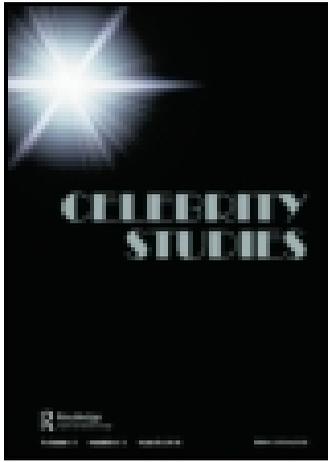


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Lady Gaga as (dis)simulacrum of monstrosity

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Lady Gaga's celebrity DNA revolves around the notion of monstrosity, an extensively researched concept in postmodern cultural studies. The analysis that is offered in this paper is largely informed by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of monstrosity, as well as by their approach to the study of sign-systems that was deployed in *A Thousand Plateaus*. By drawing on biographical and archival visual data, with a focus on the relatively underexplored live show, an elucidation is afforded of what is really monstrous about Lady Gaga. The main argument put forward is that monstrosity as sign seeks to appropriate the horizon of unlimited semiosis as radical alterity and openness to signifying possibilities. In this context it is held that Gaga effectively delimits her unique semioscape; however, any claims to monstrosity are undercut by the inherent limits of a representationalist approach in sufficiently engulfing this concept. Gaga is monstrous for her community insofar as she demands of her fans to project their semiotic horizon onto her as a simulacrum of infinite semiosis. However, this simulacrum may only be evinced in a feigned manner as a (dis)simulacrum. The analysis of imagery from seminal live shows during 2011–2012 shows that Gaga's presumed monstrosity is more akin to hyperdifferentiation as simultaneous employment of heterogeneous and potentially dissonant *inter pares* cultural representations. The article concludes with a problematisation of audience effects in the light of Gaga's adoption of a schematic and post-representationalist strategy in the event of her strategy's emulation by competitive artists.

Keywords: monstrosity; sign systems; flows of intensity; territorialisation; Lady Gaga

Introduction: Lady Gaga, the world's most influential artist

Time magazine nominated Lady Gaga among the 100 most influential people in the world and as the most influential artist in the world (Time 2010). In an interview with Gaultier (Gaga 2013), Lady Gaga expressed her deeply felt honour for having been recognised for her cultural contribution from *Time*. So the initial question that springs to mind is what is this unique cultural contribution Lady Gaga has made to the pop hall of fame, a feat that is unquestionably not to be belittled, given that Gaga had to compete for mindshare and share-of-hearts alongside behemoths such as Madonna, Beyoncé and other chart-topping 'monsters'.

The Gaga-related popular press and academic literature thrives with explanations of her rise to stardom. Some analysts (for example, Guschwan 2012, Bennett 2014; see also Jenkins 1992 on fandom) attribute her success to the creation and meticulous management of a core consumer franchise, what Lady Gaga calls her 'little monsters' (both on her website and repeatedly during her live shows). Others attribute her success to various key performance indicators (see Anderson *et al.* 2013), such as the creation of a virtual

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network of trusted associates (Haus of Gaga) on various fields of music production and marketing expertise, a sort of goldmine of human resources that she leverages in order to fuel her artistic engine; the implementation of a balanced online/offline sales/promotions mix; or even her sheer entrepreneurial mindset, which has been praised by biographers and columnists alike (cf. Deflem 2012).

In this paper I draw on a different interpretive avenue that seeks to distill the ideological, so to speak, vein of Lady Gaga; namely, the creation and active promotion of a culture of monstrosity. By drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (D&G's) principles of a sign-system, as formulated in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), on the multimodal imagery that is employed in Lady Gaga's live shows, and specifically on two successful (in terms of audience participation, i.e. sold out) live shows from the *Monster Ball* (Gaga 2011) and the *Born this Way Ball* (Gaga 2012) tours, on a seminal interview she gave to the famous designer Jean Paul Gaultier, on communications that are deployed on Gaga's official fan-website, and on various biographical sources, I immerse myself into Gaga's universe with a view to unlocking the mysteries of cultural monstrosity. The offered analysis aims at contributing to the extant literature on Lady Gaga by contextualising her proclaimed monstrous artistic identity within a wider culturological framework, informed by D&G's semiotic theory in general and their conceptualisation of monstrosity in particular, while exploring the question (and providing tentative answers) as to whether Gaga's monstrosity is that monstrous after all.

Is Lady Gaga, the mother monster, really monstrous?

This paper has been boiling for almost a year now. In between extensive and most diverse literature reviews in an attempt to identify the optimum entry point to the hermeneutic circle of Lady Gaga, I ventured into all sorts of remotely related territories prior to settling on the Deleuzian (and Guattarian) concept of monstrosity. This concept was deemed to be most pertinent to understanding the ideology of Gagaism, or, rather, for demonstrating what would amount to a truly monstrous ideology (or, more pithily, culturological paradigm). I must admit that initially I approached this interpretive undertaking with utmost reluctance, if not agonising scepticism. But the more I immersed myself into the Gaga phenomenon (including signing up to the Little Monsters fan-club and reading the regular updates that members have the privilege of receiving for about a year), the more it became clearer that D&G's approach to monstrosity is a particularly relevant interpretive blueprint, as will be shown throughout this paper.

Gaga's artistic vision is edified on the concept of monstrosity. Her most concise manifesto¹ that is almost religiously replayed in her live shows is addressed to her little monsters. Her official fan-club website is called littlemonsters.com, her identity is performatively projected onto her audience in live shows through the constant employment of utterances that are prefaced with the phrase 'my little monsters ...', while transposing the mirror of cultural production from artist to audience. Indicatively I am citing one post that was sent by Gaga on littlemonsters.com soon after having undergone an operation:

Monsters, You really gave me a lot of strength today. Everything happened so fast, but when it came time to face it I reflected on the many stories and experiences you've shared with me about your lives. Meeting you backstage, reading your letters, watching you communicate with fans from around the globe to form a community that supports one another – You have completely blown my mind. As they wheeled me into surgery today, I thought about all of your pain and perseverance, your unique family situations, school environments, health issues, homelessness, identity struggles – sometimes you are so brave that it terrifies me. I

wonder how it's even possible. So I thought to myself, I'm alive, I'm living my dream, and this is just a bump in the road. I'm grateful because this is temporary, and for some it is not. You have changed my life. I love you and am proud to be a part of your lives. If you can do it, I can do it too, and if we stick together we can get through anything. Love, Gaga.²

So if monstrosity constitutes the very culturological underpinning of Gaga's artistic vision, an account of its meaning is called for.

The concept of monstrosity constitutes a mainstay in cultural studies. Monsters have always been the Big Screen's 'best friends', from gigantic spiders and mosquitoes, exemplary representations of split personality (for example, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* 1931, 1931, 1931), to atrociously looking creatures with supernatural powers (*Frankenstein* 1931, 1994; *Quasimodo [The Hunchback of Notre Dame]* 1939, 1956, 1997; *Edward Scissorhands* 1990), blood-sucking vampires (*Underworld* 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012) and undying serial killers (*Friday the 13th* 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2009). The metaphorical allure of monsters or, rather, monstrous representations has been attributed to a 'projection of certain threats, fears and contradictions that refuse coexistence with the prevailing paradigms and consensual orthodoxies of everyday life ... it serves to operate as a mode of disruption and breakdown in the status quo' (Paul Wells cited in Rogers 2011, p. 368). 'After much monster madness, order is restored to everyday life and the stability of the official order reinstated' (McRae 2002, p. 7). From a cultural psychoanalytic point of view, monstrous representations have been employed as manifestations of menace to the father-figure (vengeful man-eating hookers; *Monster* 2003, the story of *Aileen Wuornos*), as disruption of the Symbolic Order in terms of a transgression of sanctioned burial rituals (zombies; cf. Davis 2007), as *déjà-vu* images of a ubiquitously and ever-returning death drive (*Final Destination* 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011), or as agents of social anxieties to be alleviated through mass-slaughtering (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* 1974, 2003; cf. Buxton 2011). 'This anxiety manifests itself symptomatically as a cultural fascination with monsters, a fixation that is born of the twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate that which threatens' (Cohen 1996, p. viii). In common parlance, someone is called a monster due to the display of outrageously deviant behaviour that may or may not involve criminal acts. Hence, a monstrous personality is likely to evince traits that are either ethically or legally (or both) frowned upon. The semantic nucleus of monstrosity contains the element of excess (cf. later, D&G's [1987] principles of a sign-system Principle No. 5) and/or transgression. The frame of reference, again, may be a cultural norm or a clause of the penal code. Rapists are called monsters inasmuch as geniuses. There is a professional recruitment agency under the name monster.com, but also an energy drink called Monster. Monsters have been an integral part of the popular imaginary since time immemorial, either in the form of dragons that inhabit lagoons and terrorise unwary villagers or as deformed humans (aka Frankenstein) who have lost their 'humanity' due to some sort of genetic (and/or cultural) anomaly.

The function of a monster in the setting of a certain community, at its most basic, is to demarcate its boundaries by posing a physical/behavioural limit. This consists of delimiting the imaginary and/or symbolic contours of a community, while infusing the community's ethos with schemata of transgression. The schema of monstrosity and its multifarious manifestations serve to propagate, most fundamentally, a Same/Other dialectic. On the inverse, a schema of monstrosity aims at nurturing feelings of belongingness among members of a community by pointing to instances of transgression of its ideational limits (cf. Davisson 2013, pp. 47–48). The schema of monstrosity is stronger than mere

difference, while functioning as a limit metaphor of radical alterity. If, as Massumi (1996, p. 93) contends, ‘normality is the degree zero of monstrosity’, then monstrosity is a metaphorical schema that transposes us to the limit of normality.

It may be observed that at first sight Gaga’s employment of this highly (ab)used concept does not deviate from the common vernacular, were it not for the semantic distance and differential magnitude between monstrosity and difference. Gaga repeatedly urges her audience during live shows to be themselves; she reflects herself in this maxim by praising her achievements publicly as the outcome of her monstrous personality. When Oprah asked Lady Gaga what she really wanted for her fans, she said:

I want them to free themselves, and I want them to be proud of who they are ... I want them to celebrate all the things they don’t like about themselves the way that I did, and to be truly happy from the inside. (Davisson 2013, p. 2)

She is far from repelled at the idea of using ‘strong language’ when referring to how her actions and ‘eccentric’ behaviour may be perceived by the ‘general public’ when she employs expressions in live shows like ‘I don’t fuckin’ care what they think of me ...’ and such-like intersubstitutable attitudinal and emotive markers. Gaga offers herself as mirror/exemplar to her little monsters by going through her personal experiences in becoming mother monster; that is, in recalibrating expectations based on her climb to stardom. Once there, any eccentricity is allowed; and in the case of Gaga, such eccentricity is the norm. Yet this eccentricity is largely evinced at a stylistic rather than axiological level. Or when it is evinced at an axiological level, this occurs in other than linguistic modes, mostly visual, but also gestural, as will be shown in due course.

Gaga appeared in an interview with Jean Paul Gaultier (Gaga 2013) as regretful in the light of past drug usage, while she even pledged allegiance to traditional family values and her utmost respect for the father figure: ‘I care so much about what my father thinks, I am very old-fashioned Italian in this way’. So where is that monstrous ‘line of flight’,³ in D&G’s terms, in the above statement that affirms the legitimacy of the pinnacle of the Symbolic Order (cf. Žižek 1992, p. 124: ‘The symbolic order [the Big Other] and enjoyment⁴ are radically incompatible’)? Is there anything left in Lady Gaga’s articulated discourse that is even remotely reminiscent of monstrosity? As will be shown in due course, monstrosity in the multimodal semiotic edifice of Lady Gaga is evinced in the less articulated (in linguistic terms) moments in the deployment of her artistic narrative. The relatively under-explored (compared with biographical data, official videos and lyrics) modes of multimodal textual formation of live shows present a significant opportunity for gaining access to the function of monstrosity (also see Prieto-Arranz’s [2012] examination of Madonna’s performative aspects by recourse to semiotic concepts). It is about signs that hang together disjunctively (or diabolically, in D&G’s (1987, pp. 480–481) terms, merely echoing the etymology of diabolus that is *dia-balein* or a disparaging force that sets apart, that spreads conflict, rather than unison), but not necessarily oppositionally. This mode of propagation of monstrosity within the semioscape of Lady Gaga as simulacrum or self-referential discourse (cf. Nöth 2011) furnishes a limit metaphor for the popular imaginary of a strange or fractal attractor, in D&G’s terms.⁵ This simulacrum constitutes the centre of the heterogeneous signs that make up Gaga’s iconic self-sameness through stylistic excess. Nevertheless, as will be shown, this is a clear case of feigned estrangement, of the imposition of an axiological nexus that demands to be danced to, rather than be comprehended. This reading of Gaga’s brand DNA does not rush to celebrate, in line with postmodern readings, openness and semiotic playfulness (Varriale 2012). It aims at tracing

the hermeneutic circle of mother monster as (dis)simulacrum; that is, as a dissimulative simulacrum that posits self-referentially a limit metaphor for the popular imaginary. Viewed from this angle, Gaga only feeds parasitically on the limit of radical alterity in a mundane, representationalist discourse. At the same time, any claims to monstrosity appear to be more adequately accommodated under a strategy of hyperdifferentiation, as will be further elaborated in the final section.

Gaga is fake monstrosity, long live monster Gaga

The above introductory remarks should at least point to the shaky foundation of Gaga's claims to monstrosity. But how can we tell the difference between what is 'really' monstrous and what amounts to faking monstrosity? The key to answering this question lies in drawing as sharp a distinction as possible between schema and representation of monstrosity. By definition, the monstrous is simulacral insofar as it is an image of itself, a self-subsistent discourse that resembles nothing but itself and that depends on its iconography for its recognition. But the monstrous as simulacral may not be exhausted in its iconography. It is in excess of any iconographic inscription. A conceptual tension emerges at this juncture, notably that monstrosity as schema depends on representations for its constitution as such and for its recognition on behalf of members of a linguistic community, even though it is in excess of representations.

In order to effectively contextualise the notion of simulacrum in our interpretation, let us take a short detour into the concept that was popularised by Baudrillard in works such as *Simulation and Simulacra* (Baudrillard 1994) and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Baudrillard 2000; even though it is encountered in almost all seminal post-structuralist French thinkers who have elaborated the concept in idiosyncratic ways). The key tenets that underpin the notion of simulacrum and set it apart from traditional conceptualisations (e.g. Plato's notion of *eikon*) of the function of images consist of the recognition of the loss of the referent in the establishment of a referential relationship between image and object, as well as of the constitutive power of the image *apropos* its referent. The very notion of 'object' has always been the outcome of the simulating (modelling) power of images, rather than a presupposition for their existence. Not only is image as simulacrum a self-subsistent entity that resembles nothing but itself, but reality is the outcome of the simulating capacity of images. 'The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory' (Baudrillard 1994, p. 1; also see Baudrillard 2000, p. 50). Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.

Baudrillard's renowned outlook on simulation was also endorsed by D&G: 'Simulation defies, Guattari specifies, the territorialising effects of representation and denotation [...] icons do not lead one away from themselves to their objects, rather, they exhibit their object's characteristics in themselves' (Genosko 1994, p. 69). Although, as Massumi (1987) remarks, D&G did not dwell on the concept of simulacrum in one place, an argument may be reconstructed out of their dispersed reflections on the subject. The crux of the argumentation is summarised as follows:

The simulacrum bears only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model. The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model; its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion. (Massumi 1987, p. 2)

This standpoint resonates D&G's wider strategy of reversal of Platonic idealism (cf. Deleuze and Krauss 1983), in that not only the assumption of (ideal) type/(real) copy has been mistakenly interwoven with a theory of truth, but the very relationship between type and copy actually holds on the inverse; that is, the ideal is an illusory manifestation of the meaning effects of the copy. This argument for referential illusion has been central in various French structuralists and post-structuralists throughout the 1960s/1970s and has been carried over in contemporary critical readings in media theory concerning the constructivist nature of media representations. Representations as 'stable identities or territories [...] are in fact undercover simulacra that have consented to feign being copies' (Massumi 1987, p. 3). Massumi's interpretation of D&G's agreement with the Baudrillardian theory of simulation and at the same time their active preoccupation with its radicalisation could not be more in alignment with the central argument that is put forward in this paper; namely, that monstrosity as representation is a feigned simulacrum or (dis)simulacrum (see also the eighth principle of a sign-system in the ensuing section).

Yet the simulacral self-subsistent nature of monstrosity harbours a paradox. If monstrosity did function as a limit metaphor, it should be capable of incorporating not only what lies within its boundaries or what is assimilable by a stable signifying centre, but also what lies beyond 'its' boundaries. Otherwise, the schema is quasi-monstrous, as it encapsulates only what is assimilable. The only way out of the partial assimilation impasse would be to constantly renew the recognisable manifestations of monstrosity. This is indeed what has been happening over the centuries, albeit to the very detriment of what is actually the mission of the schema of monstrosity, as such representations (e.g. lagoon dragons, zombies) reflect inadequately the semantic excess of monstrosity. In other words, what is recognised in a visual sign of monstrosity as monstrous is a spatio-temporally situated representation of an ideal limit or an open horizon of semiosis that exceeds what is engraved in 'its' manifestation. The sign appropriates the horizon of unlimited semiosis as radical alterity and openness to signifying possibilities as a simulacrum of itself and at the same time as a (dis)simulacrum or dissimulative (feigned) simulacrum. Gaga is monstrous for her community in the performance of the speech act 'be what you want to be' insofar as she demands of her fans to project their semiotic horizon onto her as a simulacrum of infinite semiosis, albeit a simulacrum that, in reality, may only be evinced dissimulatively in a feigned manner as a (dis)simulacrum. Subsequently, Lady Gaga appropriates the schema of monstrosity in her performative trajectory, while stripping it from its function as a limit metaphor of radical alterity and re-inscribing it in a representationalist mode.

The allure of the schema survives in this re-inscription by virtue of a hidden analogy. This analogy is sheltered in a latent comparison between Lady Gaga's stylistic excess and what is afforded (representationally, but also materially) by her target audience. In order to render this point more concrete and hence show how the pseudo-openness of Gaga as monstrous semiotic horizon assumes 'real' currency as an extension of a habitual pattern to its limits (compared with how average consumers of her target audience may fantasise about limits), let us consider the artist's proclaimed overconsumption of designer clothes. In this context it may be argued that, in the eyes of a teen market with scarce financial resources, Gaga's frantic rate of stylistic transformations functions as an imaginary limit metaphor for their becoming as semiotic horizon. In these terms, Gaga is by analogy to her fans a monster consumer, an aspirational idol of excess, even though by definition monstrosity does not partake of representationalist/analogical thinking, and hence the example of designer clothes constitutes a corollary of why Gaga's monstrosity is 'fake'. In short, Gaga's manifest excess as overconsumption appears to be monstrous, whereas,

by definition, the schema of excess as such may only be under-represented. This explains why Gaga's stylistic excess may only be viewed as an imaginary limit metaphor of a semiotic horizon as radical alterity.

In fact, Gaga's overt legitimization of fantasy (defined as limitless consumption of designer clothes in her interview with Gaultier) as constitutive of her reality principle may be perceived as an enactment of Lacan's formula for phantasy, namely $\$ \diamond$ [diamond] *petit objet a* ($\$ \diamond a$), or the fetishistic/imaginary string of small other objects (or partial objects, in Lacanian lingo) as designer clothes. In this manner, designer clothes function as inscriptions of the other side of the split subject or the Other that is appropriated through the fetish, albeit always already incompletely, thus rekindling the desire for consuming more designer clothes:

The central term of the formula, the *poignon* [my note: diamond], fuses the logical symbols of conjunction and disjunction, indicating both inclusion and exclusion, both necessity and contingency, both implication and impossibility. The objet a is the point at which the subject assumes a certain paradoxical consistency precisely by virtue of marking the impossibility of coincidence of the subject with itself. (Boothby 2003, p. 161)

This impossible relationship between desire and its object that lies at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis is also endorsed by D&G:

In Deleuze's analysis, the transcendent theory of desire comprises three moments: (1) desire is the mark of our 'lack' of being, since the object of desire is transcendent; but (2) one can only hope for illusory discharges of desire in acts of pleasure; and thus (3) desire is pursuing a *jouissance* that is ultimately impossible. (Smith 2003, p. 59)

'*Objet a* is a kind of remainder, a scrap or residue inassimilable by either the imaginary or the symbolic' (Boothby 2003, p. 161; also see Rossolatos and Hogg 2013). The critical difference between *objet a* as fetish according to the standard psychoanalytic vernacular and D&G's approach consists of the fetish's exculpation by the latter, in the context of their wider polemic against dogmatic psychoanalysis.⁶ However, stylistic clothing choices are only part of Gaga's semiotic edifice, as will be shown in a while. For the time being, let us revert to the problematic between real and feigned monstrosity by attending to how the concept has been conceptualised by D&G.

The closed loop from *objet a* to Other and back again through the barred subject that constitutes a fundamental tenet in Lacanian psychoanalysis (cf. Boothby 2003, Smith 2004) has been severely criticised by D&G. Instead of closed loops (cf. later, Principle No. 2), D&G (1987) opt for mapping trajectories of pure becoming as opening to absolute and non-assimilable exteriority (which is, in a sense, precluded by the Lacanian formula that re-inscribes the *raison d'être* of the fetish in the Other as its Being, even *in absentia* and as 'impossible' or 'irrecoverable' *object*). This sort of mapping is more faithful to the function of monstrosity, as will be shown in the ensuing section, but also liberating from the negativity of the Other that feeds parasitically on its inscriptions. This liberatory move towards non-assimilable exteriority is suggested (dis)simulatively in Gaga's sung pun 'I'm a freak ... free' in her live performance (Gaga 2011, 00:00:586)⁷ that is coupled with a visual of the artist being levitated against the background of an infolding/enveloping matrixial structure unto itself. Whether this is 'a singular path of freakish becoming' (Massumi 1996, p. 94) remains to be seen.

On the multiple regimes of Lady Gaga as sign system

‘Becoming, in its simplest expression, is a tension between modes of desire plotting a vector of transformation between two molar coordinates’ (Massumi 1996, p. 94). These coordinates are not given, as in the spatial form of a map, and hence are not amenable to re-tracing what is part of a universe of knowledge. The irreducible singularity of such a desiring mechanism rests with a fusion of potential relations or, as put by Massumi, by a mutant trajectory never before travelled. Gaga’s constant stylistic shifts in the form of a transformational relationship with *haute couture* is not intent on making a ‘fashion statement’ (*tout court*) that might be reinscribed in a trajectory of cyclic repetition, but to endorse hyperdifferentiation and its instantiation in novel fusions.

Hard as it may be to preclude outright any influence of Deleuzian philosophy on Gaga’s image-makers, it is inevitable that such highly abstract concepts as monstrosity are occasionally mutilated once decontextualised from their theoretical contours and blended with intuitive ordinary discourse. In such instances, abstract schematic concepts, rather than entering the process of scholarly elucidation, recede into greater oblivion through their ossification into vague rhetoric. In this sense, Gaga’s very employment of a rhetoric of magnitude (big monster versus little monsters) should be alarming as to the faithful employment of the term monstrosity. By definition, there can be no continuum of monstrosity; either something is monstrous or it is not. A continuum implies the prevalence of analogical thinking and the predominance of proportions: John is as monstrous as Jane, but less than Gaga, which is simply absurd. Gaga as maternal lieu of monstrosity is plausible (again, within the conceptualisation of monstrosity as a dissimulacrum, as delineated above). But what kind of evidence do we have for Gaga’s effective functioning as mother monster or what kind of symptoms/signs are available for making sense of Gaga’s discourse as semiotic system (even retroactively) under the auspices of her role as mother monster? Moreover, could this kind of monstrosity be viewed as a ‘subcultural trend’ as suggested by Corona (2011) in the face of the far-reaching effects and wide proportions that the Gaga phenomenon has assumed? Let us continue unweaving Gaga’s (dis)simulacrum of monstrosity in the light of these questions by attending to D&G’s eight principles underpinning a sign-system or signifying regime.

According to D&G, any formalisation of expression constitutes a regime of signs. ‘A regime of signs constitutes a semiotic system’ (D&G 1987, p. 111). Each signifying regime is characterised by eight principles (1987, p. 117). The first principle of each signifying regime is that a sign refers to another sign *ad infinitum* (which, should be noted, echoes a fundamental tenet of Peircean semiotics). Then, a sign never ceases to return to itself through other signs (what D&G call Principle No. 2 or the circularity of the deterritorialised sign). The mode of this return of a sign back to itself does not entail an immutable and stable centre. According to Principle No. 3 (the ‘hysteria of signs’), a sign constantly displaces the centre at the same time as it ties into it. This displacement is brought forth interpretively, while the shifting centre invests a sign’s signifiers with different signifieds in the process (Principle No. 4). Now despite the fact that a sign is always in motion, during which it stabilises provisionally in different couplings of signifiers/signifieds, it remains anchored in a supreme signifier that presents itself as both lack and excess, what D&G call the despotic signifier or the limit of the system’s de-territorialisation (Principle No. 5). The embodiment of this signifier is most eminently engraved in the face (Principle No. 6). Let us recall that in *Face-off* (1997), starring J. Travolta and N. Cage, a face-swapping operation – an operation that affected directly the embodiment of the signifiers of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ – did not disrupt the sign-systems that

undergird the signifiers. The threat to the sign's homeostatic stability (however eccentrically this stability may be maintained) is evinced in lines of flight that exceed the signifying regime's power of de-territorialisation (Principle No. 7 or 'the principle of the scapegoat'). Finally (Principle No. 8), a signifying regime is maintained as such only in a feigned manner throughout its regulated interpretations as a sign returns upon itself in a circular fashion, while attempting to ensure that interpretations of lines of flight are sufficiently accommodated in shifting couplings of signifiers/signifieds (without posing any threat to the omnipresence of the despotic signifier).

In my view, the central principle that, based on D&G's postulates, should be posited as vantage point for unravelling an eccentrically centralised semiotic system, such as Lady Gaga, is Principle No. 5; namely, the necessity of a supreme (despotic) signifier that presents itself as both lack and excess and that delimits the system's de-territorialisation. By resuming the analysis that was deployed in the previous section concerning the function of monstrosity as a limit metaphor, instantiated in a name and in a face (namely, Lady Gaga), we may infer that Lady Gaga as name (first and foremost) constitutes the archi-signifier (the despotic mother figure) of her sign system, the blind and omnipresent spot in a structure that regulates the extent of multimodal signs' territorialisation within the contours of the Gagaist semioscape. At the same time, Gaga is the archi-signifier to which all the rest signs that are produced by her colleagues refer; for example, the utterance 'this is so Gaga' in the face of a choreographic fragment that features multiple dancers and kinesic patterns. And if Gaga is the supreme signifier of her semiotic space, then she is the Phallus that regulates entry into her imaginary/symbolic semiotic space. Thus spoke Gaga (2011: 00:32:10): 'I don't know if you've heard, but I have a pretty tremendous dick ... Welcome to the monster ball, now dance you motherfuckers'. Was this an ironic answer to rumours that were circulating at that period about her presumed hermaphroditism? I hope so, because otherwise Gaga would have to pay royalties to Lacan (also see Benton 2010)!

Lady Gaga functions as regulator of the production (and termination) of the flow of signs within the contours of the artist's semioscape. Why is Gaga as archi-signifier 'lacking' from her system (Principle No. 5 as per above)? Simply due to her functioning as the monstrous signifier that delimits the potentiality of becoming, as circular re-territorialisations and de-territorialisations of the signs that make up this sign system. Insofar as, based on our earlier analysis, the monstrous signifier safeguards the integrity of an 'inside' against a threatening (with radical alterity) 'outside', the monstrous signifier may not be pinned down within the semiotic system. It is both within and without. This also justifies D&G's ascription not only of lack, but also of excess to the supreme signifier.

Principle No. 8 ('universal deception') lends further credence to the propounded dissimulative dimension of the Gaga simulacrum. This is not due to a 'will to deceive', that is to mask 'truth', but to a recognition of the excessive function of the monstrous signifier as both inside and outside the semiotic system, and hence as not being restricted by any sort of truth conditionals that aim at upholding the truth value of a linguistic community. The truth of the supreme signifier is the affirmation of untruth as condition for the inbound/outbound flows of signs within/without a semiotic system – whence stems the function of the archi-signifier as despot and regulator: 'A place where all the freaks are outside and I am at the fucking doors' (Gaga 2011: 00:17:20–00:18:20). In the mother monster's own words: 'I hate the truth; I prefer a giant dose of bullshit every day over the truth' (Gaga 2011: 01:27:21). Notice that Gaga does not display a preference for lies, but for bullshit; that is unnecessary information, where necessity is deemed as such by a

mainstream media agenda as to what constitutes important news (also see Meyers [2009] and Deighton and Kornfeld [2010] regarding mediated truth about stars).

Gaga's preference for the frivolous is not so much a statement about the suppressed importance of frivolous news, as an affirmation of the irreducibly important territorialisation of signs within a semiotic system that is not regulated by the Symbolic Order. In the light of this remark, it is of little wonder that D&G assign the principle of scapegoatism as a constitutive factor of a semiotic system (also see Girard 1986). The scapegoat as monstrous representation is affirmative of the role it performs in upholding the limits of the Same, while delimiting the boundaries of tolerable transgression. In the 2012 *Born this Way Ball Tour*, Gaga's dancers march while holding flags with the inscription G.O.A.T., what may be surmised as an allusion to a mythically sanctioned symbol of fertility, but also as a strategic equation of Gagaism with scapegoatism as wilful rapture with a cultural establishment and the celebration of Gaga's own 'House'. Gaga's flag-holding dancers constitute a parade of signifiers that celebrate and afford to circumscribe their monstrous and despotic signifier's provi(de)nce: in the name of Gaga, the (scape)G.O.A.T (Principle No. 7, as per above). But Gaga also does not refrain from intentionally acting as a scapegoat on stage *apropos* bourgeois closet morality, including engaging (dissimulatively) in lesbian sex on a bike. However, one might argue, are these visual signs sufficient representations for justifying Gaga's role as mother monster? Hardly so. Similar signs abound in the performative repertoire of popular artists such as Madonna. Madonna was flirting with such representations before Gaga was born (this way; cf. Lush 2012). What is different, however, is that Gaga's signs are embedded in a semioscape that is not constrained by a master-signified as ideologeme(s).

More concretely, Madonna's open promotion of lesbianism surfaced in her *Erotica* period; that is, in the context of the ideologeme of sexual liberation and polymorphous perversity (if this Freudian term is still allowed) that underpinned and permeated as master signified the stage-setting, the lyrical orientation, the rhythmic sections, and any other signs that were part and parcel of the ethos that was definitive of Madonna at that historical juncture (inasmuch as similar constraints on the signified were placed on the semiotic systems of Meredith Brooks, Britney Spears, Kylie Minogue, or Samantha Fox), and which was preceded (and succeeded) by other master signifieds. On the contrary, the Gagaist hyperspace is not sustained by a master signified, but by intersections of flows of intensity that happen to give rise to determinate signifieds at the same time, at the same place. Signifieds in Gagaist space protrude randomly from and over a pre-semiotic flow of intensities:

The question is not yet what a given sign signifies but to which other signs it refers, or which signs add themselves to it to form a network without beginning or end that projects its shadow onto an amorphous atmospheric continuum. (D&G 1987, p. 112)

Signifieds in Gagaist space just happen to be there. This position is quite strikingly evinced in the neon-lit pseudo-ideologemes that make up the depth structure, so to speak, of Gaga's front-stage performance (Gaga 2011).

The semiotic universe of Gaga's live show is indeed perfused with signs, albeit signs that hang together disjunctively not as parts of oppositional structures (as is the case with classical structuralism), but as protrusions from a vague semantic depth that gives birth (territorialises) and death (de-territorialises and reinstates in a nomadic trajectory) without taking into account any ideological repercussions. It is hardly arguable that the signs 'liquor' and 'drugs' on the neon-lit collage in Gaga's stage-setting (Gaga 2011) shelter

ideologemes and maxims such as ‘Drink’ and ‘Take drugs’. Such an interpretation would imply a latent hierarchy in the syntagmatic ordering of signs such as ‘old teeth’, ‘implants’, and all the rest of the amply lit signs that make up the semantic depth of the show that is enacted on the front stage. In the absence of such an ordering or ‘imposition of an absolute identity grid’ (Massumi 1996, p. 124), this random and disjunctive juxtaposition of signs may be interpreted as the affirmatively untruthful semantic depth of Gaga as dissimulacrum.

But Gaga gets even more monstrous when she openly challenges striated state space, while exclaiming in the Stade de France (Gaga 2012) that ‘France is shit’. This dictum is both in narrative complicity with her ‘Government Hooker’ epic that opened the shows in the *Born this Way* tour, and in marked contrast to her later appreciation of French culture, designers, and so forth.

I am not a woman; I am not an alien; I am not a man. I am not human. I am not a creature of your government. I am you. I am everything you love about this universe and, France, I am everything that you despise. (Gaga 2012: 00:34:15)

In this case, France might as well be any other geographical territory that has been spatialised by a state mechanism.

Furthermore, Gaga’s explicit admission of her quasi-allegiance to post-humanism (in the context of a post-ideological *pot pourri*, as above noted, without any prevalent or transcendental signified, save for ephemeral ‘protrusions’) is manifested visually through her appearance in cyborg attire during the opening of Gaga (2012) and her subsequent engagement in virtual oral sex with one of her dancers (2012: 00:06:38). The strategic placement in the flow of the show of the virtual oral sex scene also affords to effect a regress to her audience towards Gaga as originary locus (monstrous gatekeeper) or a khoric space (third realm) that gives birth and cancels at will representations, a ‘brand promise’ that is rendered visually immediately thereafter (2012: 00:10:20–00:10:24). The coupling of the visual sign of Gaga as birth machine with the verbatim ‘I am not a prisoner, they will not define me’ is a sharp corroboration of the impossibility of pinning down, in concrete representations, the mother monster. The monster cannot be defined, as it delimits the very definitional scope of her semioscape. Does Gaga as cyborg enhance the validity of our claims about her monstrous function within her semioscape? On the contrary, cyborgs – a by now trite representation of what would amount to being non-human – maintains an oppositional relationship with monstrosity and hence antedates and is hypotactic to monstrosity as uber-representational schema. Gaga flirts with representations of post-humanism, as territorialised and recognisable ideologemes, with the same ease that she transforms into a heavy metal fan in the following song. She stabilises provisionally on one of the multiple signifying plateaus that make up her signifying regime, without subscribing to any of them as wannabe revelations of her truth. In this manner, for once more, the core essence of monstrosity as non-assimilable becoming other is affirmed, as being in excess of a representationalist logic.

Conclusions: hyperdifferentiation is not monstrosity

Up until now and predominantly in the previous section, the interpretive orientation may have given the impression that Gaga really delivers on the monstrosity promise. This is hardly the case. Gaga’s presumed monstrosity may be more pertinently encapsulated in the employment of the term hyperdifferentiation. The more rapid shifts from constellation

of signifiers to constellation, the ironic play with the idea of a transcendental signified as temporary fixation of the semantic depth of the parade of signifiers, the representational gimmicks that enrich the popular imaginary about monstrosity (e.g. cyborgs) and the proliferation of ephemeral assemblages among outworn modes of being that refuse to die (Massumi 1996), such as borrowed representations from cabaret performances mixed with heavy metal, attest to Gaga's indubitably creative imagination, and to a greater proclivity towards giving in to pure play, devoid of any ideological orientation. However, this logic of hyperdifferentiation is not equivalent to monstrosity.

Caution should be exercised in interpreting Gaga's moves along monstrous lines. First, repetition and hence a mapped trajectory of becoming are clearly part and parcel of Gaga's deliverables. Each live show in a tour follows a particular plot, songs appear pretty much in the same order, and the scenery is invariable throughout shows. Her fans resort to expressive outlets that constitute far from flirtatious gestures with haute couture, while consisting occasionally in replicating Gaga's stylistic aspects (contrary to the anti-narcissistic posture adopted by Gaga amidst a predominantly narcissistic star-system (cf. Pinsky & Young 2009)). Furthermore, as already argued, something cannot be more monstrous than something else. Certainly Gaga may be more open to differentiation in terms of an increased playfulness with elements from different genres, but the proliferation of territorialisations is not the function of a monster. Gaga rightly claims that she is the gatekeeper of her semioscape and surely she does abide by the Deleuzian principle of the supreme signifier in this respect. However, this supremacy is not of the same plateau as the monster schema whose main function is to regulate the flows of intensity between the inside and the outside of a semioscape.

In conclusion, Gaga does afford to delimit ideationally her space and to function as attractor; however, any claims to monstrosity are undercut by the inherent limits of any representationalist approach that might sufficiently engulf the schema of monstrosity. Monstrosity may only be sensed through a dissimulatory gaze, and the Gaga spectacle offers such a dissimulacrum.

As regards wider implications for celebrity studies in the light of Gaga's strategy of monstrosity/hyperdifferentiation, the most striking point from the preceding analysis that should be highlighted rests with the fundamental distinction between monstrous representations and schema of monstrosity. Gaga went an extra mile (compared with her predecessors, as noted in the previous section) by acting out not merely as conveyor of a set of cultural representations that converge spatiotemporally on a set of determinate ideologemes as semantic depth (e.g. eroticism, gender issues), but by liquidating any sense of depth at the expense of a recycling of existing expressive modes, intermingled with the invention of new ones in an open space that endorses becoming as unpredictable lines of flight. Such superfluity and proclivity for heterogeneous *mêlanges* might as well be tinged with 'postmodernist' overtones, the difference being that, contrary to predecessors such as Madonna, Gaga does not endorse heterogeneous cultural representations one at a time (e.g. from record to record), but simultaneously.

The pending question is whether such a strategy is sustainable going forward, especially given that mainstream media still function within an outmoded representationalist mindset upheld by a fuzzy yet evidently concrete axiology (simply witness the sort of questions that were addressed to Gaga by Gaultier) that abides by the assimilative tenets of striated space and, furthermore, whether it is replicable. If the schema of monstrosity constitutes a limit metaphor that delimits monstrous representations and if such a schema is evoked by Gaga as the very kernel of her celebrityhood, then a prospective competitor's laying claim to being more monstrous (a, by definition, impossible claim, as

aforementioned) would most likely trigger a kitsch war on monstrosity that would reduce the schema to its hyponymically inclusive representations. Moreover, Gaga's monstrosity strategy that, as already shown, lies in between what would amount to real monstrosity and deflected representations that belong to a wider schema, is still in need of research among her audience members (an audience that is far from uniform) as regards the extent to which such an 'open-ended' positioning resonates with her audience. Findings from such a study would furnish relevant indicators of the ripeness of a mass audience for post-representationalist discourses that might redefine the semantic currency for which celebrities as sign-systems are exchanged.

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Notes

1. See http://images4.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20100610135415/ladygaga/images/1/1b/Manifesto-of-little-monsters.png
2. See <http://uk.eonline.com/news/390287/lady-gaga-posts-letter-thanking-fans-for-strength-during-her-surgery>
3. According to Deleuze, a line of flight marks a singular, non-replicable trajectory of becoming that is more akin to a non-arborescent structure and smooth space, rather than a hierarchical structure and striated space. It may be assimilated by a hierarchical structure and become territorialised in a cartographic space with determinate coordinates, but as an after-effect of emergence from the Many that is not yet One. 'Deleuze and Guattari characterise assemblages in terms of three kinds of lines that inform their interactions with the world. There is the "molar line" that forms a binary, arborescent system of segments, the "molecular line" that is more fluid although still segmentary, and the line of flight that ruptures the other two lines (D&G 1987: 205)' (Parr 2005, p. 147). Gaga's singular becoming as a line-of-flight marks a constant sliding through striated (state) space and, hence, as 'monstrous' for a hierarchical (phallic) order (whence stems her parodying of any attempt by a state mechanism of assimilating her in her song *Government Hooker*).
4. Here Zizek is referring to enjoyment as *jouissance*; that is, as the ecstatic feeling of pleasure in pain. See Lacan's essay *God and woman's jouissance* (the word woman is crossed out, thus pointing to the effacement of its function as determinate signifier) and Clero (2002, pp. 42–43).
5. According to D&G, a strange (or fractal) attractor (a term borrowed from cybernetics) 'must be visualised as a mixed set of points – "dense points", infinitely dense points. Each point corresponds to a potential global state of equilibrium' (Massumi 1996, p. 64). Gaga's semi-escape, by virtue of its openness to stylistic variation (fashion, choreography, music genres, etc.) and to its explicit endorsement of radical alterity, is potentially inclusive of an infinity of dense points around which her fans may homeostatically stabilise. She does not attract her fandom because she polarises responses (which would accommodate her image under a binarist rubric), but because she is a complete 'Stranger' to any identificatory logic. Her infinitely open semioscape functions as a strange attractor for her fandom.
6. The rejection of the universality of the Oedipus complex constitutes the vantage point in this polemic that culminates in an overcoming of structural topographies, which were prominent in both Freud's and Lacan's writings, in favour of systems of transformation and a-signifying diagrammatology (cf. Watson 2009, p. 168 and Genosko 2002).
7. References to Gaga's live shows feature date (e.g. 2011) and time point (e.g. 0 hours:0 minutes:58 seconds).

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