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## **FORGET MADONNA: THE MANY METAMORPHOSES OF KYLIE MINOGUE, SHOWGIRL AND SURVIVOR**

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### **Abstract**

American pop star Madonna is the female performer that has received more academic attention within Cultural Studies in the last twenty years. The main issue discussed in relation to her is whether her very successful, provocative, phallic persona —the embodiment of her rigid control over her own career— presents a valid alternative to stereotyped femininity. In contrast, Australian pop princess Kylie Minogue —whose music career already spans 20 years— has been practically ignored by academia due to the generalised perception that she represents precisely the kind of bland femininity that Madonna challenges.

This paper argues from a Cultural Studies perspective that, far from being easy to dismiss, Kylie Minogue is a relevant female performer whose public persona is also connected to pertinent gender issues. It is our belief that the insistence on finding subversive alternatives to traditional femininity —as represented by Madonna— has negatively affected the understanding of femininity itself. Minogue proves with her sustained career and professionalism that femininity does not necessarily have to be phallic in order to be successful and that it is too often unfairly identified with weakness.

We argue this thesis by analysing *Showgirl*, the tour that Minogue had to interrupt due to the breast cancer she was diagnosed with in 2005, and the revised version of this tour after her cancer recovery in 2007, *Showgirl Homecoming*, together with *White Diamond* (2007), the documentary on the impact of her illness on the show. In them Minogue comes across as a committed, metamorphic artist and as a tough survivor with much to offer as a role model to women who wish to be both professionally successful and feminine.

**Keywords:** Kylie Minogue – Madonna – pop music – femininity

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### **Introduction: An unfair comparison**

Like Madonna, Kylie Minogue has survived through endless recreation. As Barron explains, “as the 1980s drew to a close, Madonna would have, not a ‘child’ but rather a ‘sister’ in terms of a female pop performer who would become equally synonymous with re-invention and performative identity-evolution” (2008: 47), a role that Minogue plays today. However, while Madonna’s masculinised, sexualised femininity and her control over her performing career have been celebrated enthusiastically by feminist academics, Minogue’s apparently unproblematic femininity has resulted in her being treated as a non-issue.<sup>1</sup> One of her few defenders, Marc Brennan, notes that the comparison with the “feminist juggernaut” that Madonna is may be unfair as pop princesses “do not always attempt to be subversive” (2007: 178). For him, Minogue is intriguing mostly because of her elusiveness, as thanks to her many transformations and “[i]n the absence

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous critics have discussed constant reinvention and appropriation as career strategies for both singers, though mainly focusing on Madonna. About her, see Tetzlaff (1993); about Kylie, see Stanley-Clarke & Goodall (2002).

of definitive personality traits, she can be all we want her to be" (2007: 186-7), from the girl-next-door to an icon of glamour.

In this paper we argue that this postmodern fluid identity can be seen as an empty signifier —as Brennan unfairly does— only if we identify femininity with lack of control over the content of the star's image. Kylie's perseverance and her determination to survive the ups and downs in her career and even cancer are not compatible with the weak, blank personality that Brennan describes. Actually, similar attributes are read as masculine —hence positive— in Madonna's case, whereas in Minogue's they appear to be part of her feminine inability to develop a strong identity. To prove that this is a prejudiced reading, our focus will be the documentary *White Diamond*, dealing with the impact on her artistic development of the breast cancer she survived, and two tours: *Showgirl* (2005), a celebration of her career interrupted by her illness, and *Showgirl Homecoming* (2007), its revised version.

### **1. *White Diamond*: Survival strategies of the elusive female star**

*White Diamond: A Personal Portrait* is the work of Minogue's closest friend and collaborator, Willie Baker. The film borrows its title from the song that Minogue co-wrote with Scissor Sisters, in which she sings that "What you see and what it seems / are nothing more than dreams within a dream", words that reflect her elusiveness as a performer and as a woman. Baker's film, a remarkable example of the backstage genre, can be read as the result of Minogue's successful struggle to please her friend and still protect her private self from exposure. As such, this peculiar postmodern product produces an illusion of intimacy with the star while at the same time thickening the screen protecting her privacy.

Baker's easy access to Minogue is paradoxically his main obstacle. As her best friend —perhaps soulmate— he tries to reconcile the need to shield her from morbid curiosity with his wish to pay public homage to the woman behind the star. In the end, these cannot be reconciled. Baker wishes "to rip the surface away" for us to see into the Kylie he loves, whereas she declares that she won't like the film "Because I like to be more private than that. It's only because you're doing it that I'm doing it". This generates an intriguing tension as Minogue implicitly acknowledges

Baker's egocentric reasons to film her —after all, her success is also his— while carefully limiting his “bland adoration”, as critic Caitlin Moran (2007) calls it in order to ward off his intrusion into her most private self.

Because of Madonna's narcissistic exhibitionism it might be hard to accept that Minogue's strategy of self-presentation is based on concealment. Many fans enjoy what they see as her “mystery” which, of course, may be a marketing ruse or, more prosaically, the accidental consequence of her inability to articulate a discourse on her own self. Her critics tend to note, as Peter Conrad does (2006), that while her image may be hers, “the image makers were men, who had agendas of their own —sometimes reverential, more often vindictive”. Conrad also notes that “Kylie relishes a joke against herself, which attunes her to Australia's national habit of self-deprecation, and helps to explain her popularity” (2006) an insult presented as praise. The fact is that Minogue is a considerably opaque text not because she is a blank but because her appeal is based on an image of glamorous femininity which is so manipulative that it appears to be a non-issue.

The cancer Minogue suffered from has given further meaning to her image, as *White Diamond* underlines. Suddenly, Minogue is no longer a vacuous Barbie doll but a tough survivor, an identity she is certainly exploiting albeit to stress her professionalism not to sell her privacy. Minogue, of course, is not the only star to survive cancer. Opera star Josep Carreras and female pop stars like Anastacia, Sheryl Crow, Luz Casal or La Mari suffered a similar ordeal. Minogue's illness, however, became a high-impact media event precisely because she is a very private person. As she confesses to Baker, “I really felt like I was stripped of everything”. Even though she kept the lowest possible profile (unlike TV celebrity Jade Goody),<sup>2</sup> Minogue found it impossible to isolate herself from the headlines. Paradoxically, the intense media scrutiny allowed Minogue to find motivation for her recovery in a public gaze far warmer than she expected. Accordingly, she accepted *White Diamond* as a chance to “be a little more truer to myself and to share that” with her audience. Minogue, nonetheless, rejects Baker's attempts to present her as a “symbol of survival and hope”, denying she feels any pressure and observing after a meeting with child cancer patients that these visits were part of her star role years before her cancer. Her self-presentation eschews thus the

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<sup>2</sup> Goody, a notorious participant in the UK reality show *Celebrity Big Brother*, died aged 27 in 2009 of cervical cancer diagnosed as she took part in the Indian reality show *Bigg Boss*. She decided to sell to the media her last few months, including her wedding, to earn money for her two sons. She did not die, though, as many expected, in front of the camera.

sentimentalism tabooed by postmodernism and shows her instead as a cheerful, calm, hard-working woman intent on putting everyone around her at ease. Collaborators and audience struggle with the emotions elicited by her brush with death yet she tries to avoid “being emotional”, supporting Baker’s thesis that the cancer has actually strengthened her.

Her loveliness, which feels genuine, is ultimately the cornerstone of her star personality and what allows her to cover up her not so feminine—in the sense of subservient—determination to feed everyone’s fantasy. In *White Diamond* Kylie is the embodiment of glamour but also a simple woman for whom happiness is walking barefoot on the beach and who is often exhausted by her public role. In her playfulness—her strategy to cope—she may seem superficial yet her unstoppable determination to return to the stage despite family, lover and friends tells another story. Even Baker is confused by the iron will enclosed in Kylie’s petite, hyperfeminine body. After carrying her in his arms ill and in tears when she is forced to interrupt a gig, he wonders “Why do you do it?” An edgy Minogue replies that “it’s naturally what I’m inclined to do”, and here lies her strength: in her self-confidence.

In our cynical times it is easy to read her as a cynical exploiter of femininity, cancer included. Under this light, Baker is an accomplice in her charade—it’s not just a masquerade—and, in the worst case, a Svengali intent on making her into a gay man’s fantasy of femininity. Being even more cynical, we might say that luckily the cancer, which was *breast* cancer, hit the most vulnerable spot of the fantasy only to reinforce it. Yet, there is nothing fake or vulnerable in this woman’s successful career. Not even her declaration that ex-boyfriend Olivier Martínez was “really instrumental” in getting her through her illness nor Baker’s narcissistic pride in their friendship make her appear dependent.

While, as Brennan (2007) assures, Madonna may represent “ambition and authority” (178), the equally ambitious Minogue uses an exaggerated version of her femininity, as *White Diamond* shows, to fool us about her private self; by pretending she’s none in particular, while she is actually a very committed professional woman, she traps us into our own stereotypes regarding women. We may not know who she is, but she knows who we are. Reading this strategy as conventionally feminine or as fluidly postmodern—even post-postmodern—is up to us.

## **2. *Showgirl* and *Homecoming*: “Come and see the real thing”**

As displayed in *White Diamond*, Minogue eventually saw in her illness a chance to finally present herself publicly as her own woman and not as someone else’s disciple. A comparison between her performance in the tour *Showgirl* and in *Showgirl Homecoming* —both available on DVD— makes this evolution manifest.

Already sick but unaware of her cancer, the Kylie of *Showgirl* remains static amid her energetic dancers, as if she were the main prop in the elaborate stage rather than the star; in contrast, the Kylie of *Showgirl Homecoming*, still very visibly under the effects of the treatment, relishes her star role, taking command of the show. *Homecoming* is, thus, despite the similarities, a radical departure from *Showgirl* as it deconstructs not only Kylie’s musical career but also the diverse images of femininity she played with in the tour before her cancer.<sup>3</sup>

This change can be seen by comparing the most imaginative, creative segments in each show: “Denial” in *Showgirl* and “Samsara” in *Homecoming*. “Denial” explores man’s inability to share his secrets, with the woman playing the role of committed listener. The performance and the role reach a dramatic climax with “Confide in me”, with the dancers playing the role of Greek choir in this classical love epic, as they surround a tormented Kylie, left lying on the floor, alone and defeated.

The opposite is found in “Samsara”. In this segment, she adopts a more independent stance, quite unlike the subservience of “Denial”, in order to explore, perhaps unsurprisingly given her ordeal, reincarnation as seen by Hindu culture. Kylie appears here no longer as the victim of gender mis-communication but as her own woman, engrossed above all by the drama of her own survival. In *Homecoming*, “Confide in me” is, therefore, recycled as a song about her own evolution as a singer, with the audience playing the role of the generous lover. Likewise, *Homecoming* explores the relationship between community and individual in a postmodern society of false ideologies. The messianic symbols suggest that, after breaking free, the new star Kylie has something unique to offer, symbolised in her presentation as a Hindu goddess while using an alternative, Hindu sign language. She, however, plays with the idea of this imaginary superior

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<sup>3</sup> These images were the object of a very successful exhibition covering her whole career at the London Victoria and Albert Museum (see Menkes, 2007).

entity in order to unmask and deconstruct the idealization of celebrities like herself.

The sacrificial ritual represented on the stage in this segment begins with the star as a puppet, manipulated through invisible threads or chains, but ends with her breaking free from the charismatic leaders of the community that enslave her to become a goddess. This is a sly reference to Minogue's first pygmalsions —the authoritarian producers Stock, Aitken and Waterman of the appropriately named Deconstruction records— that any fan will recognise, as "Confide in me" closed Minogue's period under their control. However, this liberation from enslavement seems to lead to typical postmodern identity confusion, which prevails in the ensuing segment, the "Butterfly interlude". While an acrobat performs, a screen shows images of Kylie in captivity in contrast with her hyperbolic presentation as a Hindu goddess, which suggests that there may not be a solution to the problem of how to transcend one's identity, or that liberation may lead to captivity rather than to freedom.

In the segment that follows, named "Athletica" in *Homecoming* rather than "What Kylie wants Kylie gets" as in *Showgirl*, there is yet another significant change of approach. The setting in both cases is a gym dominated by the splendid male bodies of the dancers, with Kylie controlling them thanks to her hyper-feminine eroticism. In *Showgirl* her playful interaction with the men suddenly meshes with a brief allusion to her collaboration with Nick Cave, "Where the Wild Roses Grow", in which she played a victim of sexist violence, only to mesh again with the song, "Red Blooded Woman", about a courageous woman who changes from victim to victimizer precisely by using the power of her body. Men are under her spell, she literally walks on them but her black lace, see-through catsuit —complete with red shoes and a red flower on her head— suggests that this Kylie sees herself primarily in relation to men, not to herself.

In contrast, in *Homecoming* this dependent hyper-femininity gives way to a playful take on femininity and aggressiveness. The catsuit is replaced by a Dolce & Gabbana leopard-print literal catsuit, which recalls Catwoman's, the flower on the head by red boxing gloves. This teasing Kylie is no kitten but a tigress, ready to turn men into sexual objects at her service, as she does in the wonderfully sensual "Slow". Of course, Kylie's subtle mockery of her own hyper-femininity can't protect her from what we

might call the plain predatory gaze. We may see the joke behind the catsuit but when she teases U2 singer's Bono, a co-performer in one of *Homecoming's* numbers, he misses the nuances and praises her condescendingly just for being gorgeous.

While the beautiful "Dreams" segment remains practically intact in *Homecoming*, suggesting that this elegant Kylie is her own fantasy of herself as a star, she insists on poking fun on herself in the two segments of this tour which evolved from the segment "Kyliesque" of *Showgirl*. The adjective "Kyliesque" refers, of course, to Kylie's cheesy pop origins. She is bold enough to celebrate this in *Showgirl* but she's even bolder in *Homecoming*, as this show revels in the postmodern artificiality of pop. When "Burning Up" leads to a particular quotation of Madonna's "Vogue", Minogue stresses not only her links with the Queen of Pop, but also her intention to expose celebrities for what they are: artificial glamour manufactured for sale. Exploring the androgyny of her dancers in this number and in the cybernetic segment of *Showgirl*, Minogue positions herself as Donna Haraway's cyborg, a protean creature in perpetual transformation ready to use and discard as many images as are necessary to construct her identity.

The last segment of *Homecoming* begins with the once more reborn Kylie shouting "My name is Kylie", as if we could doubt her identity after 20 years on the stage. Wearing a jacket-and-trouser outfit decorated with past images of her career, Kylie is more herself than ever, with the cubist eyes painted on her hat stressing that she is the bearer of the scopophilic gaze, reversing Laura Mulvey's positioning of the female star. This role reversal is firmly stressed when she takes off her hat to show her hair, barely grown a few inches after her chemotherapy. Postmodernism may deny the existence of a core self but this is Kylie's way to challenge this belief. As she sings teasingly in "The Real Thing": "Come and see the real thing. There's a meaning there, but the meaning there doesn't really mean a thing (...) I am the real thing".



## Conclusions

If, in short, being in control of one's career is masculine, then Kylie *is*, despite her hyper-femininity, as masculine as Madonna. Also despite the discourse of those who, like Halberstam (1998), think that female masculinity is about bodies and not behaviour. Beyond gender issues, what the documentary *White Diamond* and her performance in *Showgirl* and *Homecoming* reveal is that Kylie's radical separation of the private woman and the public star has allowed her to question her own roles even more radically than Madonna has done, as the latter is too caught up in her star persona. The battle with cancer has helped Minogue become more self-confident, and it is now for the audience—including academics—to see the substance of her art if we can see beyond the prejudice against femininity.

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