

DIVA

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A DIVA IS a glamorous and skilled female performer who wins resonance in the spectators and thereby gains fame and fortune; a phenomenon of entertainment industry that are likely to continue to be celebrated in the next decade. A diva is like no ordinary, mortal performer, or even ordinary, mortal woman, and thus named with the epithet goddess. Diva is Latin's feminine form of *divus*, meaning divine. Diva became a synonym for prima donna (the female lead) in the opera in the 17th century, but it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that the concept began to be used outside of Italy (Davies 2012). A diva is mostly a woman, but can be a man but only insofar as he is primarily associated with femininity. Queer femininity is at the core of diva.

I propose that diva is a queer concept and a tool to interpret femininity and to analyze how a performing woman can embody a signal system that can work as a weapon in politicized discourses, and reveal intricate systems of ideologies and inherited symbolic ideas of ideals and defects that circulate in society. The diva embodies symbolic values congruous to her time and society, and is thus full of contradictions. She is often criticized for her outrageous demand of payment, but still draws a large audience. She is both adored and demonized by her fans and audience; the object of fetishistic worship as well as ridiculed as a betrayer of her class, race, and gender. She is often accused of being reactionary and of capitalizing on the exotic and nostalgic ideas of glamorous femininity, but is also a role model and in some cases, a feminist icon. The diva is inter-

national and often moves between countries and continents, at the same time as she is often seen as representative of her nationality and race. Her afterlife is often mythologized, but she is also frequently forgotten. The diva is entangled with women's liberation, capitalism, nostalgia, exoticism, orientalism, nationalism, globalization, colonialism, class, and race. Wayne Koestenbaum (2001, 85) has noted that the diva's "method of moving the body through the world" both on and off stage can be read as a defensive strategy and as armor against the punishments that powerful women often are subjected to. Since the diva often violates prevailing gender norms, she has historically been viewed as a norm breaker with a feminist potential. Because of her profession and lifestyle, the diva often transgresses normative femininity and embodies a category of her own. As Koestenbaum (2001) notes, the diva's on- and off stage performance can be read as a way to identify with a queer category across invisibility and disgrace. Furthermore, the diva has both served as a restorative force for heterosexual audiences and has an iconic status in gay subculture (Rosenberg 2009, 41–9). Historically she has played the deputy subject that parts of gay audiences could identify with in times when representations of gay love were taboo, regardless of her own sexuality.

As noted in pop diva Beyoncé Knowles song "Diva," the "queen" position is one of several diva codes (Knowles 2008; Koestenbaum 2001, 107). Diva codes, Koestenbaum teaches us, are processes that surround divas that they are subjected to by their audiences, but also includes the attitudes, conduct, and poses they themselves embody and that make divas recognizable across performance genres and times. Historical divas, such as Swedish opera diva Christina Nilsson, who toured the world and positioned herself as a queen of the Scandinavian-Americans, arguably set out a template for modern celebrity culture that still can shed light upon contemporary power and compromises of visible representation in the arts and in public life (Anon. 1870). As one of the most successful contemporary female performers and songwriters, Beyoncé's work brings together African and American theories (Rossander 2017). Tellingly, "Diva" is a song about refusing to internalize negative voices and acknowledge your worth and power and taking control of your career

and money, about restorative force and female empowerment, which is a central theme of diva-dom. Yet, though her role as a feminist icon, Beyoncé arguably also plays in the hands of the patriarchy with her sexy, feminine looks and expensive, glamorous attire. The contradictions of feminist icon and heteronormative sex kitten in a patriarchal world are a recurrent diva theme. Indeed, it is the diva's eccentricity and dramatic conduct, not only on stage but also as a public figure, that gives her a dual career: both as an artist and as a cultural sign whose biography lives on across time. She embodies symbolic values that derive from both her performance (in roles, songs, and so on) and her personal life (civil state, race, nationality, sexuality, love affairs and so on). This embodiment of the duality of stage/screen and life renders the diva authenticity in the eyes of the audience. Stage/screen and life have to show some dissimilarity, but the connections between the two must exist for the diva's specific glory to last over time (Rosenberg 2009, 112).

The diva's power lies in her popularity, her function as a role model, and the fact that she embodies an economic commodity, make exploitation and self-control common themes. For Swedish opera diva Jenny Lind, money (albeit presented as a philanthropic mission to fund schools in Sweden) motivated her American tour in 1850 (Dunsmore 2015, 180). Yet, as Beyoncé's song "Diva" declares, divas are not only female versions of a hustler, they are their own bosses. Economic gains and control of their own business and representation, especially among divas who come from poor or humble circumstances cause controversy, revealing how misogyny and class shape discourses about divas to this day. Indeed, some divas, such as Zarah Leander, are punished for taking their flirt with capitalism too far. Leander made her fortune by playing in German films that promoted the Nazi propaganda during the World War II, and she was later ostracized in Sweden, Germany, and Austria for metaphorically sleeping with the enemy. A diva might not get away with everything; she has a strong potentiality of getting shamed, but she also harbors prospects for triumphant comebacks as Leander later did.

Finally, it is worth noting that even as she frequently challenges and transcends racial and cultural norms of beauty, performance, and gender,

there is no universal diva, she is always already racialized (Scheper 2016; Fiol-Matta 2017). Thus, the 19th century Swedish opera divas Jenny Lind and Christina Nilsson made iconic international careers by performing “Swedishness” in different ways, for example singing Swedish folksongs, kissing the Swedish flag, and by emphasizing their Nordic features. In America, they came to represent the glow of the white woman (Dyer 1997, 8). Emphasizing their white complexion, blue eyes, and fair hair and enhancing what was understood as typical Swedish characteristics, such as honesty, simplicity, and at the time so-called naturalness, Lind and Nilsson thus contributed to the iconization of the allure of the white, blond heroine that would reign in Hollywood in the 20th century. With iconic music film, such as *Homecoming* from 2019, Beyoncé may well be setting a new, black standard for diva-dom in the 21st century.

It is clear that in the past and in the present, the diva is a complex figure surrounded by prejudice, worship, myths, and shame. Whether she wants it or not, the diva’s body and performance is inevitably coded by her audience even as she often tries to take control of her image. Such struggles frequently reveal how the diva is engaged in a high stake dance with her fans, the current entertainment industry, and societal gender norms. One step out of line and the diva might lose her balance and fall (although a diva’s self-destructive fall can become a restorative story for her fans).

While the diva remain a dubious figure, and rarely embraced within feminist theory, I propose that diva codes and themes help us understand both our past and our society today. The diva’s contradictions as the feminist who flirts openly with capitalism, patriarchy, and sometimes even reactionary forces will arguably only get heightened in the 2020s, especially as it forces our gaze toward ourselves as feminists. One thing is clear: the diva exceeds straight frames. Thus, the scholar who engages the diva as a concept has to dance with archival sources like myths, anecdotes, gossip, and be able to move between different theories to unravel the opaque phenomenon that the diva provokes. This makes both the dance of the diva, and the scholar’s dance with the concept, undeniably queer.

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