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**Akram Khan Re-writes 'Radha': The 'Hypervisible'
Cultural Identity in Kylie Minogue's 'Showgirl'**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the British Asian dancer/choreographer Akram Khan's choreography of Samsara for Kylie Minogue's 'homecoming' version of the 2006 Showgirl tour as an intellectual commentary on the 1906 American modern dance piece Radha by Ruth St. Denis. On the surface Khan's choreography can be seen to reiterate some of the same Orientalist tropes that St. Denis was accused of, within a popular 'low' culture context. Acknowledging this trope I scrutinize Khan's key choreographic strategies that challenge the potentially feminist reading of St. Denis' Radha by successfully reinstating the marriage plot (Banes; 1998) within his choreography. More significantly, he makes 'hypervisible', the source culture of *Kathak* and the body of authority (himself) in the cultural exchange that shapes this choreographic project. Through an analysis of Khan's choreographic endeavor and a re-evaluation of the power play between male and female bodies in the space, I wish to extrapolate Khan's intellectual vision within Samsara as an expression and assertion of the place of diasporic identity and cultural exchange within Western popular culture. I frame my paper within the preexistent frameworks from scholars like Sally Banes (1998), Priya Srinivasan (2007), Edward Said (1978), Kobena Mercer (1999), Rustom Bharucha (2007) and Philip Auslander (1999).

Key Words

Dance & Culture, Liveness, American Modern Dance, Orientalism, Popular Culture.

Consistent romanticisation and co-relational fantasy of the ‘non-West’ has led to its evocation and representation by and within the ‘West’ (in literature, arts, music, theatre, dance to name only a few significant disciplines) through centuries. As a well acknowledged cultural and political phenomenon it has consequently been the subject of endless theorisation by academics across the globe. Perhaps the most significant and provocative voice of the ‘non-West’ has come from *Orientalism* by the Palestinian scholar Edward Said. Published in 1978, Said’s seminal contribution to cultural theory emphasises the perpetuation of a ‘cultural hegemony’ over the iconic power relations between the ‘West’ and the ‘non-West’. Said defines this phenomenon as, “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)”¹ and asserts further that ‘Orientalism’ helped circulate, “a body of assumptions, images, and fantasies held by Westerners about the Orient”². These documented assumptions have stereotypically constructed the ‘Orient’³ as passive, exotic, spiritual, sensual and in need of representation by the active, rational, civilised and familiar ‘West’. However in recent years, due to endless attempts at deconstruction, this mutually exclusive ‘us-them’ dichotomy within ‘Orientalism’ has come under scrutiny. With the birth of diaspora studies and the emergence of a hybrid space that embraces heterogeneity of identity, the purist segregation of ‘us and them’ has been challenged. This has consequently opened up new possibilities for identity construction that have the potential to challenge the hegemonic tropes and power-relations as theorised in Said’s ‘Orientalism’. In his recent key-note address at the Julidans *International Dance Festival* held at Amsterdam in July 2007, Rustom Bharucha, an eminent Indian scholar situated the currency of ‘Orientalism’ in the 21st century context and emphasised its multifaceted level of operation;

The Orient is a tenacious phenomenon. Even as it has been demystified, deconstructed, and flogged to death theoretically, it continues to proliferate in all kinds of versions,

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 43.

² Edward Said in Jane Desmond, “Dancing out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis’s “Radha” of 1906” *Signs Vol. 17*, no 1 (1991): 39.

³ In this article my interchangeable use of the words ‘East’, ‘Orient’ and ‘non-West’ is deliberate. I aim to indicate through this logocentric ploy, that from the perspective of the West (consisting primarily of Europe and North America), these words simultaneously imply a geographical non-specificity while emphasising the generalisation that accompanied the western perception of cultural Otherness outside its own familiar geographical borders. Patrice Pavis (1991) introduces the term ‘non-West’ to theorise this tendency of the ‘West’ to identify all things ‘Other’ in relation to what it is not itself, through this term.

derivations, and simulacra. These Orients are not just located in ‘the West’ within whose hegemonic discourses and power structures Edward Said had theorised Orientalism. The reality is that these Orients can thrive in the non-Western locations as well.⁴

While Bharucha argues that this incarnation of Orientalism exists within ‘non-Western locations’, implying a spatial specificity to this developing trend, I believe it can also be traced in the practice of ‘non-Western’ artists situated within the ‘West’. This ironic reclamation of the discourses of ‘Orientalism’ can lend visibility to non-Western artists to reconstruct their identity in the globalised 21st century. It is in this context that I locate my analysis of the British Asian dancer/choreographer Akram Khan’s choreography of Samsara for Kylie Minogue’s ‘homecoming’ version of the 2006 Showgirl tour. I theorise it as a strategic intellectual commentary on the 1906 American modern dance piece Radha by Ruth St. Denis.

I start by explicating the relationship between Radha (1906) by Ruth St. Denis and ‘Samsara’ in Showgirl (2006), the extravaganza that marked Kylie Minogue’s return to her pop career after winning her fight against breast cancer. A century apart, the prerogative of the two performing divas was similar. Inspired, in different ways by the ‘east’, they both wanted to evoke the ‘Orient’ in their respective performances. However, while St. Denis choreographed Radha herself, Minogue asked Akram Khan to collaborate on Showgirl⁵. This highlights two issues of interest. Firstly, it demonstrates that the powers of authorship and choreographic control operated at different levels in the two performances. Secondly, it suggests a significant shift in the placement of the ‘East’ within the ‘West’ through a marriage of high art and popular culture in the case of Khan and Minogue’s collaboration. This alignment I propose between Radha and Samsara is my subjective response to watching and studying them and the provocation I make in this article does not stem from any written

⁴ Rustom Bharucha, *The Geopolitics of Intercultural Exchange in the Performing Arts: Pushing the Protocols of Collaboration and Festival Organization* (July 2007), Keynote speech delivered at *Julidans International Dance Festival*, Amsterdam.

⁵ We should be mindful of the key difference between these two divas separated by a century. St. Denis was an early 20th century dancer, a representative of high art and an iconic figure within America’s early modern dance experimentations. Kylie Minogue on the other hand is a late 20th century successful icon of low art and the much loved ‘Princess of Pop’. Being a musician and not a dancer, Minogue would have had to call upon the skill of choreographers to realize her vision of the Showgirl extravaganza. St. Denis on the other hand would have had control over her own authorial voice within choreography.

material on the subject. While influential theorisations exist on Radha in Jane Desmond (1991)⁶, Sally Banes (1998)⁷, Uttara Coorlawala (1992)⁸ and most recently in Priya Srinivasan (2004, 2007)⁹ to name a few, this is not true of Samsara. Newspaper articles exist in abundance to celebrate Minogue's successful return to show-business and mentions her unique collaboration with several unique artists, including Akram Khan. However, in my opinion they fail to analyse the intellectual significance of the Khan-Minogue endeavor. I acknowledge too that Khan does not claim a reconstruction of Radha or a conscious homage to St. Denis in his choreography for Minogue. Yet, in my opinion, the parallels between the two ventures deserve scrutiny. When investigated in-depth, these readings offer an insight into Khan's choreographic vision that lends his authorship of the piece significant power through which Khan reclaims 'Orientalism' and constructs an influential voice of the 'East' in the popular cultural context of the 'West.'

A brief description of the two performances becomes vital at this point.

Radha:

In 1906 Ruth St. Denis premieres Radha. Sally Banes describes the performance as follows,

“The dance is primarily a solo for St. Denis, although it begins with a procession of male priests who serve to frame her dancing and to carry symbolic props. [...] St. Denis, as the idol Radha, is seated in lotus position, absolutely immobile, on a pedestal.”¹⁰

Jane Desmond illustrates further,

“When the priests are seated in a semicircle, framing a space for Radha to enter, she comes to life. Watched by her priests, she enters the sacred space to begin the dance of the five senses.”¹¹

St. Denis as *Radha* performs the dances of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch through self empowered sensuality and eroticism. A frenzied and climactic motif follows, through which *Radha*

⁶ Desmond

⁷ Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998)

⁸ Uttara Coorlawala, “Ruth St. Denis and India's Dance Renaissance” *Dance Chronicle Vol. 15*, no. 2 (1992)

⁹ Priya Srinivasan, “Dancing Modern/ Dancing Indian/ Dancing...in America: The Myths of Cultural ‘Purity’ ” <http://www.ballet-dance.com/200404/articles/asiandance.html> (accessed on December 9th, 2007)

Priya Srinivasan, “The Bodies Beneath the Smoke or What's Behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in American Dance History” *Discourses in Dance Vol 4*, no 1 (2007)

¹⁰ Banes, 85

¹¹ Desmond, 32

symbolically transcends human sexuality and collapses into stillness. She returns to her elevated pedestal transformed by *samadhi*, spiritual self-realisation. Depicting a marriage of sexuality and spirituality, St. Denis crafts a corporeal spectacle of an independent female body. She is dressed in a costume reminiscent of the Indian *ghaghra-choli* (flared skirt-fitted blouse), without the careful placement of the *dupattata* (scarf) that is meant to obscure the sexualised regions of the breasts, waist and hips of the female form from the male gaze. Instead, her midriff remains bare, the contours of her body are on show and she dances barefoot, claiming significant freedom for the American female body on the dancing stage.

Samsara in Showgirl:

In 2006, Kylie Minogue returns to Australia with her ‘homecoming’ tour to celebrate winning her fight against breast cancer. In the previous year she had had to unexpectedly cancel her tour of Australia when she was diagnosed with the condition; so the return to her country is to be marked by an extravaganza, a new version of Showgirl which will feature additional sequences choreographed especially for this significant event. During her recovery period Minogue spent a long time in Sri Lanka and became fascinated with the folk and classical dance traditions of the region. There is no record to suggest exactly what forms she encountered specifically, but there is one anecdote that is available on the internet a lot. Akram Khan relays this story as the turning point in Minogue’s path to recovery taking on a spiritual form,

“It wasn’t just the temples and professional dancers that inspired her. She’d dance on the beach with local children who had no idea who she was and would tell her off when she did it wrong.”¹²

I would like to propose that the lack of identity which she experienced from the Sri Lankan children on the beach influenced Minogue into a poetic reevaluation of her status in Western popular culture and culminated in the tour that marks her rebirth in show-business. On her return to the UK, Minogue, an admirer of Khan’s choreography between *Kathak* and western dance theatre, approached the

¹² Akram Khan, in Clifford Bishop, “He’s Spinning her Round” http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article1088760.ece (accessed on December 9th, 2007)

British Asian dancer/choreographer to collaborate with her on the Showgirl tour. Thus, Samsara was born.

Five massive projection screens line the back of the stage set up like a temple and on them appear multiple images of Akram Khan¹³ and his barefeet and hands gestures. Live, on the stage a chorus of ten dancers, possibly five men and five women, but androgynous in appearance and hard to distinguish, start to move establishing their authority within the space. The movement patterns are striking in their simplicity, intelligently integrating the features of *Kathak* and contemporary dance. On the screen flashes the image of Minogue, dressed almost as a gold Egyptian deity. Khan's intricate *Kathak* footwork builds to a crescendo before stillness descends on the stage. Our focus shifts to a very tiny live Minogue, lying face down on a pedestal, as two of the dancers, one male and one female approach her. Minogue is gradually brought to life like a puppet, through the manipulation of individual body parts and eventually starts to sing. She is barefoot and wears a jewel encrusted, fitted ensemble that accentuates her shape. The sequence includes movement motifs that push the envelope of music video choreography significantly. It moves away from the rhythmic and gyrating bodies associated with the MTV culture. Instead its distinct style constructs a mini narrative of power-play between Minogue and the chorus through a dynamic configuration of bodies in space, using a movement lexis that seems unfamiliar yet effective in this popular context. Gradually Minogue demonstrates her urge to separate from her creators and establishes herself as an independent entity.

Khan explains his vision for the sequence and says,

“It was based on images of gods and the idea of her being made by the gods [...] but wanting to be separated from her creators: a human being, not a puppet.”¹⁴

While Minogue succeeds in constructing her independent identity, the power dynamic between Khan's omnipresent image, her own live figure and that of the chorus suggests that the live event is

¹³ Khan's image alternates with that of one other male dancer.

¹⁴ Akram Khan, in Clifford Bishop, “He's Spinning her Round” http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article1088760.ece (accessed on December 9th, 2007)

controlled by the puppeteer, the mediatised ubiquitous Khan. Australian newspaper journalist Clifford Bishop explains,

“At the star’s insistence, Khan appears in the show, performing Kathak in two video sequences that begin and end his section. He was reluctant at first, but finally realized what a calling card it would make. ‘Actually, not a calling card,’ he corrects himself, ‘more a wanting card. I never perform to 10,000 people: how incredible that must be. And I want to keep putting myself in these situations, to be lost and wondering what planet I’m on. If you don’t have a clue what you’re doing, then you must be going in a new direction.’”¹⁵

Khan himself admits then of the tremendous and strategic appeal at capturing a new audience through this venture. Excited by the prospect of entering an unfamiliar territory in his choreographic career, he decisively chooses to craft his authorial voice in that liminal space that opens up when straddling high art and popular culture in Samsara.

In my summary of the two performances, I deliberately choose to merely describe Radha as a performance without providing a historical/theoretical context of the piece. Equally considered then is my decision to first contextualise how the collaboration between Khan and Minogue comes about before describing Samsara. I do this to emphasise that Radha has often been advocated as a stroke of choreographic genius, single-handedly crafted by St. Denis alone. This opinion fails to adequately acknowledge the historical and contextual circumstances that shaped its creation and the corporeal influence that possibly influenced St. Denis’ aesthetic from her observation of and interaction with the Indian *nautchgirls* at Coney Island in 1904. Here I am indebted to Priya Srinivasan’s recent and influential publication *The Bodies Beneath the Smoke or What’s Behind the Cigarette Poster* (2007) that investigates and traces the apparent erasure of the Indian dancing body and its influence on the subsequent development of American modern dance through St. Denis’ body of works. In contrast, the Khan-Minogue collaboration in Samsara is advertised as such - a collaboration, where the processes of exchange, of giving and taking, characterise the production and Khan’s leadership as choreographer is acknowledged visibly in the piece, albeit virtually. This implies that Minogue’s

¹⁵ Akram Khan, in Clifford Bishop, “He’s Spinning her Round” http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article1088760.ece (accessed on December 9th, 2007)

evocation of the 'East', no matter how Orientalist, and Khan's realisation of this vision is mutually negotiated. The same cannot be said of Radha and St. Denis's attempt to embody cultural otherness. It becomes vital at this point to articulate the points of similarities between Radha and Samsara.

It has been widely acknowledged and documented that St. Denis's inspiration to become an Oriental dancer came to her from a poster advertising Egyptian Deities cigarettes with the image of goddess Isis seated on a throne. While St. Denis went on to create her dance piece *Egypta* much later, scholars argue that its roots were sown in her subsequent exploration of Indian themes of spirituality and mysticism. Radha, while specifically symbolic of a Hindu mythological figure, generically came to stand for St. Denis's obsession with the 'goddess' in all cultural traditions 'east' of Christian America. The image of Minogue projected on the screen, painted gold and dressed in clothes strangely reminiscent of an Egyptian deity is an interesting coincidence.

St. Denis's observation of and unacknowledged corporeal interactions with the *nautchgirls* at Coney Island and Minogue's conscious collaboration with Akram Khan interestingly involved the same Indian dance lexis of *Kathak*. The dance vocabulary of the *nautchgirls* was a secular and voyeuristic rendition of the later classicised *Kathak* during and as integral to India's nationalist project. Thus St. Denis's and Minogue's use of *Kathak* inspired motifs shared similar characteristics and their performances drew on the key features of *Kathak* – *mudras* (hand gestures) and *chakkars* (spins), to name a few.

On a more simplistic level, both Radha and the Samsara situated the action in a staged temple scenario, with the female figure within the temple coming to life from a state of stillness. More significantly however, St. Denis and Kylie Minogue were both seeking an expression and embodiment of cultural otherness, in an attempt to reinvent their own identities in their respective temporal contexts. For St. Denis as argued by Jane Desmond (1991), this desire to align one's identity with 'Otherness' constructed an American womanhood that was sensual, self sufficient and modern. For Minogue, the encounter with the 'Other' in a globalised world took on a new meaning. As one of

the first icons of popular culture to engage corporeally with high art from the non-West, she managed to redefine her own identity as 'global' and also enabled significant creative dialogue between Western popular culture and Indian classical dance. In the past Michael Jackson¹⁶ and Madonna¹⁷ and many others have attempted this, but somewhat superficially; resulting in the irreconcilable and parallel existence of the Western identity/body as familiar alongside the non-Western identity/body as an exotic spectacle, often eclipsed by the familiar Western artist.

Finally, I turn to the title of Minogue's concert 'Showgirl' and the word so often associated with St. Denis's productions – 'showmanship'. The 'showgirl' phenomenon as an evolution of burlesque dancers and its long standing affair with Oriental dance must be acknowledged as a common reference point for both St. Denis and Minogue. Thus, both performances construct an Orientalised visual spectacle on the surface, while attempting to engage with and address more complex issues of race, gender, myth and cultural identity at its core pertinent to their respective temporalities.

How then is Khan's choreography for Minogue a rewriting of and an intellectual commentary on Radha? Through a re-interpretation of its key choreographic strategies and a re-evaluation of the power play between the male and female bodies in the space, Khan rewrites Radha at two levels. At one level Khan strategically reinstates the 'marriage plot'¹⁸ (which according to Sally Banes, is removed by St. Denis) within his choreography as an insight into the patriarchal construction of Indian classical dance. At another, through a deliberate placement of his own mediatised image on the screens, Khan makes his authorial voice within the collaboration 'hypervisible'¹⁹ (Mercer; 1999), reinstating the power of the non-Western voice in the cultural exchange with Minogue.

¹⁶ I refer here to the infamous *Black or White* video with the exotic foregrounding of the *Odissi* dancer in her classical attire and dance recital situated against Jackson's signature moves of hip thrusts and pelvic gyrations.

¹⁷ Madonna's video of *Frozen*, marked the 'Goth' phase of the artist complete with *henna* designs, *Bharatanatyam mudras* and an 'Eastern' soundtrack symbolizing Madonna's foray into Eastern spirituality.

¹⁸ Sally Banes

¹⁹ Kobena, Mercer "Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora- Based Blackness" *Third Text*, no 49 (1999-2000)

In an influential study that provides a feminist perspective on the history of western dance, Sally Banes analyses Radha. Banes argues that St. Denis's interpretation of the Hindu myth of *Radha & Krishna* obliterates the 'marriage plot', the "compulsory heterosexuality"²⁰ of western theatre dance (and a derivative of ballet conventions) that places visual and narrative emphasis on the male-female partnering. In introducing the female solo dancer on stage Banes quotes Annabelle Gamson to reiterate that, "women were not only taking center stage; they were taking all of the stage – without any support from men"²¹. St. Denis dances Radha primarily as a solo, using the male chorus of priests only on the periphery to emphasise and elevate her active higher status against their passive lower presence. Banes further argues that in Hindu mythology and religious philosophy, *Radha* is rarely recognised as a goddess in her own right, and is only given divine status when in association with *Krishna* her consort and lover. Bane's claim needs clarification here. While this is true at the level of religious theory and practice, iconographic representations of *Radha* within cultural realms exist in abundance and depict her on her own and celebrate her sensuality as an independent entity to *Krishna*. Thus St. Denis's desire to represent *Radha* and her sensuality as distinct to *Krishna's* lends this mythological woman her own divine identity in the American context. Here *Radha* is empowered by her ability to achieve both sexual and spiritual fulfillment witnessed by the male priests but not assisted by them. In Radha then, we see the emergence of an autonomous modern woman and the changing values surrounding marriage and sexuality in early 20th century America.

In contrast, Khan's chorus consists of both male and female dancers who are far from passive on stage and Minogue is far from the self sufficient image of womanhood. While St. Denis's presence commands spatial authority, Minogue's tiny body appears almost inconsequential in the live space and it eclipsed by the choral configurations and Khan's virtual presence. Through their minimalist motifs and manipulation of Minogue's body, the chorus forms the interventionists in the narrative that marks the rebirth of Minogue into show-business. However the androgynous presence and appearance of the chorus deconstructs further the superior female and inferior male power dynamic as

²⁰ Jill Dollan in Sally Banes, 1

²¹ Anabelle Gamson in Sally Banes, 66

set up by St. Denis in Radha. Instead the active male presence is magnified and resonated by Khan's himself, whose virtual dancing presence, inaugurates and concludes the sequence on the five projection screens. Khan's virtual presence on the screens however presents opportunities for multiple readings. At one level, it suggests a strategic reinstatement of the 'marriage plot' that St. Denis removed from Radha. This would be ironic indeed, as within Indian classical dance traditions the presence of the 'marriage plot' is an unfamiliar concept as most forms are primarily danced as solos. While St. Denis's obvious erasure of *Krishna* from the equation calls for a feminist analysis of Radha, I argue that the virtual-Khan and live-Minogue partnering seems to reinstate both the 'marriage plot' and iconography of *Radha-Krishna* simultaneously. *Krishna*'s elusive omnipresence is celebrated in Hindu literature and Khan draws upon this to construct and validate his presence on the screen. The parallel between Khan and *Krishna* becomes more potent when we consider Khan's self-alignment with and evocation of *Krishna* in Sacred Monsters (2007), his recent collaboration with the ballerina Sylvie Guillem. The intertextual resonance of Khan's self-admitted affinity with the rebellious, alluring, illusive and mischievous nature of the Hindu god *Krishna* in Sacred Monsters finds a popular cultural, mediatised and deconstructive reverberation in Showgirl. This reinstatement of *Krishna* of the *Radha-Krishna* myth re-writes significantly the representational complexity of this myth which is removed from St. Denis's construction of Radha²².

Khan's strategic presence via media intervention also throws up the issue of cultural validation and visibility. Unlike, St. Denis's unacknowledgment debt of cultural capital as gained through her corporeal interactions with the *nautchgirls*²³ Khan's virtual presence makes 'hypervisible' the source cultural tradition of *Kathak*. Srinivasan argues that St. Denis's decision to be accompanied on stage by the male priests, who were themselves Indian, enabled her to be validated as 'authentic' and allowed,

²² This complexity is further defined by the irony that Khan himself is a Muslim British-Bangladeshi, confessing affinity with a Hindu god *Krishna*, through the medium of *Kathak*. *Kathak* is a north Indian classical dance and an example of a hybrid art form that developed as an amalgam of the Hindu storytelling tradition of the *kathakars* and the Islamic influences of music, rhythm, percussion and virtuoso movement languages of Persian dance. It is the cultural and artistic culmination of the Muslim invasions of Hindu north India between 13th and 18th century AD.

²³ Priya Srinivasan (2007)

“white North American audiences to experience the “other,” in a safe way”²⁴. Minogue’s venture is similarly ‘authenticated’ then by Khan’s omnipresence on the screens giving credence to her vision of cultural exchange. Khan’s inaugural and conclusive dancing body on the screen, embodies Kobena Mercer’s (1999) concept of ‘hypervisibility’²⁵ and rectifies the recurrent erasure and invisibility of ‘source culture’ by the ‘target culture’²⁶, a process often associated with cultural exchange. It ensures its acknowledgement of the ‘source culture’ of *Kathak* through strategic and deliberate perpetuation of his own subliminal presence. However, Khan’s choreographic practice does not rest upon the singular source of *Kathak*. His own hybrid dance language that arises from his additional embodiment of western dance-theatre training that constitutes contemporary dance, colours his approach to choreography significantly and situates his practice in a liminal and empowered space. It is precisely this liminality of his practice that excites him into entering new territories and accepting new projects that challenge his comfort zones artistically. And it is also precisely this hybridity that allows Khan to provoke successful dialogue between his high art practice and the low art context of western popular culture without losing sight of the source culture/s that initiate the exchange in the first place.

At another more intriguing level, Khan’s virtual presence can be seen to manipulate the power of mediatization to deconstruct Said’s cultural hegemonic tropes associated with ‘Orientalism’ in order to reclaim his non-Western identity as an artist and an individual who is strategically integrated into the mediated Western popular culture. In contrast, the live ‘Orientalised’ Minogue in her exotic costume and newly learnt movement lexis, appears less consequential, trounced by the massive

²⁴ Priya Srinivasan (2007)

²⁵ In an influential essay entitled ‘Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness’ (1999), Kobena Mercer theorised the emergence of the hitherto invisibility of the Black migrant as ‘hypervisible’ among the second and third generation diasporic Black consciousness and its representation in the arts. Mercer argues that this ‘hypervisibility’ was a consequence of corporate internationalism, which resulted in Blackness becoming cool and accepted as part of the mainstream through commodification of its ethnicity. The marketability of the ethnic identity and ‘different’ to the mainstream is a key trend in British arts and Mercer emphasises this ironic tendency of Black artists to play into the hands of establishment as the only way to not be invisible. The same framework is applicable to Khan’s ‘hypervisibility’ in *Samsara* through the commodification of the source culture using the medium of mass reproduction and mediatization that helps perpetuate corporate internationalism in mainstream Western popular culture.

²⁶ Patrice Pavis and Lauren Kruger, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1991), 4.

images of Khan on the screen. At some points, in the televised transmission of the concert ²⁷, Khan's three dimensional virtual dancing images appear as a separate entity to his images on the screen and consumes all of the television screen. They create an illusion of Khan, as a live dancer next to Minogue's tiny body on the stage reminding us that, "Live performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies"²⁸ As a result the audience is unable to distinguish between Khan's image on the screen and his image that seems to occupy the three dimensional space on the live stage. This postmodern reference to the Baudrillardian concept of, "the death of the original and the end of representation"²⁹ through a perpetuation of simulacrum is ubiquitous in the mediatisation process of the live transmission that manipulates the reality for the audience as the virtual becomes the 'hypervisible' 'real' in the live space. In this context Philip Auslander's seminal study *Liveness* (1999) becomes a vital point of reference in the analysis of Khan's virtual omnipresence in Samsara. Peggy Phelan along with many others have emphatically argued for the unique qualities of 'liveness' within a performance event whose, "only life is in the present"³⁰ such that it cannot be recorded, documented or reproduced and only exists in the audience's memory of the event. Auslander challenges Phelan's notion of irreproducibility of performance by citing,

To the extent, however, that mediatization, the technology of reproduction, is embedded within the language of live performance itself, performance cannot claim [...] independence from mass reproduction, either.³¹

The Khan-Minogue collaboration and its strategic dialogue between the live (Minogue and the chorus) and the non-live (Khan's projection on the screen) reinforces Auslander's thoughts. Not only is the televised transmission of the 'live' performance dependent on mediatisation that enables recording, documenting and mass distribution of the concert, but more importantly, tools of mediatisation and strategic multiple camera angles manipulate the audience's reception of the 'live'

²⁷ I refer here to the UK television transmission of Showgirl that took place on Saturday, January 13th 2007 by Channel 4 at 10 pm which I recorded and it is this recording that I use to base my analysis on. The official DVD of the 'Homecoming' Tour has just been released on 10th December 2007.

²⁸ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 136.

³⁰ Peggy Phelan in Philip Auslander, 39

³¹ Philip Auslander, 40

bodies on the stage as less powerful in relation to the non-live projections towering above them. If one were to take the televisual medium out of the equation, and comment on watching the concert live, the overpowering presence of the projection screens with Khan's recorded imagery would by far supersede the inconsequential live body of Minogue on the stage. At least, watching the televised rendition allows the camera angles to focus on close-ups of Minogue and observe her 'live' body alongside panoramic shots of the whole stage with the overwhelming recorded presence of Khan. In defense of 'liveness' Colin Counsel theorises the body of a live performer as one that,

[...]occupies the same time and space as the audience [...] the live performer's emphatic physical presence has the capacity to remind viewers of the outside of the fiction, juxtaposing the body which is signified, performed, with the real, signifying body of the performer.³²

Minogue's 'real, signifying body' however fails to communicate over and above the omnipresence of Khan's virtual presence even as he occupies a different time and space to the audience present at the concert. Counsel's spatiality and temporality argument loses further potency when one considers the audience watching the concert on television, for whom neither Minogue's nor Khan's presence occupy the same time and space as themselves. It is this very same characteristic of the mediatised culture that enables Khan to capture millions of new audiences without being physically present in front of them but virtually making his present felt to "the generation [...] brought up in a world dominated by communications technologies, for whom *television* represents immediate, live experience"³³. Khan uses this unique opportunity to reconstruct and articulate his non-Western identity within a Western popular cultural context by allowing his collaboration with an icon of Minogue's stature to grant him mainstream status as a non-Western British artist.

Thus the story of the Sri Lankan children teaching Minogue to dance traditional forms and telling her off for doing it wrong and its emphasis on her lack of identity in the non-West finds a poignant place in Samsara in Showgirl. In the concert marking her rebirth in show-business, it is no mere coincidence that the title of Khan's sequence for Minogue is *Samsara*; the Sanskrit word for 're-birth' that

³² Colin Counsel, *Performance Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 125.

³³ Philip Auslander, 60.

conceptualises life as a series of liminal phases through which one journeys in order to complete one phase and enter another. Embracing an obvious Hindu and Buddhist philosophical reference to re-incarnation in the tour that launches her return to her professional career, Minogue suggests a re-construction of her iconic popular image through Showgirl. She negotiates a less prominent place with Samsara to acknowledge those whose holistic influences have enabled her re-birth within Western popular culture. In this respect she is unlike a host of Western artists (regardless of time and place) such as Ruth St. Denis in the high art context in American modern dance to Michael Jackson and Madonna in the popular cultural context who have capitalized on a construction of a new identity for themselves through their projects of cultural exchange while erasing the source culture from being acknowledged. Minogue however establishes Khan as an equal in the collaboration and allows his powerful authorial voice to supersede her identity and live presence in Samsara. However, more significantly perhaps Khan capitalises the ‘hypervisible’ by negotiating a place for the ‘cool Asian ethnic identity’ within mainstream popular culture. In this respect, St. Denis’ ‘Orientalist’ vision in Radha is replaced by Khan’s conscious perpetuation of his ethnicity through ‘hypervisibility’. Khan constructs a way for non-Western artists to reclaim ‘Orientalism’ as a strategy with which to find a voice within mainstream popular culture. He does this by buying into the powers of mass reproduction and mediatisation. Consequently he also successfully creates a hybrid place where high art and low art, classicism and popular culture and the non-West and West can engage in dialogue promoting a newfound understanding of each other. An understanding that must be critiqued and weighed in the context of present day discourses of globalisation to prevent generalized representations and circulation of a cool image of Asian-ness, and thereby a reiteration of this problematic Oriental and colonial myth.

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