Syllabus

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1. Assignment

Pick either Lady Gaga or Madonna, and find three of her interviews from different media (audio, video, in print). Apply a narrative analysis: what narratives are present? What is told, what is not? What formal techniques are used? What personas does she build? How she constructs and represent her “authentic” self?

2. Readings


Review: Lady Gaga "Born this way" So bad it's terrible!

The hype for Lady Gaga's new single Born this way has been building steadily for months. A hype I readily admit being caught up in, and finally today, after its release date was pushed a week forward, we got a chance to hear a song that, according to Elton John, would "obliterate 'I Will Survive'".

Alarm bells should have been heeded about the potential crumminess of the impending Born this way when the childlike lyrics were released a few weeks ago. Depressingly, Born this way doesn't just fail to live up to the hype, which to be honest was never going to happen, but more worryingly for what's to come with the album, it fails to succeed in even being a good song. The production and melody sound mediocre at best, but even worse is how it sounds like a gayer - who would have thought possible? - rehash of Madonna's classic Express yourself.

Young fans may hear Born this way as something new, inspiring and exciting and good for them, it can be their generations watered-down version of Express yourself. However, there are a million other melodies out there that speak across the generations in a distinctly more sincere, true, wholehearted manner than Gaga's has here - just contrast it to Marvin Gaye's What's Going on. "Obliterate 'I Will Survive'"? HA!
Her latest album, MDNA, has been a bit of a flop, in large part, I suspect, because she's trying too hard to keep up with the kids. There's a gap in class between her classic hits and rather more feeble recent stabs at electropop. The opening section is actually quite unpleasantly aggressive, particularly the blood spatter and multiple murders set piece for Gang Bang, although it's hard to deny that aggression suits her. Madonna stomps around the set in black leather like an ageing dominatrix, which is hard to equate with the love-in at the end, with monks, Buddhist and gospel singers joining in a happy clappy version of Like A Prayer.

How do you feel when you read these reviews?

Do you agree with their assumption that Madonna and Lady Gaga are mediocre and slightly ridiculous when it comes to their music?

Why?
They Are Not Amused

Theodor Adorno
Max Horkheimer
Walter Benjamin
(Frankfurt School)

Mass produced popular texts

The culture industry deliberately mass-produces formulaic, standardised, rubbish commodities

The mass-media stunt imagination and spontaneity

Audiences are seduced and are a passive herd
Classical (High) Art

Produced for non-commercial, genuine reasons: independent artistic expression or critical commentary

Unique, individual and authentic

H O W E V E R

...if it is so simple, and so negative, what are we doing here studying media?

Activity

Is jazz music high art?

Adorno cites jazz music as a typical example of degraded “low” art

Is photography real art?

According to Benjamin, art in the age of mechanical reproduction loses its “aura” of uniqueness: a painting is unique, photographs are just copies of reality or of other “real” art works
Limitations of Frankfurt School Theories

Elitist
• It’s usually the wealthy and cultured classes who decide what is good

Pessimistic
• Are we always gullible and passive?
• Are there no differences within the culture industry?

One-dimensional
• Taste is socially and historically determined: times and contexts matter
Cold war
Dictatorships
Authoritarianism
Political aggression

“Fordist” capitalism: large multinational corporations, standardisation
Human desires make the social machine work

PR makes people react ‘as if actuated by the pressure of a button’

‘when the example of the leader is not at hand and the herd must think for itself, it does so by means of clichés, pat words or images which stand for a whole group of ideas or experiences.’

(quotes from Propaganda)

Activity

In pairs, take turns talking about your favourite ad. How do you position yourself vis-à-vis it? Do you like because it is convincing? Do you like it despite what it’s trying to say, or how it’s saying it? How easily persuaded are you?

Each of you will be asked to report to the group what the other person said.
Popular singer, Lady Gaga, admits the songs on The Fame Monster album represented personal demons she had faced. While developing the album, she spoke of sin and demons being inside human beings. She referred to her concerts as ‘apocalyptic house parties’. Lady Gaga is quoted as saying that she has this strange recurring dream where there is a phantom in her home. She fears that the devil is trying to take her. Nonetheless, she uses her nightmares to inspire her eccentric stage shows. Her wardrobe, props, poses, and makeup aren’t just happenstance. There is a reason they are as they are. It is said that one is ‘the eye of Horus’. What is this? It is an ancient Egyptian symbol focusing on the eye. It is used in association with a cobra, representing protection and with gods and goddesses. First off, the cobra represents a sign that suggests that gods and goddesses are false gods. Not the Madonna. Secondly, the right eye is highlighted it represents thoughts of possessing masculine energies through a false god such as solar, math, reason, words, and numbers. Then we move onto the left eye. If the left eye is highlighted, it represents the mirror image of the right eye and portrays what are considered feminine energies such as lunar, feelings, intuition, and private thoughts. When you see pictures of Ishtar, goddess of love, and war, she is often shown with a cobra, it’s a symbol of protection. You can observe how celebreties such as Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Miley Cyrus, Rihanna, and Jay-Z (just to name a few) covering an eye with their hand or doing makeup in such a way to focus on one eye. It is the right eye that is highlighted in pictures of Lady Gaga, Madonna, Beyonce, and the others. The use of colors and makeup also adds to this effect.
Parents should stop pretending to be pop stars

Thanks to the X Factor, another bubble-aged immature Hollywood starlet (who can she be?) asks: Isn’t it time parents started acting their age and, you know, stop poppin’? asks Daisy Buchanan.

By Nicki Hager 2009/12/12 10:58

Alison wasn’t just imitating Lady Gaga when she appeared on the X Factor - she was doing an impression of a star struck adolescent

The boundaries between the different generations are blurred. Parents are more likely to borrow their children’s Slimfast album than ask them to “turn that racket off”.

As fashions fluctuate, it’s normal to see Grannies in neon and teens in tweed. Pop has become graphic, sexual and outrageous, and for the most part, the teens who have grown up with it seem capable of appreciating it without copying what they see. But for their parents, it’s a different story. They don’t just want to have a more interesting album on the shelf - they want to be more interesting themselves.

Being a pop star is a lot like being a teenager. You dress outrageously, behave as if you’re desperate for attention and talk about your sexual conquests in embarrassing, exaggerated length. There’s a time and a place for all of those things, but ultimately they’re behavioural traits you’re supposed to grow out of.

Parents are meant to be past exasperated and part indulgent when their offspring develop bad habits. It’s taken the school to say they’re not just imitating Lady Gaga when she appeared on the X Factor - she was doing an impression of a star struck adolescent.

You need your parents to act older and wiser than you, so that you’ve got real control.

Do you agree with the assumptions made by these sources that icons like Lady Gaga are morally reprehensible?

Why?
Advertising Theory

Advertising is a way of distributing and enhancing the meanings perceived to reside in celebrities in the consumer world. Celebrities can acquire symbolic meanings in a culture and then transfer those meanings to products.

1. A variety of meanings become attached to a celebrity through his or her appearances in mass media; accordingly, consumers understand the images or meanings reflected by the individual celebrity.

2. The celebrity’s image/meanings is transferred to a product due to his/her association with the product through an endorsement.

3. There is a shift in meanings from the product to consumers through purchase and consumption; i.e., consumers take in these images and meanings associated with the celebrity and product by purchasing and using the product.

McCracken’s three-stage ”Meaning Transfer Model”

Branding and identity panics

Branding relies on identity recognition

The strength of the brand/identity also engenders a feeling of fear and moral panic

Sense of recognition and of the uncanny

“consumers are constantly transporting symbolic properties out of products into their lives to construct their self. Consumers’ possessions and consumption of certain products often reflect their individuality and help enhance their identity”

(Choi and Rifon 2007, 307)
Policing morality through product placement

Controversy over religious (and inter-racial) content

Pepsi Ad
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkEOHyxOhYc

Madonna’s Like a Prayer
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79fzeNUqOqQ

Moral Panics

Something in society becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interests

It is stereotyped by “right-thinking” people

Experts diagnose and offer solutions

Coping strategies are devised

The condition eventually disappears or submerges

(Cohen 1972, Folk Devils and Moral Panic)
How do we explain moral panics? Hypodermic needle theory

- Audience is a passive, helpless, undifferentiated mass
- Media inject a direct and powerful stimulus
- The stimulus forces an immediate, knee-jerk response

B.F. Skinner and Media Effects

“black box” model of learning and communication:
- stimulus
- response
- reinforcement

HOWEVER...

... What about contexts? .... If it is so simple, and so negative, what are we doing here studying media?
Limitations of Media Effects

Theory

• Simplistic
• Methodologically debatable

[Media effects is] a specific strand of social ... research has arrived at the conclusion that consuming media violence has some vaguely defined relationship to real world aggression.

A high percentage of [cultural studies research] has arrived at the exact opposite conclusion -- looking at media violence in terms of the meanings it generates within a cultural context as opposed to the direct effects or influence it exerts over the people who consume it.

(Jenkins 2006 http://henryjenkins.org/2006/09/slamming_media_effects.html)

Activity

In pairs, take turns talking about examples of moral panics. Can you recall one instance in which you did not agree with one of these panics? Why? How?

Each of you will be asked to report to the group what the other person said.
1. Assignment
Think of your favourite ad. How do you position yourself vis-à-vis it? Do you like because it is convincing? Do you like it despite what it’s trying to say, or how it’s saying it? How easily persuaded are you? Post it as a comment to the blog.

2. Readings
Choi and Rifon (2007) – excerpts (online)