

Off The cuff

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Our Lady of Gaga

FOR MANY YEARS androgyny was something in the armoury of young lads in competition with manly men. What better way was there for sylph-like boys to make the most of lithe bodies, smooth skin and hairless cheeks? Sexual ambiguity was just the bait that slightly-built lads needed to catch the girls, lads brave enough to risk being thought queer that is; in any event a hint of bisexuality proved to be just as powerful an aphrodisiac as a six-pack and shed loads of money. These days, however, girls whose mothers' just wanted to have fun are deeply committed to rivalling the boys in everything from drunkenness to sexual enthusiasm; I'm told that nowadays this even extends to androgyny.

Lady Gaga, who turned 24 on Sunday, apparently just "loves androgyny". Although it is difficult for me to see much that is indeterminate in the Lady's gender, unless you count a pair of strapping shoulders and an athletic approach to life. Indeed, in *Telephone* she strikes me as all woman, particularly when she is cooking up the poison in the kitchen ably assisted by a splendid troupe of dancing chefs. The Lady is a positively old style *femme fatale* who, with the help of Beyoncé and a nod to Quentin Tarantino, carefully kills everybody in the Diner including the dog. Together with the role of poisoner-in-chief, a classically feminine part worthy of Livia Drusilla herself, we are also reassured by Gaga's prison guard: "I told you she didn't have a dick."

As a portly old homosexual I can only guess at what Lady Gaga does for straight slim-hipped youths, but I'm willing to bet, it's not bending their gender. They will not be confused by the bikinis emblazoned with the Stars and Stripes, or by the lively promise of straight sex offered by insinuations of lesbianism or by

attractive young policemen who unaccountably morph into policewomen mid-clinch. In *Love Game* Gaga dances frenetically in pursuit of the fellas' *disco sticks*, whatever they might be, in straight disregard of the fact that the lads are dressed from head to tow in rather fetching leather outfits complete with peaked caps, and glasses of *Campari!* It's a pound to a penny if you ask me that they're all more interested in each other than in the Lady. Despite the producer's decision to use mostly African American dancers in the rather naïve belief that we'll be misled, the sexual preferences of these young men do not seem to me to be in doubt, especially when one considers that they are accompanied by a handsome pair of Dalmatians.

Still, for the young in heart the sayings of Our Lady appear to be pregnant with semiotic significance. Who could doubt that the expression "Once you kill a cow you've gotta make a burger" means "Be sure to finish what you've started!" But I'm not at all clear what the fan that said, "*Telephone* was freakin awesome in my opinion" might have actually meant. Of course, I do understand the "freakin awesome", it's the "in my opinion" I don't get. In who else's opinion would it be? However, the sheer erotic energy of Our Lady's song and dance act is indeed overwhelming; in her celebration of radical difference, in her weirdness, in the dislocation of our Kylie Minoguen expectations, in her sexual enthusiasm, she really is freakin awesome, so awesome in fact that I can truly be described (with the matronly condescension Gaga uses for her fans) as one of her "Little Monsters".

But we should not allow this reality to conceal the shocking truth that Lady Gaga's innovations are all deeply well worn, except perhaps that modern sexual innuendo now puns on the shifty *double entendré* of yesteryear over, and over again, so that every style, gesture, and nuance, of the past century is folded into everything else. Eat your heart out Mae West because in the high camp of late capitalism burlesque is burlesqued, Salvador is Dalí'd, Marlene is Dietrich'd,

Andy is Warhola'd, Madonna is Madonna'd, and Cyndi is Laupered; the result is Our Lady of Gaga.

A graduate of a high-end independent girls' school in New York, the Convent of the Sacred Heart, and the Tisch School of Arts on Broadway, Lady Gaga, formerly known as Stefani Germanotta, did not, like Madonna, arrive in New York from the sticks with \$35 in her purse. Our Lady was at the heart of things pretty much from the start, which is just as well, because it has enabled her to develop her dress sense without waitressing for Dunkin' Donuts, or any of the other squalid rites of passage, traversed by generations of Italian Americans on their way up.

Now that Gaga has passed one billion YouTube views and can count her record sales in the tens of millions she has been named chief creative officer for the Polaroid Corporation that in recent years is renowned only for serial bankruptcy and unpromising re-launches. The company, famous for little more than sunglasses and a defunct instant camera, hopes that Our Lady will raise it like Lazarus from the dead. She will "create fashion, technology, and photography products" that will restore the company's fortunes. Quite how she will do this is not entirely clear. I suspect that these manifold achievements will arise under the aegis of Brand Gaga based in the virtual world of the *Haus Of Gaga* rather than from anything specific that Our Lady actually does.

She has charitable talents too. John Demsey, President of Estee Lauder and Chairman of the M:A:C AIDS Fund has taken on Our Lady to help Cyndi Lauper save women from HIV/AIDS by selling VIVA Glam lipstick and lip gloss in six fabulous shades – every cent goes to charity – completing the virtuous Circle-Gaga with the modest ambition of "changing the world one sequin at a time". She cares about women enough to become a fashion icon and philanthropist on the gargantuan scale. Gaga says it like this: "We want women to feel strong and feel strong enough that they can remember to protect themselves. To have this lipstick as a reminder in your purse, that when

your man is laying naked in bed, you go to the bathroom, you put your lipstick on, and you bring a condom out with you . . . There are no exceptions.”

Note the stern injunction and the sense of authority with which this twenty-something speaks when she’s trying to save us all from our own fecklessness, a fecklessness which she paradoxically celebrates in every video step she takes. This marriage of hedonism and social responsibility is something truly distinctive about the modern world. In the past you had to be one or the other – you could be a hedonist or socially responsible – you couldn’t be both. Now we are lucky we can dream of having it all, we can dream of having our cake *and* eating it (I’ve never understood this expression, but I’ll let you work it out).

However, in the lively expression of paradoxes, even of just straight contradictions, Our Lady of Gaga is an intrinsically Roman Catholic creation. Without doubt she’s an Italian American. If not the pushy vulgar *Guido* or *Guidette* of Ellis Island stereotype – frightening the *Wasps* and rivalling the *Micks* – she is most certainly the product of guilt and of living with the confessional. The flagellation of Christ, the sexual tension expressed in suffering, and in subordination to pleasure in pain, is all there in her vaudeville. The emancipation of women by their surrender to heterosexual passion goes without saying. Of course, we know that the sexism is ironic, and the brutal disregard for the other, is just for fun. But the truth remains it is all about finding satisfaction in surrender and subsumption. The nuns of her youth must be very proud and, given the Vatican’s present troubles concerning the interest that many priests seem to have had in small boys, the convent can take a bow for producing, in Our Lady of Gaga, a wholesome role model, one so evidently invulnerable to slurs and aspersions; the forlorn truth is that it is impossible to criticise Our Lady of Gaga without becoming a Stalinist literary critic. Consequently, we’ll have to bravely accept our fate as Gaga’s *Little Monsters*.