

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Barron, Lee (2008) The seven ages of Kylie Minogue: postmodernism, identity, and performative mimicry. *Nebula*, 5 (4). pp. 46-63. ISSN 1449-7751

Published by: Nebula

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/2463/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

## **The Seven Ages of Kylie Minogue: Postmodernism, Identity, and Performative Mimicry.**

By Lee Barron

God's in his heaven, Kylie's at number one, surely nothing really bad can happen (Bryan Appleyard, the *Sunday Times*, cited in Smith 187).

I never imagined what impact a 50p pair of hotpants would have (Kylie Minogue, *Kylie*, 2007: 12).

### **The (Second) Postmodern Pop Diva**

Kylie Minogue's Creative Director, William Baker, states that his book *Kylie: La La La* is 'an unashamed homage to pop's schizophrenia and the multiple identities contained within the tiny body of Kylie Minogue, from her roots in a Melbourne soap opera to her tour, *KylieFever 2002*' (4). This conception of the 'multiple identities' of Kylie Minogue is the key aspect I will explore in this paper, as she is a figure whose 'identity' has continuously transformed throughout her career, so much so that, in 2007, costumes displaying her continually changing images from 1987 to her *Showgirl* tour were the subject of *Kylie – The Exhibition*, staged initially at the Art Centre's Performing Arts Collection in Melbourne (and attracting almost 500,000 visitors), then travelling to the United Kingdom and displayed in various venues, but most notably the Victoria and Albert Museum (Barrand, 2007).

In this regard, Minogue arguably shares similarities with other performers who manifest chameleonic qualities, such as David Bowie, and of course, Madonna, the long-established "Queen of Appropriation" (Appignanesi and Garratt 148). Commenting on the fluid sense of identity and constant reinvention of image undertaken by Madonna throughout her career, Gauntlett states that:

Other female stars have found that a regular change of theme, image and/or style can help to extend a career – Kylie Minogue, in particular, has stretched her pop career from the 1980s to the present, partly by reinventing herself as 'indie Kylie', 'dance Kylie' and 'disco Kylie' (172).

Hence, as the 1980s drew to a close, Madonna would have, not a 'child' but rather a 'sister' in terms of a female pop performer who would become equally synonymous with re-invention and performative identity-evolution. And Kylie Minogue herself acknowledges the influence of Madonna, stating that: 'Madonna has definitely influenced me...as have lots of other people, men and women. I would say Madonna influences me generally rather than specifically.' (Scatena 182). Here, Minogue's acceptance of Madonna's influence is qualified by a tone that asserts Minogue's own sense of independent identity and identities. And, as I will point out, although Minogue does pay homage to Madonna, she is no mere imitator, but rather, she too is a performer characterized by image flux. As Odone states of Minogue's career:

Kylie – through a process of endless reinventions that have seen her as a soap star in permed poodle's curls, a pop crooner boasting a No 1 hit, and a bronco-riding nude advertising for a lingerie company – has ended up being much more: a singing sensation who flirts with porn, dangerous liaisons and scandalous behaviour, yet somehow that what she really wants is a big hug from you (in Stanley-Clarke and Goodall 218).

Whilst Madonna's fluid, ever-changing 'postmodern' public persona has long been documented (Tetzlaff, 1993), Kylie Minogue's career would develop in an equally transformative mode. Therefore, rather than simply representing, amongst the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, Pink, and Destiny's Child, one of Madonna's empowered 'daughters' (Gauntlett), Minogue would constitute a further exemplar of contemporary image reformulation within pop music with her 'ever-changing Kylie image' (Martin 44).

Therefore, within this article, I will explore and analyze Kylie Minogue's 'postmodern chameleon' sensibilities in relation to the differing personas and looks that have marked a musical career now spanning three decades and that has illustrated 'a performative self endlessly adapting to a fluid environment' (Rogers 136). Drawing upon the approaches of Kellner, Hall, Sontag and Caillois, I will argue that Kylie Minogue represents a key contemporary postmodern performer, whose progressive image changes have moved from market-driven imperatives, to a reflexive, self-aware conception of image evolution and transformation.

## **Constructing and Deconstructing Kylie**

As Kellner (1992) argues, within ‘traditional’ societies, identity was perceived to be fixed, solid, and stable, a function of predefined social roles. Within the ‘age of modernity,’ identity becomes more ‘mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive, and subject to change and innovation. Yet the forms of identity in modernity are also relatively substantial and fixed; identity still comes from a circumscribed set of roles and norms (141). However, ‘from the postmodern perspective, as the pace, extension, and complexity of modern societies accelerate, identity becomes more and more unstable, more and more fragile’ a process whereby identity is a game that one plays, so that one can easily shift from one identity to another (153). As Hall articulates:

The Postmodern subject is conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self.’ Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about... The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy (277).

Postmodern identity is consequently constituted theatrically, and so, in the contemporary world it is possible to change identities, to switch with the changing ‘winds of fashion’ (Kellner, 1992). Therefore, it is argued, one can always change one’s life because identity can always be reconstructed. It is grounded in game playing, and specifically, mimicry. In addition to *agon*, *alea* and *ilinx* within the classification of games, as articulated by Caillois, there is a fourth concept – mimicry. For Caillois, ‘all play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed...imaginary universe’ (19). Play, in this sense, which Caillois terms ‘mimicry,’ involves ‘make-believe,’ the shedding of identity whereby the player engages in masquerade, and the crux of mimicry is ‘incessant invention’ (23). Moreover, although critics of such fluid conceptions (such as Caillois) draw attention to the means by which those who experience limited economic means could engage in such theatricality, such a postmodern playful vision is discernible within popular music (and not only pop, the masked, American ‘rap-core’ band Slipknot spring to mind here), and, as I

will argue, potently reflected in the career of Kylie Minogue. Although Minogue's career is linked with costume and fashion, having worn clothing by designers such as Karl Lagerfeld, Julien Macdonald, Dolce & Gabbana, John Galliano, and Stella McCartney, Minogue has also consistently engaged in a process of invention' in relation to her performative personas, and who is, I will argue, an exponent of cultural mimicry via her adoption of successive 'masks.'

In the course of her recording career Kylie Minogue has progressed from the critically derided 'Singing Budgie' of the late-1980s, a British tabloid-inspired derogation equating Kylie's voice with that tinny-voiced domestic bird, to a 21<sup>st</sup> century credible, sophisticated pop performer. As Kaplan states:

In the past, with stars like Paul Anka, Elvis Presley, even the early Beatles or the Stones, the image that a star decided to promote remained relatively stable once a formula that produced commercial success had been found (155).

However, within the post-MTV musical world in which pop/rock star images are transmitted repeatedly, Kaplan argues, image change becomes more rapid as a means to stave off consumer boredom. Yet, certain genres of music embrace this idea more than others, and with regard to 'pop', it is perhaps an ingrained aspect, because, as Klein observes: 'Pop has always had fluid boundaries...Pop constantly changes its faces and meanings' (42) – a perception that would reflect the career of Kylie Minogue perfectly – and to consequently exhibit an increasing sense of self-reflexivity. As Minogue stated:

I change characters when I do a photo-shoot. I'm like the eight-year old with the dressing-up box. It's kind of avoiding being me – rather than being captured, I become a new character and let that take over (cited in Stanley-Clarke and Goodall 190).

In examining Kylie Minogue's recording career retrospectively, a series of distinctive phases and 'personas' can be identified which have arisen as a process of direction, evolution and, latterly, of intentional choice: 'Cute Kylie,' 'Sex Kylie,' 'Dance Kylie,' 'Gothic Kylie,' 'Indie Kylie,' 'Camp Kylie' and 'Cyber-Kylie.' As noted earlier, Gauntlett identifies a similar typology (although this only extends to 'indie Kylie', 'dance Kylie' and 'disco Kylie') within his analysis of Madonna. I will expand upon this and fully explore the nature of each 'persona,' because they are each significant and they

raise crucial issues concerning the expression of fluid pop identities. Moreover, Kylie Minogue, with a music career spanning three decades, is a significant pop performer. And while she may never have attained the global visibility of Madonna, she has (especially in the UK and Australia) proved to be an enduring cultural presence. Therefore, I will now chart and analyze the ‘seven ages of Kylie Minogue,’ in historical sequence, beginning with her first incarnation, ‘Cute Kylie.’

### **Cute Kylie**

Kylie Minogue’s career began in childhood acting. While she was still a child, she appeared in Australian television dramas such as *The Sullivans*, *Skyways* and *The Henderson Kids*. However, it was at the age of 17 that she achieved mainstream cultural prominence when she was cast in the role of would-be mechanic Charlene Mitchell in the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*. Minogue would play Charlene from April 1986 to June 1988, gaining popularity both in Australia and in Britain for her ‘unapologetic ordinariness’ (Conrad 4) and cute, spunky tomboy qualities. Minogue would become iconic via the initially tomboyish Charlene due to the character’s on-screen romance and subsequent marriage to ‘teenage heart-throb’ Scott Robinson (Jason Donovan), an episode which was a significant ratings success for the soap in the UK. It was in this ‘Charlene’ period that she also made her first foray into the world of popular music, recording *The Locomotion*, the Little Eva song from the 1960s, for Mushroom Records, which would ultimately reach the position of #1 in the Australian charts in July 1987. Subsequently, Minogue signed a recording contract with the British writer-producer team Stock, Aitken and Waterman (SAW):

Between the three of them, they understood the fundamental rules of classic pop music. Probably more than any other producer at that time. Simple chords, irresistible choruses, clear and powerful vocals, lively beat, undemanding lyrics and warm atmospherics (Stanley-Clarke and Goodall 58).

Minogue’s first ten singles for SAW produced four # 1 hits, five that reached #2, and one attained the position of #4. Moreover, she had hits overseas, in America, Europe and Australia (Bilmes, 2005). This recording success began with the track ‘I Should Be So

Lucky,' released in December 1987 and achieving the #1 spot simultaneously in the British and Australian charts.

'I Should Be So Lucky' deliberately exploited the 'cute' aspect of Minogue's *Neighbours* character to the extent that it 'was a song that the public could believe was sung by Charlene and there was little attempt to separate the two personas' (Minogue and Baker 32). The song is marked by a repetitive 'catchy' chorus and an inoffensive, keyboard-dominated tune with the SAW in-built musical format of 120 beats-per-minute to instill an upbeat quality to the music (Bond 2003). However, it was the video which precisely demarcated the 'Cute Kylie' image. The video depicts Kylie dreamily thinking about a potential boyfriend and dancing in various rooms of an apartment, but particularly within her bedroom, a practice McRobbie typifies as the archetypal behaviour of teenage girls indulging in 'fantasy, daydreaming, and 'abandon' (1984 134). Indeed, the lyrical refrain that leads to the chorus is: "But dreaming's all I do/If only they'd come true." In this sense, the longing aspect of the video performance and lyrics evokes the classic conception of romantic love as that love which, like the dance that accompanies it, 'breaks the routine and drudgery of ordinary life' (Bertilsson 313). The dominant tone of the video is conspicuously innocent, with the emphasis on teen romance in place of overt sexuality. This concept was reinforced by the subsequent single 'Especially For You,' a duet ballad which re-united Kylie with Jason Donovan in a romantic plot which saw the erstwhile lovers continually miss each other at a series of locations. Even the final meeting and embrace ends in a freeze-frame, denying the couple a kiss, perfectly paralleling (and exploiting) 'Charlene and Scott's chaste teenage romance' (Scatena xii), but the freeze was also a means of tantalizing the fans of both performers and was consequently pitched at both Minogue and Donovan fans, both of whom were SAW artists.

Variations on the 'romance' theme subsequently included the period-sets of "Je Ne Sais Pas Pourquoi" (1940s setting) and "Tears on My Pillow" (1950s setting), which also depicted a romantic sensibility, yet within a cultural-historical context. This early phase of Minogue's career was typified by bright clothing colours, simple dance moves and upbeat music, with love as the leitmotif, but always strictly in a romantic context,

never sexual. However, in the early 1990s, this would change and Charlene would be dramatically discarded as Cute Kylie unexpectedly blossomed into ‘Sex Kylie.’

### Sex Kylie

Evolving from ‘Cute Kylie,’ Minogue’s second persona emerged in the early 1990s and reflected a growing sense of cultural legitimacy regarding Minogue’s image, whereby she transcended appearing exclusively within pop music magazines and began to grace the cover of ‘style bibles’ such as *The Face* and *i-D*. Moreover, her image was a conscious and radical departure from the ‘cute Kylie’ representation of SAW’s earlier productions. Significantly, the music also differed from her initial formula, consisting now of a slightly harder, dance-infused edge, as with her *Rhythm of Love* recording, a sound even flirting with R&B influences on the ‘Let’s get To It’ album’ (although, Minogue would again flirt with R&B on her 2003 album, *Body Language*). Correspondingly, the video performances saw an identifiably erotic, sexualized content that was conspicuously lacking in ‘I Should Be So Lucky.’ For many commentators, this was the result of Minogue’s relationship with Michael Hutchence, the lead singer of Australian rock group INXS, because:

Michael had been very aware of his image, both in terms of his media image and his personal style. Kylie learned from him the power of sexuality...She had never really enjoyed her body let alone displayed it in videos or photographs. Suddenly the clothes came off as she reveled in being a sexy twenty-one-year-old...Prior to Hutchence, she was demure and coy, as if she didn’t really possess a sex life or sexuality (Baker and Minogue 32).

At one level, some critics charged that Minogue was merely aping the overt sexuality of Madonna (Scatena); however, irrespective of any potential Madonna influences, this period did represent a marked transformation of the Minogue persona. The videos for ‘Better the Devil You Know,’ ‘What Do I Have To Do’ and ‘Shocked’ now placed the emphasis firmly upon exposed bodies, both Minogue’s and those of male and female dancers. Indeed, dance was central to these performances and unlike ‘I Should Be So Lucky,’ it was now a mode of locomotion that was “redolent with sexual tensions and possibilities” (Frith 180). Hence, ‘Better the Devil You Know’ visually depicted Minogue in a series of short dresses, frequently with the shoulder straps



teasingly falling away, and dancing in hot pants with bra combinations, flanked by male dancers stripped to the waist and displaying muscular torsos. A further scene frames Minogue being slowly caressed from behind by one of these dancers, with a hint of a post-coital vibe (Sheridan) to the scene. Thus, if the visual tone was a move away from 'Cute Kylie,' the lyrical theme, that of taking back an unfaithful lover (with the onus placed firmly upon sexual dependency), replacing any sense of demure coyness. Indeed, the song 'What Do I Have To Do' reprised the sentiment of 'I Should Be So Lucky,' but now overtly sexualized it in the line: "There ain't a single night/I haven't held you tight/It's always inside my head/Never inside my bed." The accompanying video, shot in a fusion of moody black-and-white and garish colour sequences, extended the notion of sexual longing of 'What Do I Have To Do' but added a more manifest sense of sexual abandon. The framing plot is a tale of unrequited sexual connection between a handsome man and Minogue in which the man is cast in the role of voyeur within a nightclub, with Minogue teasing him with a number of approaches to men, and in some sequences, a vampish Minogue dances suggestively with another women. Yet, the video also reveals its playfulness with images of Minogue sporting a panther tattoo, and a shot of her engaged in domestic labour, ironing board in hand. However, if 'What Do I Have To Do' revealed a sexually provocative Minogue, the video for 'Shocked' pushed this persona even further, with added elements of sexual voyeurism and hints of lesbian desire on the part of Minogue.

Visually, 'Shocked' sees Minogue cast in various outfits, from man's suit (complete with high heels), cotton hot pants to a pink tutu. In terms of narrative and mise-en-scene, 'Shocked' plays with voyeurism, as her female chauffeur observes Minogue's trysts with men. Yet, the video ends with a point of sexual suspense and suggestiveness, as Minogue is driven away from a man, the video ends with Minogue and the chauffeur gazing at each via the car's rear-view mirror. However, while 'Sex Kylie' would see Minogue attempt to abandon 'Cute Kylie,' a playful sense of 'cuteness' remains. At one level, this is inscribed into the music. Although a variation on the pop sound of 'I Should Be So Lucky,' the soundtrack to 'Sex Kylie' was still the music of SAW. Moreover, Kylie herself gives visual cues that the sexuality of this phase is intrinsically playful. For instance, the pouting kiss that concludes the 'Step Back In Time' video breaks down into

a giggle, a signifier of game play and of the slippage of a performative ‘mask.’ So, although seen (by some commentators) as a conscious emulation of Madonna, Minogue’s antics, while certainly raunchier and more suggestive than her ‘Charlene’ phase, were not as visually dramatic as Madonna’s ‘Justify My Love’ or S&M-inspired ‘Erotica’ videos. Consequently, although the emphasis was now on a more sexualized Minogue, cuteness nevertheless remained. However, what ‘Sex Kylie’ would mark was the end of Minogue’s association with SAW and the beginning of a new ‘identity’ that represented both a decisive image and sound development.

### **Dance Kylie**

The emphasis on sexuality continued with Minogue’s first post-SAW album for the smaller independent dance-oriented record label Deconstruction. The eponymous *Kylie Minogue* consolidated Minogue’s search for a more mature sound and image, and so ‘Sex Kylie’ became ‘Dance Kylie.’ This direction was typified by the string-laden, dance-based single ‘Confide in Me’ and particularly its accompanying video.

‘Confide in Me’ presented six images of Minogue framed within the conceit of a televised ‘sex lines’, with a garishly made-up Minogue singing to the screen as ‘1-555-confide’ telephone numbers repeatedly appear on screen. Although built on a dance beat, the lyrics and video also suggested an unprecedented sense of darkness, a feature visually suggested with the scenes in which Minogue stands before a mural consisting of drug capsules and pills. Here, a very different, post-SAW Minogue was being represented. However, a further video from this album was ‘Put Yourself in My Place,’ which was playful and an overt exercise in the social ‘practice of mimicry’ (Butler 138) as the video was framed as a ‘homage’ to Jane Fonda’s zero-gravity striptease from the kitsch-classic sci-fi film, *Barbarella* (Roger Vadim, 1968). Within ‘Put Yourself in My Place’ the emphasis is firmly upon lightness, with Minogue dressed in garish colours and wearing fiery red hair, the effect completed with a distinctly psychedelic spacecraft with voyeuristic astronauts keen to witness the bodily display, but who are ultimately frustrated by window shields being lowered. Minogue’s (modest) disrobing is purely for her own amusement. Hence, with an emphasis on her physicality, ‘Put Yourself in My Place’ provided a playful counterpoint to the overt sexuality of ‘Confide in Me’ (although the final shot of the

decidedly phallic rocket heading into a circular nebula casts an interesting symbolic nod to 'Sex Kylie').

In addition to the sound and image aspects of *Kylie Minogue*, 'Dance Kylie' also marked her emergence as a 'gay diva,' with Kylie's famed public appearance at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parties, a status she has retained, particularly due to her embrace of a disco-sound (Bonner, 2005). Minogue would develop this direction later in her career, however, as 'Dance Kylie' became established, Minogue would make an image detour, a development that was established through a (unlikely) duet with a fellow Australian performer.

### **Gothic Kylie**

'Gothic Kylie' was achieved in 1995 by way of a stark musical collaboration with Nick Cave, an artist once reputedly excluded from leading music magazines because he 'promoted evil' (Baddeley 207) for the track 'Where the Wild Roses Grow,' drawn from Cave's *Murder Ballads* album, which reached # 2 in the Australian singles chart. 'Where the Wild Roses Grow' represented a dramatic and ostensibly unlikely synergy between two very dissimilar Australian musical figures.

The essence of 'Gothic Kylie' was established within the song's accompanying video in that the opening shot of the video depicts Minogue as the corpse of Eliza Day, a woman who has been brutally murdered with a rock by Cave. The song and video work to create a potent collision between Minogue's softly sung vocals and Cave's doom-laden intonations. Moreover, the video is highly sexualized, from Minogue's near-naked body and the suggestiveness of the snake which slowly glides across her thighs as she lies half-submerged within a river in a pose analogous to Millais' painting of the drowned Ophelia (Baker and Minogue). However, it is the relationship and visual interaction between Cave and Minogue that marks the performance as unique and radical in relation to her previous performances. Whereas the 'Sex Kylie' of the early 1990s flirted with voyeuristic sexual elements, the gaze within 'Where the Wild Roses Grow' is located within the zone of the taboo, that of necrophilia. Within 'Where the Wild Roses Grow' Cave engages in this process, re-visiting the corpse of Eliza day-by-day, declaring his love for her, and sensuously touching her body. The 'Where the Wild Roses Grow' collaboration (she also sang on Cave's 'Death Is Not The

End’) dramatically subverted and played upon Minogue’s well-established ‘Pop Princess’ persona and its aura of cuteness in an unprecedented manner, a process Minogue would continue with on her next album by effectively jettisoning her pop sound altogether.

### **Indie Kylie**

‘Indie Kylie’ revolved around Minogue’s 1997 recording: *Impossible Princess*, a title subsequently changed (although not in Australia) to the eponymous *Kylie Minogue* in the wake of the accidental death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The album presented a very different image in its active retreat from the glamorous aspects of ‘Sex Kylie,’ replacing it with a pared-down vision of Minogue, emphasizing a simple sense of style, lack of overt make-up, and a short, elfin-style hairstyle. Moreover, the musical style of the album was a major departure from SAW and her first dance-orientated work with Deconstruction. The ‘indie’ aspect derived mainly from the writing contribution of James Dean Bradfield from the politically-charged rock group The Manic Street Preachers on the tracks ‘Some Kind of Bliss’ and ‘I Don’t Need Anyone,’ both characterized by a distinctive guitar-driven musicality. However, this was juxtaposed by a series of non-rock songs co-written by Minogue, such as ‘Too Far,’ ‘Breathe’ and ‘Limbo,’ which emphasized a minimalist musical structure, marked by stream-of-consciousness lyrics peppered with autobiographical insights which betrayed a range of musical influences from Patti Smith, Alanis Morissette and Shirley Manson, to Saint Etienne and Bjork (Sheridan); not a roster readily identifiable with the typical Kylie Minogue sound, and indicative of the album’s reception.

The *Impossible Princess* phase represented a period of diminished commercial success. It marked a moment in which Minogue consciously began to engage in a playful awareness of image construction and self-referentiality, acknowledging her distinctive ‘personas’ up to that point. This was unmistakably manifest within Pedro Romany’s video for ‘Did It Again’ which featured four Kylies, each defined by the labels that the media had created for her and in which ‘Kylie was split into the various splinters of her pop star persona. Dance Kylie, Cute Kylie, Sex Kylie and Indie Kylie all struggled [rather violently] for supremacy as they battled bitchily with each other for attention’ (Baker and Minogue 112-113). The overall victor however, was none of these

incarnations, but rather the construction of an entirely new one. Because, although Minogue was now reflexively alluding to her identity-shedding progression, 'Indie Kylie' did not gel with the wider record buying public, and, to return to Caillois, this mask did not convincingly fit. As Caillois states of the incessant reinvention of mimicry, it is dependent upon a simple rule, that of the actor fascinating the spectator while avoiding an error that might lead spectators to break the spell (23). The emphasis on psychological revelation was that error. Hence, 'Dance Kylie,' while different (and in places, darker) than the archetypal 'Cute Kylie,' still maintained a recognizable connection, a sense of pop abandonment and playfulness. Consequently, 'Indie Kylie' was discarded for 'Camp Kylie,' a new persona, but one with discernible allusions to both 'Sex Kylie' and 'Dance Kylie.'

### **Camp Kylie**

In 2000, Kylie Minogue entered her third decade as a pop performer, and regained the commercial success of her earlier career. Leaving the deConstruction label, she signed with Parlophone. Her 'comeback' was inaugurated with the single, 'Spinning Around,' which went to #1 in the UK charts. The single was soon followed by *Light Years*, an album dominated by an explicitly camp property, that principle which, according to Susan Sontag, chiefly involves 'a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics...a vision of the world in terms of style' (279) and which is especially centred upon 'actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis' and 'apolitical frivolity' (Robertson 3). Furthermore, for Sontag, the camp sensibility seeks the theatricalization of experience. Indeed, 'the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious' (288). Unlike the prevailing motif of 'Indie Kylie,' with its moments of soul-searching angst, all of the attributes of camp described by Sontag pervaded the *Light Years* album, especially the video for 'Spinning Around,' because, as Sontag maintains, 'camp taste is above all, a mode of enjoyment' (291).

'Spinning Around' represented a decisive return to a pop music sound following the 'indie' experimentation of *Impossible Princess*. Within the video, the emphasis is firmly upon dance, fun and freedom. The setting is a disco and the video communicates no message other than to dance and enjoy life. Within 'Spinning Around,' Minogue's

body dominates the frame, dressed, at some stages, in the now-iconic gold lamé hot pants. Minogue had of course sported hot pants previously, within ‘Better The Devil You Know,’ ‘Step Back In Time,’ and ‘Confide In Me,’ but this particular garment effectively led to a media obsession with her bottom, so much so that commentators in respectable broadsheets such as the *Sunday Times* proclaimed it as a ‘wonder of nature’ (Smith 190). The video for ‘Spinning Around’ presents a camp fantasy world, neon lit and slow-motion dance shots and a sense of unreality created by costume changes and marked by the easy-to-copy dance moves which could be re-created within real discos. The entire *Light Years* album, with writing contributions from Robbie Williams and Guy Chambers, similarly resonated with this camp sheen, from the mimetic plays upon 1960s ‘bubblegum’ pop as evidenced by ‘Koochachoo,’ to the dance-themed ‘Disco Down’ and the ultra-camp anthem ‘Your Disco Needs You.’ But, while maintaining the emphasis on a pop music sound that dominated *Light Years*, Minogue would don yet another performative mask for her next recording, an album which would see her evolve from camp disco-diva to a sleek, metallic ‘simulacra’ as she glided from ‘Camp Kylie’ into ‘Cyber-Kylie.’

### **Cyber-Kylie**

Although there were three years between *Impossible Princess* and *Light Years*, it would take only one year for her next album, *Fever*, to appear. Moreover, the first single from the album, ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head,’ further established Minogue’s cultural and commercial relevance in the new millennium, giving her the highest-selling #1 single of her career since ‘I Should Be So Lucky.’ ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head,’ with its hypnotic ‘la la la’ refrain and the deceptively uncomplicated, catchily-repetitive beats and synth-sound, marked yet another clearly-defined image transformation from the camp-infused *Light Years* to an emphasis upon a cool, machine-like sexuality, a trait clearly identifiable within the promotional video for ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head.’ As Railton and Watson state:

The video opens with Kylie Minogue sitting at the wheel of a car, driving into a futuristic metropolis typified by both the clinical environment of the city and the clean lines of its skyline. Indeed, both the evident architectonic space and the

sheer brilliance of the image itself characteristic of this opening sequence typify the form and content of the video generally...all of the locations featured...are architectural in the sense that they are artificial, manufactured, built environments (59).

This sense of artifice and simulation extends to the human bodies within the video. The dancers flanking Minogue all wear 'robotic' outfits, their faces obscured by red plastic helmets. This artificiality extends to Minogue's body and movements because in the instances 'when Minogue's body does move it is notable that her flesh does not. This is both made apparent and made possible, in part, by the design of her costume [which] variously constrain the flesh, cover the flesh, or reveal evidence of armature beneath the flesh' (Railton and Watson 60). This would be extended within the tour for *Fever*, with Minogue cast as the *Metropolis/Star Trek*-inspired 'Kyborg Queen.'

For William Baker, the overt 'electro futurism' of the musical style of 'Can't get You Out of My Head' firmly and explicitly established the direction and tone of the *Fever* period as: 'slick, minimalist and postmodern' (247). While Railton and Watson infer a Baudrillardian essence, Baker casts postmodernism in a general sense, and, although multifarious in form, and by its very nature problematic to define, the concept of postmodernism that Baker surely refers to is the sense that it is a body of knowledge, a set of philosophical approaches that foreground cultural and conceptual 'play and combination' (Harvey 1989); that, as Rojek outlines, replaces the 'heaviness of modernity' with a lightness of being. It recognizes play, change and anomaly as the province of humankind. It urges us to live without guilt' (cited in Rogers 146). If any contemporary pop performer's music invites us to do this, then it is (with the possible exception of 'Indie Kylie') the music of Kylie Minogue.

### **Incessant Pop Progression, or Kylie Minogue and the Sorcerer's Mask**

For William Baker, Kylie Minogue's career is one of flux. A figure who has vacillated between being 'revered and reviled, loved and loathed, adored and abhorred. Hers is a career of contradiction, of constant evolution, of construction and deconstruction' (Minogue, Baker et.al. 1). What is significant about Minogue is that this construction and deconstruction would become a conscious postmodern process. Moreover, this idea of a deliberately designed postmodernism would be implicit within the design and themes of the tour for the *Fever*

album, *KylieFever2002*. Under Baker's direction, *KylieFever2002* would prove to be an exuberant exercise in spectacle, pastiche, mimicry, retrospection and the ironic, highly postmodernist references to both pop cultural artifacts and the celebration of the various 'ages of Kylie Minogue.' But this discussion is for another essay.

Returning to her post *Fever* recording career, Kylie Minogue has continued to toy with and adapt her image. For instance, the release of the 2003 album *Body Language* saw the creation of 'Bardot Kylie,' in which, on the album cover Kylie adopts the image of French actress Bridget Bardot's archetypal 'sex-goddess' image of 'long bleached blonde hair, heavy eye make-up, pink lipstick' (Vincendeau 82). Furthermore, for her 2005 world tour – a retrospective tour – Minogue adopted the guise of the 'Showgirl,' a new incarnation and a potential 'eighth age,' but one that represented a distinctive degree of self-referentiality in terms of image inspiration. Although the Art Deco inspired stage show divided Minogue into a series of discrete Showgirl incarnations (Las Vegas Showgirl, Follies Showgirl, Space Age Showgirl, Torch Singer), *Showgirl* also saw the distinctive return of 'Camp Kylie,' for if the 'hallmark of camp is...a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers' (Sontag 283) then the *Showgirl* tour, with Minogue emerging from beneath the stage and resplendent in a feather-festooned dress and headdress (perhaps with less than three million, but an abundance of feathers nonetheless) would have made Sontag proud.

Following a hiatus from music and performing while she was treated for breast cancer, Minogue resumed her Showgirl tour and, in 2007, released her tenth studio album, appropriately named *X*. However, *X* did not suggest a distinctive image or theme. Bar the first single, '2 Hearts,' which bore a light 70s Glam Rock feel (with a hint of Goldfrapp), the album was generally an exercise in pop, with stylistic nods to her 'Dance Kylie' phase with regards to sound, and the videos for 'Wow' and 'In My Arms' suggested a further presence of self-referentiality, with the presence of semi-robotic dancers and vivid, garish dress complete with 1980s-style Dayglo colours. Indeed, the most striking aspect of the '2 Hearts' video and the *X* inner sleeve photography is Minogue's blonde hairstyle that evokes, ironically but arguably deliberately, Madonna within her 'Vogue' and *True Blue* periods (furthermore, Minogue performed a version of 'Vogue' as part of her 2006 *Showgirl Homecoming Tour*). And away from music, it is



significant to note that Minogue adopted a further role, Astrid Peth in the BBC's 2007 *Doctor Who* Christmas Special, 'Voyage of the Damned;' a factor that producer Russell T. Davies believed would have 'gay men in Utah' who had never seen *Doctor Who* avidly watching for the iconic Kylie (Sheridan 250).

Thus, Minogue continues to engage in the artful process of performative mask wearing, articulating and according with Caillois' mode of mimicry in videos, photographic imagery and live performance. And if, as many commentators maintain, this process represents the epitome of constructed identity (Robertson), then Kylie Minogue is, if not the Queen (Madonna still arguably possesses that crown), the Princess of contemporary pop masquerade.

## References

- Appignanesi, Richard and Garratt, Chris. *Introducing Postmodernism*. London: Icon Books, 2003.
- Baddeley, Gavin. *Goth Chic: A Connoisseur's Guide To Dark Culture*. London: Plexus, 2002.
- Baker, William. Minogue, Kylie. *Kylie: La La La*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002.
- Barrand, Janine. Collecting Kylie. In *Kylie*. Melbourne: V & A Publications, 2007.
- Bertilsson, Margareta. "Love's Labour Lost?: A Sociological View." in, Featherstone, Mike. Hepworth, Mike. Turner, Bryan. S. (eds) *The Body: Social Processes and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage, pp 297-325, 1992.
- Bilmes, Alex. "Kylie". *GQ*, Issue 187, pp 176-183, 2005.
- Bond, Michael. "The Power of Music" (Interview with Mike Stock), *New Scientist*, November 29, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
- Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. (Trans Meyer Barash) Urbana and Chicago: University Of Illinois Press, 1958.
- Callinicos, Alex. *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

- Conrad, Peter. "Now for the real Kylie..." *The Observer*, Sunday, July, pp 4-5, 2006.
- Frith, Simon. *The Sociology Of Rock*. London: Constable, 1978.
- Gauntlett, David. "Madonna's Daughters: girl power and the empowered girl-pop breakthrough". in, Fouz-Hernandez, Santiago. Jarman-Ivens, Freya. (eds) *Madonna's Drowned World's: New Approaches to her Cultural Transformations, 1983-2003*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp 161-176, 2004.
- Hall, Stuart. "The Question of Cultural Identity," in Hall, Stuart. McGrew, Tony. (eds) *Modernity and its Futures*. Open University Press, 1992.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
- Kellner, Douglas. "Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identities." in Lash, Scott. Friedman, Jonathan. (eds) *Modernity and Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp 141-178, 1992.
- Klein, Gabriele. "Image, Body and Performativity: The Construction of Subcultural Practice in the Globalized World of Pop." in Muggleton, David. Weinzierl, Rupert. (eds) *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003. pp 41-51.
- Martin, Rebecca. "The Kylie Touch." *Blink*, December/January, pp 42-45, 2004.
- Minogue, Kylie. Baker, William. Farrow, Mark. Jeffrey, Jonathon. Heath, Chris. *Kylie*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1999.
- McRobbie, Angela. "Dance and Social Fantasy." in McRobbie, Angela. Nava, Mica. (eds) *Gender and Generation*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp 130-162, 1984.
- Railton, Diane. Watson, Paul. "Naughty Girls and Red Blooded Women: Representations of female heterosexuality in music video." *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp 51-63, 2005.
- Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp From Mae West To Madonna*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1996.
- Rogers, Mary. F. *Barbie Culture*. London: Sage, 1999.
- Scatena, Dino. *Kylie*. London: Penguin Books, 1997.
- Sheridan, Simon. *The Complete Kylie*. London: Reynolds & Hearn Ltd. 2003

- Smith, Sean. *Kylie: Confidential*. London: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 2002.
- Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp'." in *Against Interpretation*. London: Vintage, 1994.
- Stanley-Clarke, Jenny. Goodall, Nigel. *Kylie Naked: A Biography*. London: Ebury Press, 2002.
- Tetzlaff, David "Metatextual Girl: Patriarchy, Postmodernism, Power, Money, Madonna" in Cathy Schwichtenburg (ed) *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*. New York: Westview, 1993.
- Vincendeau, Ginette. *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*. London and New York: Continuum, 2000.