Bodies theory. It argues that her stage productions have developed a type of body politic akin to that of a historical monarch, which in turn promotes and defends Madonna even in the absence of her body natural. Subsequently, guided by Baudrillard’s Simulation and Simulacra treatise, it then proposes that Madonna’s body natural and associated body politic conspire to create (for her fans) an aura that, together with the structure and thematics of her stage productions, approaches a type of post-modern religious experience.

Secondly, this project takes a specific case study, 2012’s The MDNA Tour, and uses it to explore the star machinery that has allowed Madonna’s star persona to develop, self-reference, and survive over the course of thirty years. In attempting to answer the question “How?”, it also develops a new term for describing the dominant thematic strands that have laced their way through Madonna’s body of work: Madonna-ness. It proposes that Madonna-ness is a scale by which Madonna’s cultural output can be seen to embody or evoke intertextual chains that have been developed over time as her star persona has been constructed. Moreover, it also outlines three primary strands of Madonna-ness, namely an embodied, eroticized narcissism, a re-occurring vulnerability, and celebration as a form of catharsis, and it explores the ways in which those three dominant strands were used or evoked in the past as well as in The MDNA Tour. This project also expounds upon the very real commercial realities of stardom and the prerequisite that a star persona be both artistically unique as well as commercially malleable, inspired by Barry King’s thesis on the modern fan and star “elasticity”.

This project concludes with a nod toward the future. In short, it expands upon the role that the rise of social media has played in the outsourcing of the construction of Madonna’s star persona as of late. It explores Madonna’s official social media presence, as well as – and more importantly – the unofficial presence that Madonna’s star persona enjoys on social media. On a more broad scale, it traces the ways in which social media platforms are not only sites of consumption, but also of production with regard to stardom and celebrity culture. This, in turn, hints at the applicability this research could have on not only future scholarship with regard to Madonna, but also to other artists. Social media, after all, provides another way for reducing (or seeming to reduce) the proximity between fan and star.
German Abstract


Das MA-Projekt erläutert auch die realen, kommerziellen Realitäten von „Startum“ und die Grundvoraussetzung, dass eine Persönlichkeit, die man als Star bezeichnet, immer auch künstlerisch einzigartig und kommerziell
veränderbar sein muss, wobei letzterer Gedanke inspiriert ist von Barry Kings These von der „Elastizität“ moderner Fans und Stars.

Abgeschlossen wird die vorliegende Arbeit mit einem Blick in die Zukunft. Es wird also darüber nachgedacht, welche Rolle die immer wichtiger werdenden social media in letzter Zeit in der Auslagerung der Konstruktion von Madonnas Star Image spielen. Erforscht wird nicht nur Madonnas offizielle Präsenz in den sozialen Netzwerken, sondern, viel wichtiger, auch die inoffizielle Präsenz, die Madonna als Star in den social media genießt. Weiter gefasst wird nachgezeichnet, inwiefern soziale Netzwerke nicht nur virtuelle Orte der Konsumption sind, sondern auch der Produktion, was „Startum“ und Celebrity Culture angeht. Dieser Aspekt der sozialen Netzwerke als Orte der aktiven Partizipation, der in der vorliegenden Studie entwickelt wird, könnte nicht nur interessant sein in der künftigen wissenschaftlichen Erforschung des Phänomens Madonna, sondern auch in Untersuchungen bezüglich des „Startums“ anderer Künstler, da ja soziale Medien als Weg gesehen werden, der (scheinbar) die Entfernung zwischen Star und Fan reduziert und daher (scheinbar) mehr Nähe schafft.
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