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STAGING THE SELF: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND POSTMODERN FEMINISM IN MARINA DIAMANDIS'S MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical analysis of select songs by Marina Diamandis—namely "Primadonna," "How to Be a Heartbreaker," and "Bubblegum Bitch"—through the theoretical lenses of Judith Butler's gender performativity and postmodern feminist thought. It argues that Marina's work exemplifies how popular culture functions as both a site of gender norm reproduction and a potential space of subversion. Drawing on Butler's foundational claim that gender is not an innate identity but a series of socially compelled performative acts, the chapter explores how Marina's ironic and self-aware lyrical strategies expose the constructed and unstable nature of femininity. It further integrates postmodern feminist critiques of identity fragmentation, consumer culture, and the rejection of essentialist notions of womanhood, as theorized by bell hooks, Teresa de Lauretis, and Fredric Jameson. The chapter demonstrates that Marina's exaggerated personas do not offer coherent models of feminist identity but rather perform contradictory stances—simultaneously complicit with and critical of patriarchal and capitalist gender scripts. Through analysis of lyrics, visual aesthetics, and cultural positioning, the study reveals the complex interplay between performativity, hyperreality, and the commodification of femininity. Ultimately, it situates Marina's music as a key site for understanding the politics of gender identity in contemporary popular culture.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Primadonna, Marina Diamandis

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of popular music, Marina Diamandis, known artistically as Marina (formerly Marina and the Diamonds), occupies a unique space where gender, identity, and performance converge. Her lyrics, public persona, and aesthetic strategies operate as complex sites of resistance and complicity within prevailing gender norms. Applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) alongside postmodern feminist perspectives provides a critical framework to interrogate how Marina's songs not only reflect but actively construct gendered subjectivities in a fragmented cultural context. This chapter proposes a Butlerian listening of select songs by Marina—specifically "Primadonna," "How to Be a Heartbreaker," and "Bubblegum Bitch"—to explore the interplay between gender as a constructed performance and postmodern fragmentation of identity.

Judith Butler's foundational claim in Gender Trouble posits that gender is not an innate, stable identity but rather a series of repeated acts or performances governed by regulatory norms. Butler argues, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 191). In this view, the "naturalness" of gender dissolves into a socially scripted performance, which gains the illusion of coherence through repetition and societal reinforcement. Butler's theory destabilizes binary understandings of male/female identities, highlighting instead the inherently unstable and constructed nature of gender (Butler 185).

Marina's lyrics enact this very destabilization through ironic self-awareness and pastiche. The song "Primadonna" encapsulates this performative tension, as the lyrics—"Primadonna girl / All I ever wanted was the world"—echo a hyperbolic self-presentation that both inhabits and critiques the diva archetype. By embodying the stereotype of the "self-centered diva," Marina exposes the constructed and performative nature of such gendered roles. As Butler suggests, such performances are not expressions of an inner truth but are compelled by external norms and discourses (Butler 192). The performativity of the "primadonna" becomes a double-edged sword: an act of both subjugation and subversion.

Postmodern feminist thought further complements this analysis by rejecting grand narratives of essential femininity. Postmodernism emphasizes the fragmented, contingent, and plural aspects of identity (Lyotard 37). Marina's fragmented persona—alternately seductive, vulnerable, manipulative, and defiant—resists any essentialist reading of femininity. As Judith Roof asserts, postmodern feminism "emphasizes the instability and multiplicity of identity, undermining universalist notions of womanhood" (Roof 105). Marina's work illustrates this multiplicity by not presenting a singular "feminine" voice but rather a series of self-conscious performances that reflect conflicting gendered scripts.In "How to Be a Heartbreaker," Marina adopts an ironic tone that provides a "how-to manual" for manipulating male desire: "Be aggressive, stupid, and cruel" (Diamandis). This hyperbolic guide suggests a conscious strategy of performing gendered power dynamics, undermining romantic norms that frame women as passive subjects. Butler's theory helps

us understand this as a performative reiteration of gendered tropes rather than an expression of innate identity. By consciously performing manipulation, Marina exposes the coercive power of heteronormative scripts. As Susan Bordo argues, the body is not merely a biological fact but a "cultural text inscribed with norms of gender and sexuality"
(Bordo 10). Marina's performative subversion thus reveals the cultural construction of femininity as simultaneously imposed and reinterpreted.

The song "Bubblegum Bitch" offers another layer of analysis, engaging directly with consumer culture's role in constructing gender identity. The lyric "I'm your little bubblegum bitch" reflects the commodification of femininity, where women are packaged and consumed as cheerful, disposable objects. Postmodern feminist theorists argue that consumer capitalism shapes identity by fragmenting subjectivity into marketable images (Jameson 68). Marina's articulation of the "bubblegum bitch" persona plays with this fragmentation, highlighting both complicity and resistance. Her self-awareness aligns with Butler's concept that performance is neither wholly voluntary nor completely imposed but occurs within a matrix of power relations (Butler 193).

Moreover, Marina's deliberate exaggeration of feminine tropes signals an awareness of their constructedness. This aligns with Butler's argument that parody and exaggeration can destabilize normative gender practices by exposing their artificiality (Butler 195). Marina does not claim a "natural" femininity but rather performs it in a knowing, ironic manner that reveals its inherent instability.

The broader postmodern feminist critique emphasizes how identity is not a unified subject but a fragmented and shifting construct. As bell hooks articulates, feminist resistance involves recognizing and challenging the multiple layers of oppression embedded in cultural representations of gender (hooks 45). Marina's songs thus become acts of both participation in and critique of gendered norms. Her self-presentation is not a simple affirmation of womanhood but a complex, self-reflexive performance that reveals the contradictions of femininity in contemporary culture.

Through a Butlerian and postmodern feminist lens, Marina Diamandis's songs emerge as sites where gender is performed, fragmented, and reimagined. The ironic tone, hyperbolic personas, and playful pastiche in her lyrics do not merely entertain but critically engage with the discursive production of gender. Marina's work problematizes the essentialist binaries of male/female, subject/object, and active/passive, offering instead a postmodern performance of identity that is reflexive, unstable, and always in process.

This chapter will proceed by offering a close textual analysis of the selected songs, situating them within the theoretical frameworks of Butler and postmodern feminism. It will argue that Marina's work functions as a performative critique of normative gender constructions, illustrating how identity is a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon shaped by repetition, parody, and cultural discourse.

2. Performing Femininity: Parodic Reiteration in "Primadonna"

Marina Diamandis's "Primadonna" functions as a critical site for exploring the performativity of femininity as theorized by Judith Butler. The lyrics oscillate between celebration and self-mockery, reflecting Butler's assertion that gender performance is "compelled by social sanctions" rather than freely chosen (Butler 192). The repeated chorus—"Primadonna girl / All I ever wanted was the world"—serves as both an embrace and parody of the diva archetype. This duality highlights the instability of gender norms: Marina is neither wholly trapped by the primadonna role nor entirely liberated from it.

From a postmodern feminist perspective, the song's ironic tone exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon terms "parodic intertextuality," where cultural forms are both reproduced and subverted (Hutcheon 86). By deliberately exaggerating diva stereotypes—self-centeredness, superficiality, and vanity—Marina exposes how femininity is constructed through performative acts that serve patriarchal narratives. As Butler explains, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; … identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25).

Visually, in the music video for "Primadonna," Marina appears in hyper-stylized outfits and makeup that both mimic and exaggerate consumer culture's commodified image of femininity.

This reflects Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, where representation becomes detached from any original reality and exists only as a copy without an original (Baudrillard 2). The constructed visual performance reinforces the idea that Marina's primadonna is a hyperreal construct—both product of and commentary on the culture industry's role in shaping gendered identities.

3. Subverting Romantic Scripts: Strategic Gender Performance in "How to Be a Heartbreaker"

"How to Be a Heartbreaker" advances the critique of heteronormative gender dynamics through Marina's ironic, almost instructional tone. The lyrics function as a meta-commentary on the "rules" of romantic interaction, where the singer positions herself as a knowing subject who manipulates rather than passively participates in gendered power relations: "Be aggressive, stupid, and cruel" (Diamandis). Judith Butler's theory elucidates how this deliberate manipulation is not merely individual strategy but a performance compelled by cultural scripts. The repetition of advice mimics the cultural injunctions that shape feminine behavior, such as how women are expected to attract and maintain male attention. In line with Butler's argument, gender becomes "an act which is said to be expressive of a prior identity" (Butler 191). Marina exposes this act by making it explicit, thereby subverting the pretense of naturalness.

Postmodern feminist theorists like Judith Roof emphasize that identity is "a site of contradiction, a place where competing discourses intersect" (Roof 109). The song's playful tone does not obscure but rather highlights the contradiction of feminine subjectivity. Marina's performance reveals that the heartbreaker

persona is neither wholly liberating nor entirely oppressive; it exists in a liminal space where agency and coercion intersect.

Furthermore, the song challenges the notion of women as passive victims of patriarchal structures. Instead, Marina assumes an active role, albeit within the very framework that objectifies her. This aligns with Teresa de Lauretis's insight that postmodern feminism seeks to "dismantle the ideology of identity as coherence" (de Lauretis 9). Marina's heartbreaker is a fractured subject who navigates, performs, and destabilizes gender norms simultaneously.

4. Hyperreality and Commodified Femininity in "Bubblegum Bitch"

"Bubblegum Bitch" offers perhaps the most explicit engagement with Butlerian performativity and postmodern feminist critique. The lyric "I'm your little bubblegum bitch" exposes how femininity is commodified within capitalist consumer culture. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the "hyperreal" is particularly relevant here, as Marina does not present an authentic self but rather a constructed, commodified persona designed for mass consumption (Baudrillard 2).

Butler argues that the repetition of gender norms makes them appear natural, yet their exposure as performance opens a space for subversion (Butler 192). Marina's exaggerated vocal delivery, playful melody, and provocative lyrics signal an awareness of the artificiality of such roles. The "bubblegum bitch" is not an expression of a fixed identity but a conscious enactment of patriarchal expectations for female sweetness and disposability.

From a postmodern feminist standpoint, the song reflects the fragmented nature of subjectivity. bell hooks describes this fragmentation as a necessary site of resistance, where the subject is not bound by a single, unified identity but continually renegotiates the terms of selfhood (hooks 45). Marina's persona is not fixed but in constant flux, adopting contradictory positions that challenge the normative binary of "good girl" versus "bad girl."

By foregrounding the commodification of femininity, Marina critiques the ways in which consumer culture shapes and limits female identity. This aligns with Fredric Jameson's argument that postmodern culture turns identity into a commodity, reducing subjectivity to marketable images (Jameson 68). Marina's self-aware performance is thus a double-edged critique: it participates in the market while simultaneously exposing its constructed, hollow nature.

5. Gender Performativity as Site of Subversion and Compliance

Marina's strategic engagement with gender norms illustrates Butler's claim that performativity is never entirely voluntary nor completely imposed but always occurs within a matrix of power relations (Butler

193). Her songs highlight the tension between complicity and resistance, showing that subversion does not entail total rejection of gender norms but a complex reconfiguration of them.

Postmodern feminism's emphasis on identity's instability helps us appreciate how Marina's work does not aim for an essentialist redefinition of femininity. Instead, it demonstrates that identity is always multiple, fragmented, and performative. Marina's playful pastiche, ironic tone, and hyperreal aesthetic do not obscure the power structures they critique but render them visible and open to contestation.

Her artistic project thus serves as a contemporary example of how popular culture engages with—and challenges—dominant discourses on gender. By foregrounding the performative and constructed nature of femininity, Marina's songs participate in a broader feminist effort to dismantle the myth of essential identity, making space for fluid, contradictory, and politicized self-expression.

6. Performative Femininity in Popular Culture: From Butler to Mass Media

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) fundamentally challenges the notion of gender as an innate, stable identity by positing it as a series of repeated acts governed by social norms and power structures. In the context of popular culture, these performances are not isolated individual acts but are deeply embedded within a mediated network of images, discourses, and market forces. Butler argues that "gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). Popular music, as a pervasive cultural form, operates as one of the primary sites where gender norms are not only reproduced but also potentially destabilized.

Marina Diamandis's work exemplifies this intersection between individual artistic expression and the broader regulatory discourses of popular culture. Popular culture operates as a disciplinary apparatus where gender identities are continually performed, circulated, and consumed. As Angela McRobbie suggests, popular culture serves as "a site of ideological contestation and pleasure" where meanings of gender are constructed, repeated, and contested (McRobbie 56). Marina's ironic, self-aware persona intervenes in this process by exposing the artifice of such performances while simultaneously inhabiting them.

7. Hyperreality and the Commodity of Femininity

Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal is central to understanding the performativity of femininity in Marina's work. In a postmodern consumer society, identity is increasingly shaped by images and simulacra—copies without originals—that circulate within the cultural economy (Baudrillard 2). Marina's exaggerated portrayals of femininity, especially in songs like "Bubblegum Bitch," reveal how female identity becomes commodified and packaged for mass consumption.

The lyric "I'm your little bubblegum bitch" does more than adopt a provocative persona; it critiques the way femininity is manufactured as a consumable good. This commodification aligns with Fredric Jameson's

argument that in postmodern culture, “all identity becomes a commodifiable image” (Jameson 68). Marina’s performance thus functions as a double gesture: participating in the market’s logic while simultaneously parodying and critiquing its reduction of gender identity to a set of marketable signs.

Butler’s theoretical insights suggest that this hyperreal femininity is neither entirely imposed nor entirely self-chosen. Rather, the performance emerges within a matrix of power relations that both enable and constrain agency. Marina’s self-awareness of the spectacle of femininity signals a critical engagement with the mechanisms of power that sustain gender norms, aligning with Butler’s argument that performativity is a site of both compliance and potential subversion (Butler 193).

8. Postmodern Feminism and the Fragmentation of Subjectivity

Postmodern feminist theorists like bell hooks and Judith Roof have argued that identity is inherently fragmented and unstable, resisting coherent, essentialist definitions. Hooks explains that “feminist theory must not be bound to the search for a singular, stable identity” but must instead engage with multiplicity and contradiction as sites of resistance (hooks 45). Marina’s work is illustrative of this postmodern rejection of essentialist femininity.

In her discursive approach, Marina adopts contradictory stances within a single artistic persona. She simultaneously performs vulnerability, manipulation, sweetness, and aggression. This multiplicity echoes Butler’s claim that gender is not a singular identity but an ongoing,contradictory set of practices (Butler 191). The fragmented subjectivity in Marina’s songs challenges the normative expectation that femininity must conform to a coherent, unified ideal.

Moreover, Marina’s playful adoption of contradictory gender scripts aligns with Teresa de Lauretis’s notion that postmodern feminism seeks to dismantle identity as coherence and expose it as a “site of endless construction” (de Lauretis 9). Rather than presenting an emancipatory, “authentic” female subject, Marina performs a layered, conflicted femininity that reflects the complexity of contemporary subject formation.

9. Popular Culture as Disciplinary Apparatus

Popular culture does not merely reflect society’s gender norms—it actively disciplines and reproduces them. Angela McRobbie emphasizes that media industries function as regulatory mechanisms that shape how gender is perceived and performed (McRobbie 72). In this context, Marina’s songs do not exist outside the system but are deeply embedded within it, both reinforcing and disrupting its codes. Her strategic use of irony and parody reveals the ambivalence of cultural production. In “Primadonna” and “How to Be a Heartbreaker,” the self-aware tone exposes the ways in which feminine behavior is scripted by patriarchal ideology, in accordance with Butler’s assertion that “the very notion of a subject” is “always a regulatory fiction” (Butler 193). Marina’s performative acts become a site where the tension between personal agency

and structural compulsion is played out, revealing the impossibility of an authentic, pre-discursive femininity.

This aligns with postmodern critiques of identity and power. As Judith Roof asserts, identity is not an origin but a construct formed at the intersection of cultural, political, and economic discourses (Roof 109). Marina's work, therefore, cannot be read as a straightforward feminist anthem but as a complex negotiation between complicity, parody, and subversion.

10. Implications for Feminist Cultural Criticism

The implications of analyzing Marina's songs through Butlerian and postmodern feminist lenses are far-reaching. They challenge the critical tendency to look for stable, coherent expressions of feminist identity in cultural texts. Instead, Marina's work reveals that gender identity is always contingent, performative, and fragmented.

This theoretical approach disrupts traditional feminist strategies that seek a singular, unified "woman's voice" in cultural production. As Butler argues, "the subversion of gender requires, rather, that gender be understood as performative" (Butler 193). Marina's self-aware performance of gender roles does not offer a prescriptive model for feminist identity but instead exposes the mechanisms by which gendered subjectivities are constructed, consumed, and contested.

Furthermore, the integration of popular culture into feminist critique emphasizes the importance of analyzing everyday cultural practices as sites of ideological reproduction and resistance. Popular music, as a widely consumed form of expression, shapes collective understandings of gender. Marina's work exemplifies how pop culture can simultaneously reinforce and destabilize the gendered status quo.

11. Gender Performativity, Popular Culture, and the Politics of Identity

This chapter has examined Marina Diamandis's select songs—"Primadonna," "How to Be a Heartbreaker," and "Bubblegum Bitch"—through the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's gender performativity and postmodern feminist thought. Marina's work emerges as a compelling example of how popular culture both reflects and shapes gender identity as a constructed and fragmented performance, rather than an essential or stable truth.

Judith Butler's foundational insight—that gender is performatively constituted through repeated acts and social norms (Butler 25)—provides the key lens for understanding Marina's engagement with femininity. The songs analyzed do not merely reproduce cultural scripts of gender; they expose their constructedness through irony, exaggeration, and pastiche. In "Primadonna," Marina enacts the diva persona not as an authentic identity but as a hyperreal performance, highlighting the artificiality of the cultural expectations placed on women (Baudrillard 2). The deliberate exaggeration of vanity and self-centeredness serves to

parody patriarchal ideals, revealing the underlying mechanisms of gendered power. Similarly, "How to Be a Heartbreaker" functions as a meta-commentary on romantic interactions, where Marina adopts a consciously manipulative stance. This aligns with Butler's argument that gender performance is not a voluntary expression of an inner identity but a compelled reiteration of cultural norms (Butler 191). The playful, ironic tone of the lyrics complicates the binary of active versus passive femininity, emphasizing instead a liminal space where agency and coercion intersect (Roof 109). Marina's strategic performance destabilizes heteronormative scripts without providing a coherent alternative, exemplifying postmodern feminism's resistance to essentialist definitions of identity (hooks 45).

"Bubblegum Bitch" offers the most overt critique of consumer culture's role in shaping gender identity. The commodification of femininity as a cheerful, disposable object is a central theme that reflects Fredric Jameson's observation that postmodern identity is commodified and fragmented into marketable images (Jameson 68). Marina's self-aware embrace of the "bubblegum bitch" persona operates as both participation in and parody of the capitalist production of female identity. The song illustrates Butler's idea that performativity is a site of both subjugation and potential subversion (Butler 193), as Marina neither fully rejects nor wholly conforms to the norms she enacts.

The theoretical implications of this analysis suggest that Marina's music challenges traditional feminist approaches seeking a stable, coherent expression of womanhood. Instead, her work highlights the multiplicity, contradiction, and fragmentation inherent in contemporary identity formation. This aligns with postmodern feminist calls to abandon essentialist narratives in favor of understanding identity as contingent, socially constructed, and always in flux (de Lauretis 9).

Furthermore, the chapter underscores popular culture's role as a disciplinary apparatus that both regulates and enables gender performance (McRobbie 72). Marina's self-conscious performances reveal how pop culture serves not merely to reflect society but to actively shape and normalize gendered subjectivities. Her music exemplifies a critical space where the construction of gender is made visible, contested, and reimagined.

Ultimately, Marina Diamandis's songs provide a nuanced and provocative site for examining the politics of gender performativity in the contemporary cultural economy. They do not offer simple solutions or affirmations of identity but instead reveal the complexity and instability of gender as a performance mediated by power, discourse, and commodification.

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