

Music

By Kristian Vistrup Madsen

Ruin Lust

Are pop stars a product of an increasingly outdated quest for grandeur? Beyoncé, the self-described That Girl, pulling up in her Cadillac on her latest album *Renaissance*, reaches back to an era where narratives reigned supreme.



All photos: © Sony Music

Beyoncé photographed by Carlijn Jacobs



Beyoncé photographed by Genevieve Tate

When institutions begin to show signs of wear, it tells us something about shifts, not in fashion, but in paradigm. Beyoncé is an institution – but what comes after perfect?

Since the beginning of the millennium Beyoncé has been stacking money and Grammys, commas and decimals, asking us all to bow down – and we have. Across seven albums, her lyrics primarily thematize her various modes of primacy, and yet she remains, somehow, a survivor. Survival, in her world, however, is an assertion of triumph rather than victimhood. With great power comes great vulnerability; with so much victory, there's a lot to lose. Beyoncé is a survivor of her own overachievement – a survivor of survival itself.

Her latest album *Renaissance* (2022) is perhaps the most self-conscious chapter of this grand narrative so far. She invokes the pioneers of Black American pop and chides the wrongs of the past while centering her own excellence in one fast-paced dance track after the next. “I’m number one / I’m the only one / Don’t even waste your time trying to compete with me,” she sings on “Alien Superstar.” I do admire her will to power. And the empowerment she has sought has been both generously and responsibly redistributed. But if the grandeur and scale of the project is self-conscious, the narrative voice is not. It is starting to dawn on listeners that no matter how many times you may repeat the mantra “you won’t break my soul,” it still won’t come true. Ironically, breaking is often required for “soul,” understood as life or nerve, to seep into a piece of music. It comes from the sense that loss is intrinsic to the passage of time. A little bit of breaking might be good for art, actually. *Renaissance* is exceedingly well-produced, the mash-up quality of its beats and rhythms irresistibly sophisticated, but its lyrical dimension lacks even the possibility for failure or fatigue. Beyoncé’s legacy-making program of perfectionism is out of sync with a culture that is, at every step, failing at self-preservation.

Beyoncé is not the weather but the climate; the MoMA of pop. Institutions have a responsibility to accommodate the zeitgeist, that is how they survive, and why Beyoncé is a survivor. You have to be religious at the right time, or sentimental, or proud, or quiet, or do

a collab with Sean Paul, or Ed Sheeran. Be a feminist at the right time, champion civil rights as well as queer ones (a number of queer and trans musicians are sampled on *Renaissance*; she caught that ball too, and more elegantly than most). This is not calculating, or merely opportunistic, but a matter of mutual complicity. MoMA rehung their collection to mark which parts of the narrative hitherto authored by them can now be changed; what of the weather may now be considered climatic. You don’t achieve that kind of power without first relishing its terms.

Modernism is tired, and its institutions are looking more and more like mausoleums. The mid-century theme park that is Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie is a case in point; New York being New York, MoMA will be hanging on by the skin of its teeth a while longer. What it clings to, I should add, is not importance or immediate relevance – money and the right address alone will grant it that – but a deeper and more complex inkling that it is not stuck in a perpetual afternoon, but still contains the day to come. Likewise, Beyoncé’s strength and capability, how hard she’s worked, as she never fails to remind us, her diamonds and expensive fashion, flaunted on every single track on *Renaissance* – in all this we see, unmistakably, a daughter of the last century. The capitalist optimism of Clinton, the capitalist militarism of Bush, the capitalist hope of Obama. She absorbed and carried those eras because terrorism, financial crises, and civil uprising could be responded to with strength, and fit into the logic of the American Dream as events you can build an identity around overcoming.

The gaping hole of Trump’s post-truthism has occasioned a defeatist turn that is rather something else. Billie Eilish’s depression, her thoughts of suicide. Forest fires. Climate collapse. This might have begun in 2017 when we realized the immense appeal of Ariana Grande as both a victim of tragic private circumstances as well as of a suicide bomber at her concert; on the face of this otherworldly lady, we saw our own reflection, our time. The woundedness at stake here is deep, as in deep-state, or deep-web, and cannot be simulated.

And so, how does a child of the Cold War, such as Beyoncé, respond to the fact that the supreme



Beyoncé photographed by Mason Poole

victory of capitalism, as the new litters are starting to suspect, might not be worth surviving? You don’t wear a golden dress to the Grammys anymore (as Bey did in 2004, that triumphant year) but, pajamas, like Eilish, or something you’d bought the same day at the mall, like Lana Del Rey. It is more than a disillusion with grand narratives, it is a total lack of interest in narrative as such, which renders irrelevant the aesthetic grandeur necessary to maintain the symbolic capital of institutions. On TikTok, it’s known as “goblin mode,” the antidote to so-millennial Instagram’s #ThatGirl, who works out at 6 am and drinks celery juice for lunch. Beyoncé is not that basic, but she is “That Girl,” as the opening track on *Renaissance* track puts it, pulling up in her Cadillac and shining “from the top of the morning.”

This shift also partly has to do with what we might call either the inflation of the public sphere or its collapse. The distinction between private and public no longer applies in the fields of labor, politics, identity, and media. The confession achieved its value through the scandalous leap from private to public, but, as we learned during the 2000s, a sex tape is not worth much when everyone has one. The problem is, Beyoncé *still* doesn’t have a sex tape. She has the “billion dollars on an elevator” tape which shows her sister Solange (allegedly) attacking Jay-Z after the 2014 Met Gala – but that all went over so smooth, *too* smooth. She really believed it would harm her, because she actually has something to lose: Beyoncé has maintained her privacy. In reality,

the values she upholds by keeping any and every scandal at bay – monogamy, dignity, beauty, work – are things nobody cares about anymore.

Ten years ago, Del Rey was among the first to catch this now-endemic sadness, but like Beyoncé. she is too much of an artist and an adult to really slob out; her nostalgia so pinned to the twentieth century and the tragic, drunken glamor of a lost Golden Age. Lady Gaga was the perfect choice for Sleepy Joe’s inauguration because her hysterical pantomime neatly assumes the negative space of his total blankness. Of course, it is as impossible for a survivor to admit defeat as it would be for MoMA to devolve into a project space. But where could the monumental and triumphant history-writing project that is *Renaissance* possibly land? It is not that another institution is vying to take Queen B’s place, but that, after three decades of deconstructive paranoid epistemology, we are no longer sure what we need institutions for – *if* we need them at all. *Renaissance* is already celebrated for the beautiful dream that it continues to posit. It is perhaps on those terms that Beyoncé has been able to accommodate the zeitgeist one last time: by plonking a great ruinous Colosseum into our midst. Such grandeur, such power, traced back to antiquity through the renaissance – truly a thing of the past.

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