# [A] A Fondness for Shock: The Celebrated Outburst of Grace Jones

[A] Mark Duffett

In 2006, to mark the launch of its nostalgic programme, *Wogan: Now and Then*, the UK TV network channel, Gold, ran a poll in Britain amongst 2000 viewers to find the "most shocking" moments in international chat show history ('Jones Slap Tops TV Chat Show Poll,' 2006). Grace Jones's November 1980 appearance on *The Russell Harty Show* topped the listing, beating moments such as the Sex Pistols' famous expletive-laden 1976 Bill Grundy interview (which came 6th) and Tom Cruise's infamous 2005 appearance on *Oprah* (9th), during which he hyperactively enacted his feelings about being in love. In other words, if dedicated fans loved Grace for her videos and concerts, the wider public had a TV appearance from twenty five years earlier foremost in this mind. Gold's head James Newton expressed the complexity of the show's reception when he added, in a BBC news story, that such moments were ones "which people throughout the country talked about at the time and still remember with great fondness" ('Jones Slap…,' 2006). The "shock" was not simply an occasion for moral outrage, but either always had been, or had gradually become, recouped as something seen with "fondness." What is interesting here is, why was there such "fondness"? For many people, some perhaps now of an older generation, Grace Jones is the epitome of divahood. Anthony Haden-Guest ended his 1997 "biography" of the New York discotheque Studio 54 with a "cast list" that recorded the occupations of its habitués: writers, photographers, publicists, paparazzi, and so on. Next to Grace, he simply wrote, "diva" (389). Reviewing one of her 2008 shows, *Times* journalist David

Sinclair called her a “Headstrong Diva… at her Exotic Best” (13). Rather than a moment of mere “slap” or “fisticuffs,” her *Russell Harty Show* appearance was a performance that had complex cultural resonances. My argument about Jones’s diva moment is that it emerged as a sign of the times: both an economic symptom and artistic strategy, as well as inscription of identity.

To begin, it is worth considering Robin James’s (2008) discussion of “Robo-diva R&B.” Drawing on the innovative work of Kudwo Eschun (1998), James argues that 1980s Black robotic electro and breakbeat acts reversed the “classic ‘60s [rock] myth” (404) in which White male musicians equated pre-industrial Black male blues performance with an authentic expression of heterosexual swagger. This cross-racial reading, which Eschun suggested, seems apt, albeit one that ignores the complexity of geographically separated, cross-*class* dynamics involved the cross-racial patronage of the British invasion era. On the basis of the claim that Black female sexuality has been positioned as a doubly compounded threat to the social order, James further extends this usurpation of organic ’60s thinking, to say that the adoption of cyborg technology by women is itself threatening and feminine, and that Black female robotic performers only emphasize the threat:

> Thus, to adopt the aesthetic of the robo-diva is to throw in White patriarchy’s face what it most fears – black women and Black femininity… as competent, empowered agents of their own destiny, whose very existence challenges the political and aesthetic norms of White patriarchy. (James 2008: 417)

In recent decades the notion of “divahood” has been reclaimed and applied by those of Black and queer identities: in other words individuals who face multiple forms of oppression in the light of how their identities are socially perceived. The era of identity politics has reinforced this to the extent that discussion of divahood is almost always about empowerment. Specifically, in relation to Grace Jones, however – who is a kind of prototype figure in this debate – James cites Eschun,

saying, “Jones, as both a Black woman – implicitly farther from embodying White beauty norms – and as a model – who is expected to embody the ideal perfectly – requires a greater-than-average degree of [technological] alteration” (2008: 408). This is a complex argument. To begin to address it, Grace Jones’s emergence as a diva needs more social context. Rather than simply dismissing Grace on the *Russell Harty Show* as committing an act of personal vengeance, or worst still as “mad” or intoxicated, it might be better to locate her action in relation to the social changes and discussion going on around popular music and pop in particular in the era.

If we are to consider Grace Jones in her time (and not just in our own), we should explore the kaleidoscopic social changes that occurred between the late 1960s and late 1980s: a time of “creative destruction” (Harvey, 2007: 3) in which computer tech usurped industry in Western nations as engines of profit. This was associated with a series of momentous changes summarized in the exemplary debate from forum contributors to *The Journal of Modern European History* geographic: social dislocation, postcolonialism, and the rising social status of marginalized people such as gay men, women and people of colour. While one might imagine that their comments only apply to a European context, different parts of the world had long been interlinked in various ways. Despite a range of viewpoints, a broad summary of the changes is as follows: Left wing paternalism and welfare was reversed in a complex phase which saw the rise of militant right wing liberalism, privatization, and market deregulation. The Keynesian consensus of the post-war economic boom crumbled. Industrial society’s gradual collapse was reflected by the rise and fall of Marxism, both in terms of academic discussion and labour organization, “before the new norm of high inflation, rising unemployment and low growth… [in which] welfare states also passed into crisis” (Wirsching *et al*, 2011: 13). As part of this change,

“What we now call globalization deprived social democrats of their ability to manage national capitalisms in the interests of their working class supporters” (15).

What matters here is that historians rightly describe the turbulent shifts *as the opposite of a smooth transition*: as a “turning point” in European history (Wirsching *et al*, 2011: 8), “the end of industrial society” (10), where “circumstances changed very rapidly” (12), “welfare states passed into crisis” (13), “profound ruptures occurred with the past… during the turbulence of 1967–74” (14), where we saw “the violent denouement of European decolonization” (16).

This moment of “creative destruction” was associated with significant social and political transformations. The women’s liberation movements and changes to the family happened alongside the shift towards a post-industrial economy. New technologies both created a demand for skilled labour and increased wage inequalities (Woods 1998). Rather than creating communal unity, the emerging era was alienating and fragmenting.

### [B] Postmodern Pop

> I don’t believe personally that rock’n’roll is meant to endure through the ages as great art. That’s what makes it so great – it’s “now”; it’s me, right now. Use it, dispose it, throw it away. Forget it. But then there was like this sense of defeat [in the early 1970s], of defeatist music, and now it’s totally into an escapist thing: Elton John, and disco, and [all] this. People want slick, shallow music. Superficial: here today and gone tomorrow. (Lester Bangs on *Whatever Gets You Through The Night*, 1977)

Social shifts were registered in the mass adoption of “pop art” sensibilities (which merged art and advertising) and “the rise of postmodernism in the arts and human sciences” (Wirsching *et*

*al*, 2011: 19). It is interesting, for instance, to consider the way in which genres emerging in the 1970s and 1980s began to herald a significant reformulation of pop.

Glam rock had been an early response, embracing postmodern forces which mixed rock and pop, art and business. Tony Palmer's seminal music documentary series *All You Need Is Love* aired an episode on "glitter rock" in May 1977 in which the famous critic Lester Bangs opined:

> In Roxy Music what you see is the triumph of artifice, because what they're about is that they're not about anything. Musically, they are an incredible synthesis of a lot of things, but I think their longevity and vitality will be quite limited due to the fact that the leader of this group is a fellow named Bryan Ferry who is possibly the most vacuous excuse for a superstar that has yet been presented to us… He doesn't care about rock'n'roll at all. The ascendance of these people is an indication of the level to which rock has sunk. It's appearance and artifice. There's nothing, I believe, truly committed, about either a Bryan Ferry or a David Bowie. It's much more a using of rock for their own ego aggrandizement rather than a belief in the music they're working with.
> (*Whatever Gets You Through The Night*, 1977)

Bang's thinking painted the late 1960s as a watershed where the leading rock musicians appeared to be deeply committed to music, politics and art, and the time since then as a retreat in which rock had been drained of its most noble qualities, leaving nothing except music as commodity (vacuity, artifice, *pop*).

As if replying to Bangs, Palmer edited in footage of Bryan Ferry explaining:

> Presenting your music in a kind of fun way helps to attract a wider audience. It is very much a 24 hour business. You have to be totally dedicated to your work, like an actor on a stage, I suppose, when you're doing a tour. Instead of throwing yourself into one part, you have to throw yourself into lots of different parts. I try to write lots of different types of songs with different kinds of mood… There isn't much time to stop and think, "What am I doing it for?" (*Whatever Gets You Through The Night*, 1977)

In Ferry's thinking, pop is first and foremost a commodity or business. Creating a spectacle is central to it. "Glitter" is not mere gloss, however, but a medium through which art can be

created. The metaphor of the "actor on a stage" is interesting here as it implies both artifice *and* art.

Glam rock had subverted the rock aesthetic to "honestly" and self-consciously locate rock as a pop commodity. Since glam's "unholy" combination of business, artifice and art proved so popular, for some musicians the next artistic and political step was to create a critique, either in the form of punk, which protested, or new wave music, which subverted glam from within.

As the times got economically, socially and politically turbulent, culturally up-ended, and geographically fragmented, groups with a sense of self-awareness and social conscience began to produce musical commentary that itself negotiated between appalled opposition and subversive participation (see, for example, Hackett 2019). I am going to suggest this was played out across at least two fields: gender and technology. Bryan Ferry's discussion of the place of gender in his glittering art-commodity spectacle defined the glam aesthetic:

> As well as the stage presentation, you use everything – the packaging of your work, which in the business is called "product." Things like album covers, and posters, and souvenir programmes, which you can either totally ignore or take an interest in and try and raise the standard of.
>
> There's a great tradition in advertising of using glamour girls for selling cars through to Coca-Cola. The first album cover we did [for the 1972 *Roxy Music* LP], I sort of had a pin-up girl on the cover, because I thought that was a lethal way of selling any kind of product. That worked incredibly well. Business can be artistic as well.
>
> (*Whatever Gets You Through The Night*, 1977)

In the form of the "pin-up girl" – the models or supermodels who regularly graced Roxy Music's album covers – female beauty was used to affirm a certain taste, based on a shared sense of the aesthetic, which was one that added the gloss of glamour. Yet it was also window dressing: an ingredient which marketed and propagated the product.

Post-punk and new wave groups critiqued such stances. Sometimes they linked this to the uncritical adoption of technology. A good example was Devo, a male group from Ohio who began in the art world of Kent State University and went on to become a cult act in the new wave. Like Bangs, their approach was McLuhanesque: society was *devolving* as deindustrialization was deepening material inequality, but distracting with the lure of new consumerism. Technology was at the centre of this: deskilling the workplace, yet also offering new opportunities. The crisis of manufacturing had already taught Western workers that making adjustments to new technology would not bring lasting material benefits. That crisis associated adjusting to technology with false promise.

As a raft of new musical instruments appeared, such as synthesizers and sequencers, they seemed to reflect the pervasive nature of this technological change. For the artists of the new wave, however, technology was not abandoned. Instead it was to be controlled or redirected:

> We always had a healthy interest in technology. We loved new technology when we saw things, but we were also fairly sceptical. So, to me, there were artists that I thought their artwork looked like they worshipped technology – and they were, you know, especially in the entertainment industry. I just see it as something to use or to misuse, and make it more interesting than it was intended to be.
>
> (*Oral History of Mark Mothersbaugh*, 2017)

With its mechanistic beats, objectifying aesthetic and association with hedonistic consumerism (the party or club night), the "synthetic music" of disco symbolized the coming of a post-industrial age. The genre became a contested terrain; its emancipating ethos liable to be interpreted as false promise, culture without protest, advertising without product.

In 2017, Devo founder member Mark Mothersbaugh explained:

> There were riots at a number of campuses, but in America, when it got too real for everybody, they all kind of like put their heads in the sand. And everybody went to sleep, and there were no Bob Dylans in 1971.

> Instead, what you got was disco, and you got, erm, basically, corporate rock. You got like White rock, like guys on stage that were singing, "I'm White. I'm a misogynist, and I'm proud of it, and I'm a conspicuous consumer." I remember describing disco as, "A woman with a beautiful body but no brain." So we decided we wanted to do something different.
>
> (*Oral History of Mark Mothersbaugh*, 2017)

Mothersbaugh's "beautiful body but no brain" comment could be used to suggest a critique of the *uncritical adoption* of new technology, epitomized in popular music by sequencers which, critics argued, were often used to produce pleasant beats devoid of any political messages. To some ears, the "woman with a beautiful body but no brain" metaphor might be construed as deeply misogynist – or, perhaps, given that the disco genre famously had its roots in New York's marginalized gay and Black club cultures, something even more resentful or unjust. Mothersbaugh's disavowel of the misogyny of straight White "corporate rock" suggests that new wave discourse was complex. Perhaps he *wanted* music made by women with brains, *audible in some critical form*.

Grace Jones looms large in such a debate, partly because she began as a modestly successful disco covers artist. Her disco music was not always appreciated because of the materialism it was thought to signify. Consider this 1983 review, for example, from Iman Lababedi (1983), parodying the attitude understood to be embodied in Jones's music in *Creem*: "Her music? Yuck – jet-setting, hedonistic, cocaine-freaked, blanked-out – double yuck – disco." Dramatic changes were being played out in the fields of technology, geography, gender and race, and could be critiqued by making music that adopted a pop art approach. Devo symbolized the shifting techno-social-gender dynamics of the era in their video for "Whip It" which was set on a "dude ranch" and featured a statuesque diva having her clothes whipped off her by a band member who seemed both nerdish and aggressive:

> You have all the imagery being messed around with that is familiar imagery to people: the ranch, you know; the cowboy mythology of America, down home, with the ranch; the family; mom baking the pie. But then you have this woman that looks like she's Grace Jones, as if she's a refugee from the Alamo here, being *whipped – being whipped!*
> (*Gerald Casale: Oral History of Devo*, 2015)

In other words, for Casale, the video for "Whip It" offered a strange and disturbing pop art take on the complexities of the changing era. It located Grace Jones as a certain iconic "type": the disco diva as a "woman with a beautiful [Black] body but no brain." By the time "Whip It" was released in August 1980, however, Jones's own trajectory had complicated this interpretation. She was embracing an enlarged, dislocated, post-soul, post-disco, post-punk musical territory.

[B] The Miracle of Creolization

In a recent discussion with Paul Gilroy, Thomas Hylland Eriksen drew on Richard Price's (2001) term "the miracle of creolization" and described it as "the fact that so much inexplicable suffering and misery has led to this wonderful cultural creativity which continues to reverberate throughout the world… I mean all the rhythmic music we have mainly comes from that historical experience" (*The Holberg Laureate…*, 2019). Later in the discussion, Gilroy explained the dynamics of this process in relation to civil rights from the 1960s onwards:

> And then, you know, you get James Brown and Nina Simone and all of these cultural people coming to West Africa and playing in FESTAC [1977 Nigerian cultural festival]. And it's there on film, so you see B. B. King and the voices of East Harlem playing with Fela [Kuti] and playing with African musicians.
>
> That Creole conversation is really something that's being rendered attractive not just to African Americans, not just to Africans, *but also to the people who are consuming these new, emergent, popular forms of Black music as a kind of adjunct to rock music as well*.
> (*The Holberg Laureate*…, 2019; emphasis mine)

What interests me here is *the way in which* the "miracle of creolization" was entering into popular music in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, as a way to enhance musical commodities for the White audiences who dominate the mainstream music marketplace ("people who are consuming… Black music as a kind of adjunct to rock music"). The tensions of this process can be seen around the Whitening of rock, the ambivalent acceptance of disco, the rejection and eventual embrace of Michael Jackson on MTV, the racial complexity of post-punk and the new pop (where, broadly, punk, funk and glam fused in art music made by White musicians who challenged gender norms), and the complex emergence of World Music.

To put this another way, the 1970s and 1980s were not only a period where there was a cultural trajectory in Western popular and high arts, including music, from modernity (which notionally opposed high art to commerce) to post-modernity (which used art concepts to market mass commodities). Those decades were also an extended moment where the "miracle of [cultural] creolization" – which stemmed from the diasporic, displaced, postcolonial, aspirational predicament of many of the world's population – provided the creative engine for that process to happen.

Western cultural traditions began to embrace postcolonial, multicultural hybridity. Here, "the space of the 'in-between' becomes re-thought as a place of immense creativity and possibility" (McLeod 2000: 215). The creative industries of the 1970s and 1980s – fashion, art, music, literature – thrived on this new sense of cosmopolitanism, which celebrated racial diversity as an indicator of human liberation, even as economic inequalities were exacerbated. In that sense, I would further return to James's (2008) work, and agree with her invocation of Sandra Bartky's notion of the "fashion-beauty complex." This idea pinpoints the high gloss creative industries that were invigorated by the social shift towards postmodernity, as epitomized

in both pop and pop art. However, I disagree with the conclusion that Jones's Black body, in that context, required "a greater than average" degree of alteration. Instead, I would argue that the "fashion-beauty complex" thrived on a touch of perceived primitivism that Jones artfully performed.

Grace was not simply, however, the queen of glam. There was something else going on. To understand what that means, I wish to invoke the earlier conversation with Paul Gilroy, where he distinguishes "1% cosmopolitanism" from "cosmopolitanism from below" (*The 2019 Holberg Conversation*…, 2019). In other words, the "miracle of creolization" in the arts draws its very authenticity from the *juxtaposition of or trafficking between* the fraught realities of postcolonial displacement (with its difficult racial encounters and moments of economic exploitation) and the Studio 54 fantasy of globe-trotting, jet-setting cosmopolitanism, where the injustices of racial oppression were supposedly soothed by embracing the dictates of capital and enjoying an overabundance of money.

Rather than an "immigrant," Jones was a "nomad": raised by a wealthy Jamaican family and traversing world cities: New York, Paris and London. One could go further, however, by saying that in the fragmented, creolized, global hybrid pop created by Grace Jones, forms of identity arguably lost their folk moorings. It is prescient here to remember Stuart Hall's thoughts from 1992:

> Where would we be, as bell hooks once remarked, without a touch of essentialism? … This moment essentializes difference… And it is therefore unable to grasp the dialogic strategies and hybrid forms essential to the diaspora aesthetic… You can be Black and British… The essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference… [and] we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct. (Hall 1992/2003: 295)

On the next page, he summed up, "it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity of Black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention" (296). Both Hall and Jones were born in

Jamaica, and rose to prominence in other places. Both began their lives in countries where, from one perspective, generations with African ancestry lived in colonial exile and were shaped by European colonizers. Such a complex geographic experience helped them understand how race relations and racial oppression operated differently in these diverse and changing locales. For Hall, this consisted in part of being privileged for his relative White skin tone in the Caribbean, but pronounced Black and conflated with a range of other people in Britain. Jones's Jamaican family life was shaped by Christian authoritarianism. Her international trajectory was self-defined as a rebellion against, or on-stage re-working, of it. Each different location where she lived left its mark. Her accent changed audibly. Her displaced, globalized, fragmented existence was an effervescent source of creativity in her art. In it, her agency was necessarily a kind of oceanic construct – visibly coming and going as she switched careers, artistic styles and collaborators. Like the divas who came in her wake, Jones's agency would necessarily "vibrate queerly out of range" (Burton 2017: 10) even though, here perhaps by compromise and there perhaps by adjustment, she maintained control the whole time.

If Grace's disco days partly consisted of reworking chansons, her new 1980s period became more experimental. Her Warhol–fostered journey from supermodel to pop star was thus one of enfranchisement: she became *both* the author and the story of the pop commodity, and yet this process was discussed through, and fraught with, the limited possibilities of the glam aesthetic held at the time. Paul Morley's (1981) profile was especially instructive, and written quite soon after the *Russell Harty Show* incident:

> Grace Jones is a purposeless system. Grace Jones is a random event meticulously controlled. Grace Jones is no more than a surrealist object with the shock removed… She is nothing in herself. She is only the roles — that is the contradictory roles — she enacts for others.

It is instructive here that Morley both articulated Jones's predicament in relation to the questions of the glam aesthetic, as postmodern "art into pop," but that he also later became her biographer, in effect collaboratively reasserting the "nothing-there–ness" (though certainly not "vacuity") of her celebrity image. Morley comments, for instance, about her being "a purposeless system" are negated in the same review by claiming that he is not saying she is of no value. There is a sense there of art for art's sake as pop. This approach, however, went further, when Jones *creolized* the new wave. Such blending was elaborated by Alistair Dougall:

> Island Records' boss Chris Blackwell had decided to involve himself in shaping his singer's future, calling in the crack reggae rhythm section of drummer Sly Dunbar and bassist Robbie Shakespeare. Whereas her previous records had featured comatose camp standards like "Send in the Clowns," "La Vie En Rose" and "Autumn Leaves," *Warm Leatherette* [1980] contained funk/reggae interpretations of songs by adventurous modern songwriters such as Bryan Ferry ("Love Is the Drug") and the Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde ("Private Life"). (Dougall 1984: 2300)

Emblematic of such change was Jones's dub cover of Joy Division's "She's Lost Control." Mark Fisher (2006) argued it reworked Ian Curtis's alienation as an objectifying entry into the world of the machine. Post-punk was mainly made by White musicians, but adopted elements of dub and other Black music to help express hybridity and alienation. Grace covered glam and post-punk music, not necessarily to return it "home" to Jamaica, but to express her race as a case of refracted identity. To Russell Harty, when asked "Do you understand what I'm saying to you?", with a pointed stare she replied, "No – your accent is a bit foreign," raising laughter from the audience. When he asked if she had been photographed recently, she said, "No, no, not recently. I think I'm homesick, maybe, right?" Such phrases were provocations, asking political questions about what was to be expected or seen as appropriate in a multicultural society.

[B] Unruly: Grace Jones as (Post-Punk) Rock Star

> I think Devo's final contingent [message] about the path of rock'n'roll, whatever that is, was that it had gone as far as it could, and I don't care if you bring in world beat music and influence it that way, or bring in reggae and influence it that way, use samples or don't use samples – whatever you want to do, it doesn't have the same power anymore, just as paintings don't have the same power, because, as we race at a faster and faster pace towards bigger and bigger problems of survival, it's inadequate. It's merely relegated to, you know, a runway show.
>
> It's a fashion show. That's all it is.
>
> (*Gerald Casale: Oral History of Devo*, 2015)

For many commentators, the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society marked a catastrophic political and artistic descent. Grace Jones, however, found a larger audience when she embraced the pop art traditions of glam and the new wave. The idea that "robo-divahood" threateningly inverted the "classic '60s [rock] myth" is open to question. Ironically, while new technologies threatened male industrial employment and the masculinity associated with it in the 1970s, Black women had no more claim on embodying such changes than anyone else. The positing of a pre-industrial Black aesthetic amongst White rock musicians may have held true in the 1960s but, by the 1980s, the situation was more complicated due to the technological shifts. Rock audiences started using figures like Bruce Springsteen to locate an "authentic" performance of *industrial* era masculinity. The new technologies of pop often floated new *male* maestros of all races who had different masculinities. There were plenty of male rock and pop bands who thrived on adjusting to the new technological conditions and hybridizing their musical styles, just as there were mixed and female bands who did the same. The tradition of the rebel was ironically reworked too.

In the span of the twentieth century, Black music was often associated with a kind of personal and sometimes sensual freedom. As epitomized by the idea of the juke joint as an illicit space, this association was older than rock'n'roll, and arguably emerged from the highly

regimented cultures of manual labour to which many Black folk were subjected during slavery and much of the Jim Crow era (see Murray 1976). Here, Saturday night notionally formed a liberal space of release from the rigours of each working week, and the both sides of the equation were, in mythology as much as in actuality, intensified in relation to Black culture as Southern working class U.S. culture. This notion filtered through the popular arts, particularly jazz and, even before it was embraced in rock'n'roll and articulated to what came later, appealed to a growing minority of White bohemians – such as the jazz player Mezz Mezzrow and the Beats.

In the 1960s, the modelling of "pre-industrial" Black masculinity by White R&B and then rock musicians gave them their permissive swagger. Rock stars were taken to exemplify such swagger, as referenced in President Jimmy Carter's eulogy for a freshly dead Elvis Presley in 1977: "He was unique and irreplaceable… he was a symbol to people the world over, of the vitality, rebelliousness, and good humor of his country." In other words, the project of post-war popular music was indelibly associated with what I would call a "project of personal freedom," epitomized by the persona of the White male rock star, whether Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Mick Jagger or Axl Rose. According to Leerom Medovoi (2005), individuals with rebellious stances in pop culture became useful to post-war America because, in contrast to the conformity demanded by Communist or religious authoritarian regimes, they advertised the benefits of being part of the capitalist "free world" to postcolonial trading partners. The approach celebrated exceptionalism epitomized in youthful rebellion. Moreover, this exceptionalism's value was *consistent* between the breakout of 1950s rock'n'roll, the communal idealism of the 1960s, and the me-first entrepreneurism of the 1980s.

Grace Jones's "fit" with such notions of individualism is interesting. Reviewing one comeback show, a *Times* journalist noted: "Her performance began half an hour late – what else

would you expect?" (Sinclair 2008: 13). Such "fashionable lateness" was also a hallmark of White male rock stars. Such stars had often been described as individualists rather than divas. As Fulgani Sheth (2009) has argued, Orientalism in perceptions of race itself define racial different through notions of "unruly" Otherness. All this raises the question of what being a "disruptive diva" might mean, and to whom. Grace's rebellion is perhaps easier for people to locate: not as something rocking – though it definitely is punk rocking – but, rather, as a kind of revenge of the social and geographic periphery, an appropriation of music stardom as a rightful assertion of incivility.

It is interesting to compare the Sex Pistols interview with Bill Grundy to Grace Jones's *Russell Harty Show* interview. In Grundy's hands, the taunts came in such forms as asking his guests whether they liked classical composers. When Johnny Rotten said, "That's just their tough shit," Grundy seized his chance: "No, no, what was the rude word?... Was it really? Good heavens – you frighten me to death!" When Steve Jones piled on further swearing, the host's response was, "Go on, keep going… Say something outrageous… What a clever boy." In other words, Grundy's aim was to expose the distance between the Pistols and "polite" society, then use that distance to put them down. Now compare some of Russell Harty's lines: "Have you calmed yourself down, in clothes over the years?" When Grace mentioned eating Thanksgiving turkey, Harty added, "Or the stuffing, even… If you relax her any more, she'll slip off the chair and fall away." These could be construed as references to sexual availability, and stereotypical assumptions about "looseness" (or in music, "loose-jointedness") associated with a Black Other. When Jones began to get playfully aggressive, Harty referenced monstrosity: "It's coming to life! It's coming to life!" Then, when Harty asked Jones if she was wearing perfume, she decide to play for the low position. He asked, "Are you wearing perfume at all?" She replied, "No, I've

got my body odour perfume." He came in, pushing his hand downwards, with the stiff upper lip style retort: "Let's try and keep it on a slightly higher level, if we may?" It was at that moment that Jones's complaints about being ignored escalated. She started to slap him. Ironically, in her memoir (2015), Jones reversed the hierarchy: for treating her with such ill-mannered contempt, for literally turning his back on her, it was Harty who was being uncivilized.

In both the cases of the Grundy and *Harty* shows, relatively haughty, White male interviewers attempted to use the longstanding cultural hierarchy to dismiss their guests. Grundy was goading, swaggering, heterosexual, chauvinist, whereas Harty was more gentle: a gay presenter from a Northern, grammar school background whose affable, empathetic approach regularly won guests and audiences over. Both Grundy and Harty found themselves deposed from control of the conversation, with guests behaving unconventionally. In their conversational patter, despite their differences as presenters, their approach was the same. A modified stiff upper lip modus operandi, offered their guests – as hypothesized representatives of a sub-altern Other – further space to assume the license associated with their position and to display its vulgarity, which could then provide precisely the excuse needed to put them in their place for not adhering to a "correct" standard of civility. It was a ruse: their errant guests would be enticed and ambushed, or so they thought. On *The Russell Harty Show*, Grace Jones opposed the traditional, respectful, but bland turn-taking of the chat show format. She boldly fought back. Perhaps the moment has been remembered so "fondly" because it epitomized what the cultural conservative Roger Scruton (2007) called a "world besieged."

[B] An Art of Failure?

Watching Harty's show again one is reminded of the Christmas 2007 episode of Ricky Gervais's comedy show *Extras* ("The Extra Special Series Finale") , where the protagonist attempts to move up in the movie industry following his initial role as an extra. After much struggle and success, he finds himself in a much more prominent position, only to end up under surveillance as part of the house in the TV series *Celebrity Big Brother*. Apart from the veteran tap dancer and choreographer Lionel Blair, Andy (Gervais) fails to recognized any of the other contestants, which include an *X-Factor* finalist, a member of manufactured pop group, a mother whose son was murdered, and a women who leaked a sex tape of herself on the Internet. Through this experience, he realizes that not only have people traded their dignity for fame, but a boundless process of commodification has erased meaningful distinctions between different types of talent, and relocated an unfathomably diverse range of people through one blunt measure: whether they can increase the show's popularity rating. The episode was, of course, metaphorical of the business culture, which disrespects depth, specialization or social care, and instead prioritizes competition organized through universal, levelling metrics which make all workers interchangeable. On *The Russell Harty Show*, the other guests that week were highly diverse: Patrick Litchfield, the glamour photographer whose other claim to fame was that he was the Queen's cousin, the eccentric landscape photographer Walter Poucher, and roller-skating clothing designer Tom Gilbey.

We might liken this scenario to a daily ritual in the traditional casual manual work environments of dock workers depicted in *On The Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954), where jobs "were filled by selecting workmen from a milling crowd seeking employment at the morning 'shape-up' or 'call'" (Donovan 1999: 68). In these "shape-up" scenarios, workers would, "jockey against each other for a job for the day" (*Longshore Workers and Their Unions,* 2012). They

were in a ritual in which the cold eye of the marketplace judged mercilessly between competing labour. The entertainment industry and celebrities within it are constantly subjected to such pressures via metrics of competition, whether in the shape of audience ratings, advertising revenue, movie test screenings, catwalk review pieces, music chart positions, streaming counts, Twitter trends, TikTok engagement rates, or YouTube hits. In this attention economy, to be ignored is to suffer a death of sorts.

Looking at *The Russell Harty Show* in this way, we can see that the questions the host asked were designed to relegate Grace as a cultural worker who failed to fulfil her role in the freshly reformulated, competitive society of the spectacle. Consider dialogue from the show:

> RH: I thought your costume would be more lavish than that which you appear to be wearing?
>
> GJ: I'm over-estimated. [Shoots interviewer a glance.]
>
> RH: By the world at large, or by your public?
>
> GJ: By everybody I think, yes.
>
> RH: How do you think you've received this over-estimation? Why's your estimation inflated?
>
> GJ: That's just a lyric from a song!
>
> RH: Oh, I do beg your pardon. I thought that was a judgement you were making.
>
> GJ: No.
>
> RH: Have you calmed yourself down in clothes over the years?
>
> GJ: Try me!
>
> RH: Are you hearing what I say to you?
>
> GJ: Umm-hmm…
>
> RH: Did you have a late night last night?

GJ: I haven't slept in three days.

RH: That explains it. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?

GJ: No – your accent is a bit foreign.

RH: [Hides head in hands.] How shall I go around the back of this, I wonder. Have you been photographed recently?

GJ: Just now, on television?

RH: Have you been photographed as a model recently?
(*Grace Jones – The Russell Harty Show interview + Love is the Drug*, 2017)

It is instructive here that Grace was not exactly competing against traditional, straight White masculinity on the show. Harty's formulation was already somewhat queer. Not only did he describe his struggle to talk to her as being a case of "have you ever tried to climb the north face of the Eiger in high heeled shoes?" but his other guest that day, Walter Pouter, was an 88-year-old mountaineer and photographer who wore gloves, perfume and make-up especially for his host, in a display of rebellion against traditional, middle class British masculine norms.

It was almost as if Poucher's departure from the stiff upper lip put him in direct competition with Jones, making Harty forced to choose on behalf of his audience between the equally titillating TV spectacles of a seemingly masculine Black female supermodel and a queer, old White British male. In this context, we can perhaps understand Grace Jones as an agent who inevitably struggled to maintain control in a working environment that was highly unstable.

In the *Times*, Sophie Heawood reported in 2009:

I had been told by everybody, ever, that Grace Jones would be intimidating. And drunk, and stoned, and a demanding diva, and might not make much sense, and would quite possibly make a pass at me. But the most intimidating thing about her is how unintimidating she is. (11)

In the same article, the Irish milliner Philip Treacy explained, “This is the thing, people think she’s going to be a monster! And she’s not. But she is a trip” (11). He then clarified the “trip” aspect by explaining how “everything has to be right” when you work with her. At one point on *The Russell Harty Show* when the host was reading the autocue, introducing the clothes designer Tom Gilbey, Grace explained the fashion business:

> RH: Women can get away with what they like. It’s as if they wear a uniform for men.
>
> GJ: You know why?
>
> RH: Nevertheless, there are pioneers – Are you going to tell me why?
>
> GJ: Because men always make the fashion for women, that’s why. It’s their fantasies.
> (*Grace Jones - The Russell Harty Show interview + Love is the Drug*, 2017)

Much of the research on Grace Jones has attempted to affirm her creative agency as a Black female genius working in an idiom where women’s contributions are often unrecognized or forgotten. That is a worthwhile project, but it forgets another side of the equation. The idea of the shape-up (with its connotation of getting “in shape”) resonates throughout depictions of key moments in Grace’s career. She described Studio 54, for example, as a series of “minor celebrities fighting among minor celebrities to avoid losing their fame, demented role-playing… [and] doing whatever it took to get some attention” (Jones 2015: 159). What seemed to be a high gloss career was itself distinctly precarious and unstable. Grace moved between the fashion, music and Hollywood film industry, but not with the Machiavellian prowess of, say, David Bowie in his early 1970s heyday – though, certainly, she was a successful model. The earliest part of Grace’s career, in modelling, for instance has been described like this:

> “I'd never thought about it, honestly! But we took some pictures and next thing, I was off to New York.”

> But not before Grace had done a stint as “a nudist in Philadelphia. Which was good because it helped me to accept myself, accept my body – I used to think I had horrible legs – and accept people, the world.”
>
> In New York, in 1971, Grace immediately began contacting various modelling agencies and although she had some success, she encountered considerable frustrations. (Nathan 1977)

Similarly, her Hollywood career has been rather erratic. Her entrée into the world of film-making was described thus:

> Finally, she landed a part in *Gordon’s War* [Ossie Davis, 1973], after she was asked to act as though she was angry.
>
> “Believe me, that was no problem because by then, I really was fed up with not getting accepted for parts so it came real easy! And I got the part.” This was 1973 and Grace notes: “There were other parts offered but they had such little depth. Most of the good parts were going to men,” she concludes. (Nathan 1977)

Such depictions locate Grace’s anger not as a “dotty” personal quirk, but more as an empowered response to the systematic objectification and associated competitive rejection of women in the “fashion-beauty complex” of the culture industries. Although she has worked as a film and TV actor since 1973 (and consistently since 1978), her acting career has been characterized by a series of minor parts. She has been best known for playing the Amazonian, Zula in *Conan the Destroyer* (Richard Fleischer, 1984), the high-kicking Bond girl, Mayday, in *A View to a Kill* (John Glen, 1985), and the off-edge Strangé in Eddie Murphy’s comedy vehicle *Boomerang* (Reginald Hudlin, 1992). None of these roles offered more than a parody of her existing celebrity image. To return to Bryan Ferry’s words: “Instead of throwing yourself into one part, you have to throw yourself into lots of different parts… There isn’t much time to stop and think, “‘What am I doing it for?’”

One of the means Jones could use to portray her struggle for control at work was by drawing on assumptions about Black female sexuality, sexual availability and its ambivalent association with high gloss beauty imposed upon her. To put this another way, and drawing on the work of Audre Lorde (1998) in a world where "cosmopolitanism from below" leaves some Black women the only option of trading on the associations of their beauty – as sexual objects, as singers – the Black female body has marked a territory upon which a struggle for empowerment and dignity in the face of rapacious commodification takes place. It is, however, also the sovereign territory of the individual woman, who can dramatize her (lack of) choice by acting up to the stereotype.

Jones's playful evocations of sexual availability did not begin or end, of course, with the *Russell Harty Show*. When her partner Jean-Paul Goude was quizzed about his Afrophiliac fetishism and objectification of her, he explained:

> When I portrayed Grace Jones naked in a cage chewing on a piece of raw meat, I was attacked for being racist, which is unfair if you consider that Grace always took great pride in behaving like a wild animal. I only dramatized the image she was promoting. (Hedley 2006: 113)

There is, at least, *something* in this claim: Grace was adept at using her illusion and, gradually, the world became more understanding. As she explained, "I wasn't born this way. One creates oneself" (quoted in Goude 2016: 61). Like Andy Warhol, she came from a migrant background and relocated the expectations associated with it to shape her art. What she had to sell, visually, in part, were things imposed upon her from the outside: intimations of sexual availability, conceptions of high gloss female beauty. In the context of left-right politics, this was perhaps a betrayal of sorts: artful irony substituting for direct protest. In the context of gender and the

representation of the "miracle of creolization," however, it was a moment where multiple oppressions could be artistically broached and explored.

Here, being a diva means not simply demanding perfection, but causing a commotion which commodifies by generating publicity. Seen in this way, divahood is not only a shared Black female response to structural racism or, worse still, a uniquely female personal quirk, but is instead a mode of economic empowerment in the celebrity economy. Causing a commotion can be located in this context as a strategy of self-assertion (Burns and LaFrance 2002) coded as feminine and perhaps feminist: in music, a way of marketing yourself and having your creativity acknowledged in an environment that might otherwise relegate you to window dressing.

[B] Conclusion

Hannah Yelin has argued that Grace Jones's self-portrayal as an informed pop art or performance art practitioner "could be argued to be something of a betrayal of other female pop stars as she seeks to escape the cultural field of female pop stardom, with its associated [commercialist] denigrations" (2019: 8). While emphasizing Jones's agency, this claim, I think, misunderstands her postmodern context, something which was *already* drawing art into the service of pop commerce and "denigrating" *all* artists. Grace Jones's work was a response to that. What she had to sell as a pop singer was a performance and a recording, commodities that could be framed as art. "Grace Jones" was the result: that much was clear when she appeared in a gold catsuit on another chat show, the *Wogan* show, interviewed by David Frost in 1990 (*Grace Jones - Interview Wogan Show 26.03.90*, 2019):

> DF: Welcome, under-dressed as ever?
>
> GJ: I said, Mr T [avuncular character actor known from from the popular *The A-Team* television series], eat your heart out!

DF: Terrific outfit. How would you describe it for people listening to us on radio?

GJ: I think if I came on stage crawling – and going, "Meow, meow!" – I think they would get an idea. I'd say, I'm on all fours, and this is the sound. It's a bit sleek, cat-like.

DF: Very much the story of your life, yes! You're touring the country at the moment, on your tour. When did you decide to be this exotic figure Grace Jones: this androgynous, macho, attractive –, when did you decide to be larger than life?

GJ: When did I decide to be myself, really? I think that's what you are saying.

Jones's chart heyday was in the early 1980s, a period after second wave feminism, when a Black performer could no longer be Josephine Baker – thrillingly exotic, a bit knowing, but also catering to straight White male desire – yet one could not quite be Beyoncé: entrepreneurial, empowered, and iconic for that, and ready to explore one's own oppression and personal vulnerability from a position of supreme strength. As a musical diva, she became the queen of a new economic terrain based on celebrity culture, shrewdly exploring a moment of fragmentation and turbulence in which the power balances of class, race and gender were significantly shifting. Gradually, Grace found her place and reflected the shifts.

Her ascent to musical divahood was distinctly pop (art): in quotes, compared to, say, the doyens of classical Hollywood. Even her "dancing on the table" days of being discovered in the world of disco were not quite what they seemed: Haden-Guest (1997: 24) reported that in the early years a party promoter "filled two school buses with celebs and ferried them out to the nightery. And that Grace Jones performed for free." In tipping the tables in favour of herself, she was part of something contemporary, reflecting an era in which, not only, after glam, was art a part of commercial pop, but also, after punk, *resistance was part of commercial pop marketing*.

The performance continued. In 2006, for instance, after she left a London staging of the musical *Guys and Dolls* in Piccadilly, Hugo Rifkind reported, "Some stars attack their paparazzi

tormentors. Shortly after this picture was taken, Jones kissed hers with such vigour that an excited young photographer was later seen wiping his face dry" (2006: 11). Reporting on a live show three years later, Lisa Verrico (2009: 2) described Grace's performance, saying that, "In 'La Vie en Rose' she flung her legs round a fan and rode him up an aisle." Grace continued, periodically, in this vein, arriving late and flashing her breasts at book signings for her autobiography, *I'll Never Write my Memoires*, at the age of 67 in 2015, when such an act might be considered, by some at least, to be déclassé. She has also had her inheritors.

To close, I want to consider another contemporary Black female act in the context of Grace's approach: Janelle Monáe. As the editors of *The International Journal of Screendance* recently explained:

> As we write these opening remarks to our guest edited issue on screendance and race, Janelle Monáe has recently released *Dirty Computer – An Emotion Picture* [Various directors, 2018]. Its tagline states it is a narrative film with an accompanying music album. But Monáe's persistent jabs at the vectors of oppression she navigates as black, femme, and pansexual successfully come together in this Afrofuturist utopian screen fantasy she helms. *Dirty Computer* celebrates love, Black excellence, sex-positivity, Otherness and queerness. While couched within the neoliberal discourses of empowerment and celebrations of selfhood, that Monáe wields creative control attests to the extensive contributions Black women make to global popular culture. (Borelli and Monroe 2018: 2)

Here the emergent state of us, as post-human-droids, is that we are fused with a make-work machine. By its standards, we are "dirty computers" since we are hybridized and not efficient enough. This fallen condition is allegorized by stereotypes of Black femininity as sexually available: creolized, loose, "dirty." As humans, though, we know it is also a lie. We see this post-industrial technology – with its (wet) dream of fusion – as "dirtying" us all: offering entertainment in place of remuneration or welfare; locking us down in to panoptic grids of surveillance; making burdensome demands on our attention, our time, our effort, our physical

and mental health. Perhaps any fondness of the shock of divahood is therefore that it can reveal the lie of this "dirtiness" and redeem it through a discourse of empowerment. The "diva" has come to stand for almost any female performer of colour, and the message of divahood is unapologetically uplifting.


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