

## **‘Art’s in pop culture in me’: Posthuman Performance and Authorship in Lady Gaga’s *Artpop* (2013)**

### **Abstract**

10 years after her eccentric entrance into the pop scene with ‘Just Dance’, Gaga’s image is now markedly less edgy, in part due to her current focus on her film and TV acting career which requires a different image. In her musical work, Gaga is known for referencing artists that came before her in her music and music videos, and she has previously pushed the assumed boundaries between pop and art. This bricolage of influences often gives rise to claims of inauthenticity in which her rapidly changing and subversive image has left critics questioning who the “real” Lady Gaga is. Moving beyond limited and value-laden discourses of authenticity, we instead suggest that her performances exemplify a posthuman approach to art and/as subjectivity. In the posthuman view, one’s “self” is not a singular, static, autonomous individual, but a subjectivity that is emergent; an entanglement between entities, both human and non-human. Posthuman theory consequently troubles dualistic binaries, such as those between male/female, self/other, subject/object, and human/machine/animal. This allows for a critique anthropocentric hierarchies, instead arguing for a rhizomatic acknowledgement of the different entities in the subjectivities that emerge. We suggest that Lady Gaga’s work on her 2013 album *Artpop* exemplifies this approach, as Gaga fashions her body to resemble artworks and wears visual references to (female) artists that came before her. She incorporates different objects, machines, animals and others into her performances, thereby embodying a posthuman subjectivity. This work therefore signifies a reconsideration of what it means to be an audiovisual- artist and challenges not only the sanctity of self, but also the Romantic model of the male artist and singer songwriter which persists in much popular music media criticism. However, problematically anthropocentric approaches remain throughout via Gaga’s foregrounding of self, and her current return to more muted performance styles might be seen as indicative of the difficulties of living a posthuman life in a humanistic society and marketplace.

**Keywords:** Lady Gaga, popular music, posthumanism, assemblage, Romantic artist

### **Introduction**

The Met Gala is an annual opening fundraiser in support of the Costume Institute’s fashion exhibition, and – as the theme of the yearly exhibition denotes the dress code for the opening gala – it is a staple event in the world of fashion. In 2019, the theme, “Camp: Notes on Fashion” gave birth to a variety of hits, but arguably more misses, from celebrity guests. Whilst some took camp to extremes, others seemed to flop in the face of this potentially nebulous theme. Susan Sontag (1964: 1) identifies the essence of camp as ‘its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.’ For Sontag (1964), camp is style over substance, theatricality flirting with irony, a playful consuming or performing of culture always ‘in quotation marks’. A camp sensibility ‘has been a consistent part of Gaga’s costume and dress’ (Gray and Rutnam 2014: 51) and many expected Gaga greatness at the Met Ball. However, Lady Gaga was one whose outfits fell somewhere in the middle of the pack, a

surprising turn of events given the drag and camp looks for which she has been known in the past. Her original overlarge outfit did gesture to the exaggeration and political playfulness of camp. However, as she took off layer after layer to reveal sleeker and lesser dresses it seemed like a dressing down, rather than a camping up. From the original hot pink dress with a train of 25feet that required a team of dancers to manoeuvre it, designer Brandon Maxwell stepped forward to unzip Gaga and expose an elegant black dress, then a pink bodycon dress, and finally a black lingerie number where the only remarkable thing was the height of the heels. In many ways, this stripped-down appearance is emblematic of a broader image shift from Gaga which began with the release of the album *Joanne* (2016), showcasing a more country sound and singer-songwriter aesthetic that saw her regularly perform in jeans and t-shirts. This marks a significant break with her previously exuberant fashion sense.

In the following article we therefore take this moment as an opportunity to explore Gaga's shifting performance of subject positions. Returning to her *Artpop* (2013) days, we explore the ways in which specific, posthuman themes were highly evident within her work. Drawing on posthuman theory from Rosi Braidotti (2013) and Karen Barad (2007), we analyse a selection of Gaga's songs, considering the aesthetics employed within the music videos. Posthumanism, as we explain further on in this article, works on multiple levels, disrupting taken-for-granted notions of both pre-existing binaries, and the hierarchies which they have both enabled and enforced. Both the individual unity of the self, and the anthropocentric focus of Western contemporary thought, are discredited and dismantled. Braidotti has written extensively about the genealogy of the posthuman, and the ethical needs for the disruption of humanistic hierarchies. We demonstrate the ways in which Gaga's work of the Artpop era disrupted binaries of human/animal, subject/object, human/machine, male/female. In doing so, this paper stakes a broader claim to the way in which Gaga's work destabilised positions of self/other and therefore how her posthuman pop performance can be understood not just as queer gender performance, but as a construction of subversive pop authorship that breaks with and actively deconstructs the notion of the 'authentic' independent author dominant in popular music. This allows us to draw on Barad's work, which theorises the ways in which subjectivities emerge from entanglements, arguing that there is no a priori, individual ontology that sits outside of intra-action (a concept we explore further below) with other entities.

As we argue, Gaga's performances not only embody gender queer fashionings, but also fashion her in overtly posthuman ways, through intertextual references and the intersections between clothes, makeup, the digital, and the body. We focus our study on various aesthetic devices employed by Gaga in the music videos that accompanied the release of her album *Artpop* (2013), namely: *Applause* (2013), and *G.U.Y.* (2014), as these videos embody the themes of hybridity and disruption of self. We chose *Artpop* because it signifies her perhaps most explicit discussion of the breaking of boundaries between pop/art, self/other, human/machine. Due to the intertextual and often self-referential nature of her work, we occasionally include artistic moments before and after the release of the album. We agree with Francesca Granata's (2017: 149) assertion that Gaga's fame is dependent on the ways in which she has articulated herself through fashion, and it is also within the aesthetic

realm that Gaga has made her queering of cultures and norms most visible and radical. We therefore draw on her aesthetic performances throughout the article. The following analytical sections are broken out to explore human-technology hybridity, human-animal chimeras, subject-object displacement and self/other instability. Having demonstrated the queering of self through these intra-actions, we then move to show how this catalogue demonstrates a disavowal not only of the humanist subject as static and stable, but also of the Romantic figure of the artist.

### **Queerly posthuman, posthumanly queer**

Both queer theory (e.g. Butler 1993; Kosofsky Sedgwick 1994; Halberstam 2011) and posthumanism (e.g. Haraway 1991; Barad 2007) are concerned with the unsettling of pre-existing, socially constructed boundaries. As Patricia MacCormack (2009: 112) argues, the posthuman challenges the idea of what it means to be human by refusing to reduce different modes of knowing or being into a standard “model” provided by the white, male, logical, hegemonic worldview. She states,

Like queer, the posthuman does not seek to exchange or go beyond toward a set goal. Both interrogate the arbitrary nature of systems of power masquerading as truth. (MacCormack 2009: 112)

Queer studies and posthumanism therefore both question the ideological roots behind many of our taken for granted assumptions; for queer studies this began as a project to call into account the “truths” suggested by heteronormative assumptions of stable categories of gender and sexuality. Queer itself was adopted as a term by some in order to avoid what they deemed exclusionary politics of words such as “lesbian” or “gay”, (which did not allow for fluidity of gender or sexuality and therefore continued to play into dichotomous ideologies) (Johnson 2008: 166). As MacCormack (2009: 111) argues, queer theory works to ‘theorise the spaces between’, whilst ‘posthumanism extends queer from the realm of the social-sexual to infect and inflect all systems of transformation’ (MacCormack 2009: 122). As such, both concepts work against notions of dualistic binaries by positing that within these binaries hierarchies are always already embedded. Further, these concepts both argue that the categorisations and ways in which we have historically understood identity have imposed an understanding of identity as “stable”, which fails to capture the fluidity of human experience. Margrit Shildrick (1997: 146) has highlighted the ways in which ‘the dominant modern Western notion of subjectivity’ is based on a concept of a ‘free and rational sovereign individual, aware of himself as a self, and claiming some kind of authority, whether sanctioned transcendentally or materially, over those “others” who are disqualified.’ This notion of subjectivity points to the ways in which binaries construct/signpost otherness, which, in turn, indicate less-than-ness. This “othering” is therefore apparent through the hierarchies that are enacted through what is considered to be the norm, and this ideological positioning will always suit those in power. Accordingly, queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990; 1993) ‘argue that all identity is fraught because it is always already mediated

through language and ceded to those who have the power to control representation' (Johnson 2008: 166).

Celebrated as gay icon and member and ally of the LGBTQ+ community, Gaga has been championed as a queer and potentially feminist performer. Jack Halberstam (2012: xxi) argues that '[t]he genius of gaga allows Lady Gaga to become the vehicle for performing the very particular arrangements of bodies, genders, desires, communication, race, affect, and flow that we might now want to call gaga feminism'. For example, Gaga's drag performance as Jo Calderone in 'You and I' (2011) and the MTV Awards blurs 'the line between nature and artifice, authenticity and glamour, boy and girl, "you and I" altogether' (Geller 2014: 209). Gaga's bodily performances reject strict gender binaries for something more fluid where she is 'constantly in the process of becoming: either man, woman, transsexual or alien, never quite settling comfortably into one category or the other' (Geczy and Karaminas 2017: 723).

Fundamental to her queer performance art are fashion, dress and costume. Her costumes can be understood as 'a desire to maintain control of her visual persona and to collaboratively bring it about' (Gray and Rutnam 2014: 45), and her fashion collaborative Haus of Gaga is evidence of this approach. Her sartorial articulations facilitate the gender-bending performances for which she is known while also situating her within queer history and a "'gay lib" cultural sensibility' that recovers 'tropes of hyper-masculinity, including military and biker sartorial aesthetics' (Gray and Rutnam 2014: 52).

However, despite her large LGBTQ+ following, Gaga is not always seen as a straightforwardly queer performer. This is perhaps due to her deeply polarising performances that are either read as subversive explorations of fame and gender (see, for example, Geller 2014; Halberstam 2012), or as appropriations and plagiarisms of past pop icons such as Madonna, David Bowie and Andy Warhol in which her performances are perceived as inherently inauthentic (see, for example, Ventzislavov 2012). Her feminism has been described as postfeminist and neoliberal: Robin James (2015: 138) identifies Gaga's feminism as postfeminist and as a strategy that 'neoliberalism uses to convince privileged women (and men) that they are sufficiently "progressive" and "enlightened"'.<sup>1</sup> James (2015) locates Gaga's performances within neoliberal discourses of resilience, where queer "damage" is not only commodified, but is also required to fit into a narrative of "overcoming".

As argued above, Lady Gaga uses her body as a canvas upon which a plethora of meanings can be written. But this use of her body, and her apparently ambiguous spectacular performances are not always perceived as subversive. As Juliet Williams (2014: 29) observes, '[t]hose who challenge Lady Gaga's claim to the feminist mantle wonder whether a pop diva

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<sup>1</sup> While a detailed discussion of the politics of class goes beyond the scope of this article, it is perhaps worth highlighting that as a former student of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Gaga can draw on educational and economical privileges that shape her engagement with popular music and performance art that may influence the reception of her work.

known for her love of high fashion, her model thin figure, and her penchant for sexually charged performances really deserves credit as a liberatory figure'. She highlights the song 'Born This Way' (2011) for its 'decidedly un-queer liberatory vision' (Williams 2014: 31), as the song seemingly propagates a 'biology is destiny' message through its title and lyrical content.

However, Laura Westengard (2014: 176) locates Gaga's appeal in exactly this potential for multiple readings and critiques: she 'signifies drastically different things to different people, a kind of shape shifter overdetermined by the multiple meanings playing out upon her body.' As we argue in this article, Gaga's love of fashion and multiplicity of subject positions is integral to her work as a posthuman artist. We suggest that understanding Lady Gaga's performance and pop authorship as posthuman may help think through the ways in which her work can be understood as queer and disruptive.

Posthumanism extends queer theory by suggesting that all identity is fraught not only due to the binaries constructed between genders and sexualities, but also of self/other, subject/object, human/animal. In place of these reductive dichotomies, through posthumanism an understanding of humans in a rhizomatic and entangled relationship with both human and non-human others, objects and animals arises. From this perspective, to be entangled is 'to lack an independent, self-contained existence. [...] individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating' (Barad 2007: ix). By this, Barad also means that agency is neither the sole domain of humans, nor the sole domain of any "thing" - living or non-living. She describes agency as the 'ongoing reconfigurings of the world' (Barad 2007: 141) where different possibilities and modes of becoming and articulating are made possible through dynamic intra-actions, rather than discrete inter-actions (wherein each entity retains its individuality). Based on these understandings of queer theory and the posthuman, we explore the ways in which Lady Gaga speaks to these disruptions and entanglements through her bodily expressions and experiments. Her queer-gender performance is therefore extended in further posthuman ways through, for example, her notion of identity as one where the self is constantly crafted through "external" influence, rather than fixed or core. Whilst musicians' performance personas often have an evolutionary process, fluidity and augmentation are a central thread in Gaga's ethos and performance.

However, beyond this flux in identity and selfhood, Gaga has also crafted subjectivities that have historically challenged and undermined a variety of binary positions in her work, from male-female, subject-object, self-other, and human-machine-animal-alien. From this perspective her work explicitly embodies and embraces posthuman issues and ideologies. As Claudia Costa et al. (2017: 10) say, 'the posthuman does not mean the end of the human or the beginning of the anti-human, but the decentering of the human so that it can be conceptualized in new ways, e.g., in its entanglement with nature, culture, and technology.' Throughout *Artpop*, (although, in some ways, both before and beyond it also) Gaga draws on a variety of natural, cultural, and technological influences to demonstrate a hybridisation of being. Here, where classic understandings of the liberal humanist subject strive for authenticity, stability, unity and self-mastery, 'the posthuman figure allows for

alternative perspectives and positions from which to question, destabilize, and decenter the human, including modern binary categories' (Costa et al. 2017: 9). MacCormack (2009: 111-113) argues that queer theory enables the mobilisation of different "categories" of identity through creating connections with other things, and collapsing "self" and "other". She therefore suggests that 'posthumanism is a form of queer desire, or queer "life".' (MacCormack 2009: 113) Throughout Gaga's work, we believe this is evident in the ways she constructs authorship and artistic legacy in her music videos through clothes and the body. Yet, this reading is not without issues, as we explore through the evidence of anthropocentrism within Gaga's work, from the centrality of Gaga's own head, to the exhibitionist exertion of control she displays.

### ***Human-technology hybridity***

In Gaga's *Applause* video we encounter a variety of montages where human-machine-animal configurations are seen as cyborgesque, drawing on Donna Haraway's (1991: 149-152) definition of the cyborg as 'a hybrid of machine and organism, [...] The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed'. Directed by fashion photographer duo and previous collaborators Inez and Vinoodh, the music video serves as a portrait of the artist Gaga. Different outfits were used to represent different aspects of her as a performer (Good Morning America). In comparison to her previous videos, *Applause* (2013) is surprisingly short at 3 minutes and 36 seconds. But these 3 minutes, 36 seconds are packed with more than a dozen references, or rather embodiments, of iconic works of art. Most significantly, she opens the video descending to a stage in skeletal wings, referencing Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) (**fig. 1**). The film has been noted for its depiction of the 'machine-woman', who, as Andreas Huyssen (1981) notes, marks a transgression of the association of men with technology, and women with 'the natural'.

Figure 1: Lady Gaga referencing Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Vinoodh Matadin and Inez van Lamsweerde (dir.), *Applause*, 2013. USA © Interscope Records.

Indeed, Huyssen (1981) argues that *Metropolis* channelled anxieties surrounding industrialisation and the advance of technology, particularly technology's relationship with the human body, and potential bionic human-machine hybrids. By referencing this work more than 80 years later, Gaga demonstrates the ways in which we have not yet transcended these anxieties, in more ways than one. Where, historically, the liberal human subject embraced autonomy, reason, and mastery, women (as "other") were excluded from this position, they were 'assigned to the pole of un-reason, passions and emotions' (Braidotti 2013: 34); they were seen instead as creatures more tied to the body than occupied with the mind. This worldview equates technology with scientific rationality; i.e. the domain of men. Women, with their supposedly fragile bodies and emotions, could not possibly enter into meaningful exchanges or relationships with technology. Moreover, technology and machines are seen as "other" too, subservient and instrumentalised. By melding with the mechanical wings, Gaga both refutes the separation between machine and human, as well as the deeper gendered associations of binaries between bodily being and reasonable behaviour. In these moments,

Gaga unsettles notions of ‘natural’ and ‘authentic’ femininity and moves ‘toward an affirmative, creative posthuman being’ (Lucie 2019: 76). Gaga’s embodiment seems to suggest this – she rises into the air on her wings, almost signifying an awakening and affirmative arrival.

The emergence of different experiments in being and subjectivity throughout Gaga’s earlier works, therefore suggests something of a posthuman exploration. Her art seems to provoke in order to create, and at times this hybridisation does seem provocative regarding our pre-existing hybridities. Even the height of her high heels, that continually augment her “natural” height, seem exaggerated. Normally a signifier of normative femininity, Gaga almost queers and camps heels; she ‘presents femininity as horrible prettiness: not a seamless or natural part of her body, but rather as an aesthetic object’ (Heller 2015: 452). This demands attention to the ways in which we do not stop at the boundary of the skin, and instead incorporate “other” materials into our sense and performance of “self”. Moreover, it demonstrates an engagement with stimuli that disrupts a technology-human binary. Such binaries might conceive of clothing as a representation of the individual, whereas Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (2017: 718) point out that ‘[c]ontemporary fashion has had a long and rich history of experimenting with the boundaries of the body and interrogating gender.’ If we therefore apply Barad’s (2007) work, we instead see that Gaga’s clothing choices are not mere “representations”; they are performative in themselves. In other words, rather than garments “representing” the personality, or gender, of the wearer, the garments are performative in that it is through them that that personality emerges, and through which personality becomes evident. Thus, even shoes become a particular embodiment and enactment that enable certain subjectivities. Garments are therefore another entity through which a subjectivity emerges – what we wear contributes to the available agency in terms of denoting what a subjectivity can be or do, and how it must be enacted.

### ***Human-animal chimeras***

In addition to the incorporation of the machinic, a variety of imaginations of chimeras - human-animal hybrids - pervade Gaga’s work, including, for example, Gaga as a black swan in the aforementioned music video for *Applause* (2013). She sings ‘One second I’m a Koons, then suddenly the Koons is me’ as she transforms into a human/swan hybrid (fig. 2). Here, she appears white faced with black streaks and cropped white hair, with her head imposed upon the long elegant neck of a black-swan in a fur-covered egg. Notably, while the lyrics link her transformation to Jeff Koons’ *Balloon Swan*, her own embodiment departs from the sleek plastic looks of the Koons artwork. While the Koons is an abstraction, Gaga goes for a much more ‘natural’ look. These manifestations could be suggestive of a provocative posthumanism, asking us, who, or what, are humans, without the bodies that they have come to be known for? The more we begin to work with the displacement of the idea of a standard “self”, or standard body type, the more we realise just how standardised such images can be. This, of course, is the way people of colour, disabled people, and disfigured people have been othered throughout humanist conceptions of the liberal subject - by not fitting the standard model of bodily expectation, provided, of course, by the model of the Vitruvian man (see Braidotti 2013) of ‘a perfectly functional physical body, implicitly modelled upon ideals of

white masculinity, normality, youth and health' (Braidotti 2013: 67-68). However, by incorporating the animal into her bodily experiments and expressions, this hybridisation not only questions bodily norms, but hints at being in some way post-anthropocentric. By displacing the "humanness" of Gaga and instead attaching, affixing, and interweaving it with the animal-other, this suggests a rejection of cultural idolisations of the human form. From this perspective, it may be seen to speak to a trans-speciesism. Lucian Gomoll (2011: 2) suggests that through our relationship with technologies and others we must 'dismantle humanistic notions of normativity and do away with posthuman single-species determinism.' These chimera-Gagas, (chimeragas?) seem to suggest some way towards this: normativity is dismantled, the "norm" is replaced, and single-species make way for hybrids.

**Figure 2: Lady Gaga as human-swan hybrid. Vinoodh Matadin and Inez van Lamsweerde (dir.), in Applause, 2013. USA © Interscope Records.**

However, it is important to note that this entanglement does not equate with Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal". Braidotti (2013: 66-67) drawing on Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan (1995) states that becoming-animal 'entails the displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of trans species solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species'. In the chimeragas, however, we cannot escape Gaga's gaze, which pervades her animalistic art. Like French performance artist Orlan before her, whose digital works reimagined her in different ethnicities<sup>2</sup>, Gaga here remains the stable reference. Her body may be (digitally) changed, but the animal cannot supplant the humanoid, and thus anthropocentrism remains firmly in place. Moreover, the use of the digital domain indicates a lack of environmental symbiosis, and there is no sense of solidarity with the animal-others. They are appropriated, objectified. The emergence of the animalistic hybridity is both too disruptive and not-disruptive enough to make us consider our construction of selfhood. Regarding posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, Braidotti (2013: 70) has stated that in order to escape the hierarchies within human-animal engagements, '[t]he point now is to move towards a new mode of relation; animals are no longer the signifying system that props up the humans' self-projections and moral aspirations.' Unfortunately, Lady Gaga's digitised interpretations here fail to create this mode of relation - instead the animal becomes the ogled, but with Gaga at their head, they are still subjugated. Gaga's head is foreign on the animal body - there is no true hybridity, or melding. As such, her vulnerability in these imaginings seems minimal, and the relationship not one based on mutuality.

Elsewhere, Gaga's intra-action with the animal has deeper, potentially more philosophical effects on the human-animal boundaries it pushes. Her infamous meat dress, worn at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards and designed by Franc Fernandez and styled by Nicola Formichetti, questioned our relationship with animals, meat, subject and object. Where Gaga remains the spectacle in her digital animal hybridisations, the meat dress

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<sup>2</sup> See Gabriela Cala-Lesina (2011: 177) for an exploration of the 'inevitably problematic' 'ethics of displaying and commercialising a racially coded body' in Orlan's work.

troubled these binaries, the shock factor demonstrating the ways in which the static nature of things is disrupted. Confronted with the dress we note it becomes a doing or being for Gaga; it becomes agentic. Through it, with it, and by wearing it, she/it becomes a provocation. This is intra-action and posthuman subjectivity through the meat, the construction, and the body that wears it, become-something through their engagement with one another. The meat alone is meat, the body a body. Yet through their wearing of one another they are shaped into a message, a story, a challenge. Where does subject begin and object end? The meat gains a new agency, and here post-anthropocentrism seems evident - the spectacle is not (just) Gaga. Her clothes suggest what she is, what she becomes, and here we see a form of “new materialism” emerging, ‘whereby matter as an active force is not only sculpted by, but also co-productive in conditioning and enabling social worlds and expression, human life and experience’ (Sencindiver 2017). The fact that the meat dress caused widespread shock demonstrates exactly the convergence of matter, environment, and subjects. As Anneke Smelik (2018) argues, ‘material agency is not located exclusively in the technology nor in the human body, but in an assemblage of wearer, fashion and technology’ thus Gaga and the meat became a statement together. Yet, the meat becomes evidence of instrumental behaviour when Gaga, being interviewed for *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, stated ‘It’s certainly no disrespect to anyone that’s vegan or vegetarian, as you know, I’m the most judgment-free human being on the Earth. It has many interpretations, but for me this evening it’s, “If we don’t stand up for what we believe in, if we don’t fight for our rights, pretty soon we’re going to have as much rights as the meat on our bones.”’ (2010). With these words, it is as though the meat is denied its own voice - the meat is not meat, but a representation of how few rights we might have? The narrative seems incongruent. If ‘[p]osthuman queer involves entering into alliances with things that cannot speak and with one’s own silence, entering into alliances with inhumans or less-than-humans’ (MacCormack 2009: 120) then Gaga has not achieved this here; the animal-meat is still appropriated for her own ends, and utilised for a human message as it was designed to be a commentary on the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in the American armed forces regarding sexuality.

### ***Subject-object displacement***

Agentic costuming and the disdain Lady Gaga shows for the sanctity of her own “self”-hood seem to not only call into question relationships with technologies and animals, but also demonstrate a blurring of subject and object in Lady Gaga’s work. In *Applause*, Gaga becomes her own canvas, as she smears coloured paint across her whitened face, juxtaposed against black clothes, hat, and background. In *G.U.Y.* she engages with similar themes. Lyrically, the song is a meditation on gender roles. The music video, directed by Gaga herself, explores the collision of erotics and economics to shine a light on the sexualised exploitation of the female pop star. The video opens with a visual nod to its predecessor *Applause*: Lady Gaga wears wigs, but rather than the affirming images of birth, the audience is confronted with the images of a violated Gaga, struck in the chest by an arrow and surrounded by men in suits, celebrating her downfall. In *G.U.Y.* she augments an image of herself with a famous Lego model, ‘Yellow’, by artist Nathan Sawaya; a humanoid form tearing itself open to reveal Lego bricks falling out from within (fig. 3). This artwork, originally seeming to subjectify an object (through giving it a (human) body), is made

somewhat more confused by the integration of Gaga's head. The power the bricks held on their own becomes, once again, disrupted through Gaga's interruption.

**Figure 3: Lady Gaga's head imposed on Nathan Sawaya's 'Yellow' Lego sculpture, Lady Gaga (dir.), *G.U.Y.*, 2014. USA © Interscope Records.**

Bennett (2010:4) has given a thorough insight into “thing-power” through her work on the vibrancy of matter, and this post-anthropocentric attitude is also apparent in object-oriented ontologies (OOO) and philosophies, which put ‘things at the center of being’ and suggest that ‘humans are elements, but not the sole elements, of philosophical interest’ (Bogost 2012: 6). Here, considering Gaga's incorporation of “self” back into the object we might agree with Ian Bogost (2012: 8) when he suggests that ‘[p]osthumanism, we might conclude, is not posthuman enough’. Gaga is willing to decapitate her own body and transpose her head onto other figures, thus demonstrating some allegiance to hybridity, and some openness to her own embodiment. Nevertheless, her head always remains. This has a dual demonstration of hierarchy - a figurative embodiment of mind over matter, as well as a demonstrative positioning of the human head and mind (presumed, in control, and channelling communication) over the body. This ambivalence perhaps mirrors her own reflections on her objectification as a female pop star: aware of the ways her body is commodified, the head remains ‘in charge’.

Gaga herself describes the meaning of ‘G.U.Y.’ - the music video and the song - as follows:

So wearing make-up, smelling delicious and having suckable, kissable, edible things between your limbs is something I find strengthening because I know that when I pick the right guy, I can let him have it. Some women feel oppressed by make-up and clothing, and here's to them, they have every right to feel that way as well. (McGarry 2012)

While this statement reveals a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007) in its championing of doing beauty labour for herself, in the context of the narrative of the music video this points towards a celebration of female sexuality as a source of pleasure and comfort. In *G.U.Y.* (2014) Gaga portrays both female sexuality and art as escapes from the commodification of the female pop star, as both are used to ‘strengthen’ her after her recovery before she seeks revenge in the final scenes of the music video. This use of makeup is further complicated by her transition to a more ‘natural’ look post-*Joanne* and as her acting career develops. In *A Star Is Born* (2018), she wore no make-up for the role of Ally, and diverted from her usual bleach blonde locks to a more “natural” colour. An often-retold story in the marketing campaign was that of the first encounter between Gaga and actor and director Bradley Cooper. He told her to take off her makeup, and then proceeded to wipe it off himself to reveal the woman he sought: ‘Just Stefani Germanotta. “Completely open,” he said. “No artifice.”’ (Kaufmann 2018).

The politics of make-up are complicated, and Gaga, while promoting her upcoming make-up line highlights its liberatory qualities: “When I became Lady Gaga when I was younger, it was because I discovered makeup” and credits her transformational team with giving her the strength (and subjectivity?) to be “Lady Gaga”: “Sarah [Tanno] would do my make-up, Freddie [Aspiras] would do my hair, and they would hold me and say: ‘Look at yourself. There’s Lady Gaga. You can do this. Now go do it,’” (Ritschel 2019) - thus indicating how Lady Gaga was an entanglement of human and non-human others, through which she was able to emerge - literally, onto a stage. This is not about constructing a mask to “hide” behind, but crafting the ability of a certain subjectivity to emerge from, with and through these entities.

Yet despite being this disruptively queer Gaga, there is still a yearning for being “just” the self. The idea of being “Just Stefani Germanotta” - Gaga’s given name - seems to demonstrate that even when striving for an entangled and distributed performance of “self”, we cannot escape the overthrows of our humanistic upbringing, and we still desire, or believe in, the ‘ideal of the unified, coherent, self-centered subject’ (Rose 1998: 4). This shows the ways in which even when we begin to understand ourselves in more distributed ways, we are still entangled with historical understandings from humanism. As Braidotti (2013: 35) explains, subjectivity ‘involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability’ – we understand that we have a responsibility to act in accordance with certain goals and to be seen acting outside of this draws scrutiny and suspicion, and we are accordingly moved down in the perceived hierarchy of importance.

Sally Gray and Anusha Rutnam (2014: 53) have written of how ‘Gaga’s knowing parodic performance of blonde pop princess makes transparent the notion that all gendered performance is itself parodic.’ In the *Posthuman Glossary*, Gaga is lauded for ‘the new idioms of glamour and femininity as they appear’ in her work, and for how her ‘feminine performative excess finds a new performance horizon and hovers between madness, mayhem and the dark side’ (Halberstam 2018: 171). Yet, with *A Star Is Born*, where her bodily performance tells the story of Allie rather than Gaga, not only does Gaga seem to regress in terms of “self” expression through a rejection of “external” augmentations, but also in terms of gender performance. Where previous performances have destabilised notions of the category ‘woman’, her current championing of the ‘authentic’ self is a decidedly un-queer turn towards normative femininity, despite the film’s supposedly feminist demonstration of a woman out-achieving and eclipsing a man.

### ***Self/other instability: Posthuman Pop authorship, queering the romantic humanist author***

The blurring of self and other is apparent in Gaga’s continual references and hybridisations with human others through her work, as well as the non-human previously covered. Rather than merely referencing the likes of Warhol, Madonna, and Orlan, she constructs her subjectivity through and with them, evident in her physical aesthetic in a variety of music videos.

Gaga's approach to artistic subjectivity may be understood as a form of cultural bricolage, and as Victor Corona (2013: 728) argues that this 'may ultimately open new and enduring terrains of theatricality in pop culture'. Corona (2013) refers to the pre-*Artpop* era here, however, we would argue that her work around *Artpop* is where she clearly formulates "new and enduring terrains", not only of theatricality, but in female pop authorship and aesthetics. Lady Gaga is not the first person to attempt to transgress the artificial boundaries between art and pop, and indeed, it might be a particularly Warholian move to do so (Corona 2013). However, what distinguished her from other performers is that she literally embodies these transgressions in her music videos (and on stage), while confidently claiming the title 'artist'. This is remarkable in a context in which her use of this term is constantly contested.

Returning to *Applause*, then, the video begins with the previously discussed artistic disruption of gendered boundaries. It seems noteworthy here that the *Metropolis* imagery has already been used by Gaga in earlier work such as *Alejandro* and *Born This Way*, and in a 2009 photo shoot with David LaChapelle. The image thus constitutes the link between her *Born This Way* album and *Artpop* and its celebration of fluid artistic categories. Furthermore, a similar reference to *Metropolis* is also made in Madonna's *Express Yourself* (1989) music video, which is 'set against the backdrop of Fritz Lang's [aforementioned] film of 1927, *Metropolis* – a pastiche rather than social comment, a future only out of the past' (Watts 1996: 101).

However, Watts' critique reproduces gendered discourses of cultural value that are tied to notions of 'originality' (and as such linked to concepts of authorship and authenticity) and focusses on the form of this artistic move, claiming pastiche to be an almost lazy act of uninspired copying. This neglects any consideration of the possibility that this form of pastiche may be an artistic strategy with a specific function. Lady Gaga's use of intertextual references creates a network of connections between female artists and their work, which is of particular importance in the world of popular music in which the 'canon' is dominated by male artists. Gaga's work here is offering an alternative female canon in which female pop stars are valued for their art. This becomes evidence of the ways in which Gaga embraces a posthuman-ness in her subjectivity through the acknowledgement of how intra-dependent we are on multiple "others", breaking up 'the fantasy of unity, totality and one-ness' (Braidotti 2013: 100) that the notion of the authentic self might suggest through autonomy and individuality.

But this is not the only function of citing other artists. Gaga continues to embody for example Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" and Jeff Koons' balloon swans. She does not only embody works of art by (notably only) male artists, but also embodies a range of references to her musical predecessors and influences from fashion, such as a reference to Madonna's 'Vogue', which, apart from reemphasising the linkage of female artists, also positions fashion as an important influence. And there is a reference to Andy Warhol's pictures of Marilyn Monroe. Madonna, Andy Warhol and David Bowie are, as pointed out previously, dominant influences that she has verbally and artistically cited before, and Alexander McQueen was a collaborator before his death. In this context, it seems bizarre to

accuse Lady Gaga of misleading her audience and attempting to pass her art off as original (Ventzislavov 2012). An integral part of Gaga's work is to make these influences visible and place them in the service of her own self-expression.

The visualising of her musical lineage in *Applause* becomes a part of her self-stylisation as an artist. As Corona (2013: 729) points out, '[g]iven that Gaga has released albums titled *The Fame* and *The Fame Monster*, it is not surprising that she is preoccupied with the performance of celebrity and the construction of a lasting artistic legacy'. *Applause* sees Gaga situating herself both in a line of conventionally recognised artists and musical artists, highlighting the boundary-crossing that she has set out in the song 'ARTPOP'. It further tells a narrative of her artist-becoming: *Applause* shows her not only as the currently famous pop star, but also shows scenes from her pre-fame days. For example, we can see a young Gaga lying on a mattress, envisioning dance moves that are then later performed in videos such as *Alejandro* (2009) (fig. 4).

**Figure 4: A young Lady Gaga dreams up choreographies used in her later career, Vinoodh Matadin and Inez van Lamsweerde (dir.), Applause, 2013. USA © Interscope Records.**

We suggest that her posthuman approach to art and subjectivity where 'discourses in posthumanities contribute to the decentering of classical notions of the human, offering a renewed emphasis on the relational or coevolutionary' (Gomoll 2011: 2) challenges dominant gendered constructions of authenticity. The humanist subject values the notion of an autonomous self, distinct, individual, stable and static. In the context of the Enlightenment period, this became synonymous with an anthropocentric worldview that celebrated not only the absence of God and the subsequent position of human as "master", but also with marked gender politics of the day, wherein Cartesian dualism and the supposed power of mind over matter foregrounded educated, that is to say, white, male, able-bodied, upper-class, heterosexual, members of society over "others" (being women, people of colour, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ communities). Yet, as MacCormack (2009: 124) suggests, the posthuman 'marks an end to exclusionary politics' and is liminal, libidinal 'and because it demands entering into irreducible alliances with alterity, offers what we could call a queer ethics'.

As such, these intertextual alliances serve to create a narrative of Lady Gaga as an artist with a vision and a history, contrary to the depictions of her as just another manufactured pop star. Here, she does not utilise the romantic discourses of authenticity associated with rock music, but makes visible influences the music video *Applause* (2013) and boldly claims her place in a line of art and artists (and in her current work, she is extending this to her place as a fashion and make up designer). This embodies the notion that '[r]efusing identity is identity' (MacCormack 2009: 120) by engaging bricolage and assemblage rather than static "selfhood" and serves as a direct challenge to the male-dominated devaluing of pop music as described by Susan Cook (2001). This mode of authorship challenges the Romantic model dominant in popular music. Wil Greckel (1979)

argues that both rock and Romanticism are considered art movements that express intense emotions, rebellions against social and moral norms, and both are considered to encourage or glorify drug use. Most importantly, both artistic movements position the author/musician at the centre of attention and craft a star image out of this persona. And while both men and women are judged against such criteria, women, who often occupy positions such as the singer, are judged less favourably than men. Musical positions such as the singer are usually not considered to be of similar worth as the songwriter or musicians who play instruments. In many ways this mirrors the humanist subject ideal that prioritises individual rational thought (and intellectual craft such as songwriting) over embodied experience (or more corporeal musical expressions such as singing). Gaga's emphasis of bodily posthuman performance in her music videos as part of the crafting of her author image breaks with this dominant model by emphasising art and authorship as connected and collaborative.

### **Conclusion**

Where Costa et al (2017: 10) state that 'one of the most significant theoretical interventions of the posthuman or nonhuman turn has been the subversion of all kinds of dualisms, particularly the binary nature/culture and its privileging of the human to the detriment of other ontologies and agential entities', this is something we can see in earnest throughout Gaga's previous works; expectations are subverted, and the focus is distributed. As we have demonstrated through the above analysis, Lady Gaga has played with certain humanist binaries, and flirted with posthumanist idealisms through her use of fashion and technology. She is subverted, augmented, adorned, and provocative. Yet, she seems to have bent rather than broken the categorisations with which she plays only for them to snap back into place as the human, the anthropomorphic, remains the anchor of her work. Perhaps this is why, in Gaga's latest works, there seems to be a stripping back of the overt incorporation, or celebration, of other entities. Gaga is, as we all are, still posthuman - one cannot escape the distribution of self through disavowal of it - it is not new technologies or even a recognition of our emergence or entanglement that has altered this, posthumanism merely articulates it. Yet Gaga's *performance* of subjectivity negates and occludes this more than her former work. Through her recent turn to acting work we see evidence of a pared-down version of Gaga.

Thus, returning to full circle with Gaga's Met Ball "reveal", the event seems somewhat reflective of her own journey. Once over the top, larger than life, openly entangled and altered, she strips away the most visible augmentations to leave a presumed more "authentic" pared down version of selfhood. As one who indicated a new standard for diversifying this supposed self, it is disappointing to see her retreat into it.

This article has drawn on a range of queer theory and posthuman literature to link Lady Gaga's *Artpop* era work to posthuman understandings. We have established the ways in which Gaga's work showcases a variety of human-animal-machine hybridisations that disrupt previously taken-for-granted binaries including male/female, subject/object, and self/other. In doing so we add to ongoing analyses of Lady Gaga as a performer through an original contribution of empirical evidence that highlights how Gaga '[c]hallenges the integrity of the organic body, and confronting the viewer with her morphogenesis into human-machine-

animal hybrid' (Christiansen 2012). Halberstam (2018: 171) argues that the 'ambiguity that surrounds and even defines Lady Gaga – genital, musical, aesthetic – allows her to both question and revel in spectacular forms of femininity. It also signifies as a vivid example of posthuman modes of inhabiting the body' and we have provided further critical and original insight to this analysis by demonstrating the ways in which Gaga's work still appears to be informed by a humanistic hierarchy of dominance and a desire for individualistic integrity.

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