



Universität Potsdam

Lars Eckstein

M.I.A.'s “Born Free” and the ambivalent politics of authenticity and provocation

first published in:
Hard Times. - ISSN: 0171-1695. - 88 (2010) 2, S. 34-37

Postprint published at the Institutional Repository of the Potsdam University:
In: Postprints der Universität Potsdam
Philosophische Reihe ; 83
<http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2012/5923/>
<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus-59236>

Postprints der Universität Potsdam
Philosophische Reihe ; 83

M.I.A.'s "Born Free" and the Ambivalent Politics of Authenticity and Provocation

Lars Eckstein

The release of the video to the second single of M.I.A.'s latest album *Maya* was a media coup if ever there was one. Posted on M.I.A.'s website three days after the single release on April 26, 2010, "Born Free" instantly became a facebook sensation; in the week after its release, according to one blog aggregator, M.I.A. was the most blogged about artist on the world wide web; and despite (or rather because of) the fact that it was immediately removed from youtube and has experienced widespread censorship, the clip has been viewed more than 30 million times in the following three months alone. What was it, then, that attracted the networked multitude to "Born Free"? Certainly, the soundscape of the song itself would not have generated the massive interest alone, given its rather inaccessible, fast-paced industrial break beat scope (based on a sample of "Ghost Rider" by 1977 synthpunk act Suicide). It was clearly the visuals of the video rather than anything else, directed by French director Romain Gavras, son of the renowned political filmmaker Constantin Costa-Gavras, which caused the hype.

That a promo video by Gavras should produce a stir is no news. Gavras's fame up to "Born Free" rested mainly on his work for the French electropop act Justice and their song "Stress." In the video, Gavras chose to depict a gang of underprivileged Parisian youth marauding through the city leaving a trace of random destruction which culminates not only in the torching of a car, but consequently also of the video sound engineer, and ends with the beating up of the cameraman. The video was one of the most widely discussed promo videos in 2008 far beyond France. It was hailed by some for its political daring, yet especially its stylistic perfection and aesthetic innovation, while others condemned it as a carefully calculated glorification of violence. Interestingly, Gavras never denied the sensationalist scope of "Stress" and its marketing appeal, but confirmed that "[i]t was an amazing free promo," and that in France "you can only get that much press if you have sex with children."

The reception of “Born Free” and the issues that it raises are essentially an almost exact copy of the debates following “Stress,” with one marked difference: this time, they revolve less around the director than the recording artist. While in the context of “Stress,” Gavras’s pedigree of revolutionary filmmaking made him the focal point of debates rather than DJs Gaspard Augé and Xavier de Rosnay of Justice, this time M.I.A. outshines him as a global icon of revolutionary protest and political agency, and consequently the content of the video tends to be attributed to her rather than him. M.I.A.’s exceptional biography, indeed, has dominated the media coverage of her music, and in many ways served to ‘authenticate’ not only her sound but also her political aspirations in the public arena, often at the cost of a closer examination of the complexities of her art. Let me nevertheless repeat the basics of M.I.A.’s story again, as it is vital to the more recent controversies raging around “Born Free” and the artist at large.

Mathangi ‘Maya’ Arulpragasam, stage name M.I.A. (the acronym for, alternatively, “Missing In Action” or “Missing In [the London district of] Acton”), was born in London where her Sri Lankan parents moved in the early 1970s. Her father was a key player in the foundation of the London-based militant Tamil group EROS, and half a year after Maya’s birth relocated the family back to Sri Lanka where, following three months of military training with the PLO in Lebanon, he – according to M.I.A.’s early accounts – continued the revolutionary struggle fighting alongside the notorious Tamil Tigers – while in later accounts, he supposedly worked for the Sri Lankan government. At the age of 11, Maya returned to London with her mother and siblings where the family received refugee status and lived in a run-down South London housing estate (cf. Wheaton 2005).

Maya eventually made it into St. Martin’s College of Art and Design and published a book of graffiti-inspired artwork which won her a nomination for the Alternative Turner Prize before her debut album *Arular* got her a Mercury nomination in 2005. The music of *Arular*, leaked to the public between 2003 and 2005, was received enthusiastically as something unprecedented, not only with regard to the artist’s preference for garish technicolour and 80s outfits, but especially regarding a fresh soundscape heavily influenced by Brazilian baile funk. In terms of lyrics and themes, *Arular* (carrying the alleged fighting name of her father) mainly drew on the axis between multi-ethnic London and war-torn Sri Lanka, getting M.I.A. into some trouble with the censors when MTV refused to air the video to her single “Sunshowers” until she removed the line “Like PLO I don’t surrender.” Her second album, titled *Kala* (this time carrying her mother’s name),

took on a more global scope; it was produced in various locations around the world, is composed of an extremely wide range of samples, and continues to pursue what M.I.A. refers to as a politics of “third world democracy” – while at the same time courting the mainstream. Especially her prominent inclusion on the soundtrack of Danny Boyle’s 2008 multiple Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* catapulted M.I.A. out of the comfortable associations with independent artistry into the orbit of pop stardom. At the outset of marketing her third album *Maya*, she thus found herself in the awkward position of a Western media celebrity with a revolutionary message that is perceived to be increasingly at odds with her stunning career. The most striking evidence of this situation is an extended *New York Times Magazine* cover story titled “M.I.A.’s Agit Prop Pop” which came out on April 25, just a day before the video release of “Born Free.” There is more to be said about this piece and M.I.A.’s current media status, but let me first turn to the video that caused all that stir.

“Born Free” is a short movie of a little over nine minutes length, loosely based on a South Park episode, with a clearly allegorical scope of dystopian terror. Soon dubbed “ginger genocide” in the media, it revolves around a police squad rounding up young red-haired men in what looks like run-down suburban LA. The context is affirmed by the American flags on the police squad’s shoulders, whose erratic professional violence dominates the video. They stumble across an old man smoking crack, bust into the bedroom of an overweight couple having sex, and later encounter the resistance of young ginger-haired youth in kufiyas, depicted in a blend of iconography relating to the second Palestinian intifada and Northern Ireland. From here, however, the video goes far beyond the conventional hip hop repertoire of sex, dope and violence. A number of red-haired youth are driven out to a desert camp where first a beautiful 12-year old boy is executed with a shot in the head, filmed by Gavras in painfully explicit detail, while the rest is set on the run in a mine field. The unquestionable climax of the video then gives us a frontal shot of one of the kids torn to pieces by a mine, body parts soaring through the air in slow motion before a Turneresque backdrop of blood and fire.

“Born Free” is painful to watch (at least for a viewer such as myself not immersed in the dubious pleasures of splatter), but it is nevertheless easy to speculate about a more serious political agenda behind it. It is probably no coincidence, for instance, that the second half of the clip’s setting is very much reminiscent of Arizona which roughly around the time of the video’s production legalized the detention of any person who is suspicious of being an illegal immigrant by the state police. On a more general level, the

various media responses have emphasized the film's allegorical exposition of the vulnerability of minorities and the random brutality of racist violence at large, highlighted only by the fact that the persecuted group is not a token minority – Asian or Black – but a group firmly placed in the West. More specifically, again, M.I.A. has narrowed down some of the wider allegorical possibilities via the artwork accompanying the “Born Free” audio single which shows an allegedly authentic image of the extrajudicial killing of Tamil fighters in Sri Lanka. Over the course of 2009, she repeatedly referred to the civil war between the Sri Lankan Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority as a ‘genocide’, and whatever one thinks about the ideological validity of this engagement (which certainly downplays the unspeakable atrocities committed by the Tamil Tigers in this struggle), “Born Free” certainly makes a complex political statement. As such, it has the potential, at least, of triggering vital debates about the logic of genocidal violence and its continuing relevance in the age of military as much as economic globalization, and of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which the affluent West is implicated in it.

This potential, however, is severely jeopardized by the video's hyperbolic fascination with extreme graphic violence. There is a very deliberate and rather unmistakably displayed desire to shock and provoke in Gravas's approach which goes beyond his explorations in “Stress,” and which does little to underscore the political scope, I feel, even if some reviewers defended it as an unflinching gaze at the brutalities ‘out there’ which are otherwise sanitized by the media and their regimes of control. It is difficult not to suspect a calculated bet on the provocations of spatter and violence as such, the extremity of which seems largely disarticulated from the overall political scope, which would eventually ensure maximum dissemination. And a cursory glance at the reception of “Born Free” in blogs and online comments on the video indeed confirms that it was above all the excessive violence which appealed to audiences first and foremost, rather than the clip's political meanings, and that it is this excess which has caused the extremely wide and fast spread of “Born Free” via facebook, twitter and other platforms. Maximum dissemination, of course, means a maximum boost in popularity, and maximum popularity among other things translates rather directly into maximum economic gain.

Whether one believes in the sincerity of M.I.A.'s calculated provocations – maximum dissemination of a genuine agenda remains a good thing, after all – or whether one does not very much boils down, then, to the question whether one conceives of M.I.A. as a sincere artist. ‘Sincerity’ is the category which astute observers of popular music such as Keir Keightley have singled out as the attributed marker which distinguishes

exclusively commercial ‘pop’ from similarly commercial, yet self-reflexive and politically aware ‘rock’. Sincerity, of course, is not a natural, or ontological, given; it needs to be carefully performed, and it is M.I.A.’s performances of sincerity which have come under more serious attack more recently. The most visible blow has been dealt by the aforementioned monumental 8000 plus word *Time Magazine* cover story, in which Lynn Hirschberg (a *Vanity Fair* alumni whose fame as an investigative pop journalist rests on her 1992 takedown of Courtney Love who allegedly did heroin during her pregnancy) takes great pains to systematically dismantle M.I.A.’s self-generated media image.

Revealingly, Hirschberg has neither much to say about the sincerity of M.I.A.’s musical approach and techniques of composition which have basically translated the elaborate sampled collages of the likes of Public Enemy into the globalised 21st century (fostered certainly through her collaboration with innovative DJs such as Blackstarr or Diplo), nor has she much to say about the quality of M.I.A.’s political engagement apart from the fact that she finds it simplistic – her comments on the “Born Free” video of which she was given an exclusive preview thus boil down to “at best, politically naïve, [...] exploitative and hollow.” Most of her portrait of the artist instead focuses on the juxtaposition of M.I.A. the self-fashioned media icon with the ‘real’ Maya Arulpragasam she unearths, the gist being that the ‘facts’ of M.I.A.’s actual life severely undercut her revolutionary stances. The major point of attack, then, is M.I.A.’s self-proclaimed family history, yet above all her current life style and personal relationships.

To begin with, Hirschberg basically accuses M.I.A. of having strategically lied about her father, who apparently neither fought alongside the Tamil Tigers, nor is missing in action, but was recently spotted, according to her ex-boyfriend Diplo, strolling through London with his daughter. What seems to excite Hirschberg more, however, is that Diplo, who has been instrumental in forging M.I.A.’s sound and musical philosophy, has been exchanged for a new partner, namely Ben Bronfman Jr. (a.k.a Ben Brewer and singer of the New York indie act The Exit), the father of her child Ikyhd, whom she has in the meantime married. Bronfman happens to be the eldest son of billionaire Edgar Bronfman Jr., CEO of the Warner Music Group, and is thus linked to the very heart of corporate music capitalism which M.I.A. pretends to subvert. With him, she bought a house in affluent and thoroughly white Brentwood, LA, and leads a life in luxury; all this and much more, for Hirschberg, is thoroughly at odds with her revolutionary aspirations, and her fight for a “third world democracy” comes across as phony and naïve at best.

Even though I find Hirschberg's article extremely unfair especially in the ways that her reckoning with Maya's private life implicitly not only discredits her political agenda, yet also the scope and value of her output as an artist, it needs to be taken seriously in a field of artistic production where the sincerity of the artistic persona remains a major cultural capital. According to Keightley, there are essentially two options when it comes to the performance of sincerity: popular musicians can either chose to perform a sense of 'Romantic' authenticity, or go for a notion of 'Modernist' authenticity (or 'inauthentic authenticity' in Lawrence Grossberg's terms). Romantic authenticity is probably the version we would most intuitively subscribe to, and involves a politics of organic creation, populism, tradition, hiding the impact of technology, etc. (much of the singer-songwriter genre is located here). Modernist authenticity, on the contrary, celebrates technology, multiple authorship, elitism and the fashioning of (often various) artistic personas. In other words, the disarticulation of private person and artistic persona is here perceived not – as in the case of Bowie or Madonna – as insincere, as it would be in the field of Romantic authenticity, but as a valid and paradoxically authentic artistic statement. The specific problem of M.I.A. at the current state of her career, it seems, is that both types of authenticity have become increasingly difficult to negotiate in the public arena. While her artistic persona increasingly relies on a thoroughly modernist play with identities and musical styles, her political agenda remains rooted in a sense of thoroughly Romantic ideology. When she justifies her more military stances, for instance, by claiming that other than Bono and other activists in the music business, she is actually *from* a war-torn country in the third world, she proclaims a sense of integrity and identity that is precisely not grounded in eclectic performance and self-fashioning, but builds on the sincerity of personal encounter and biographical experience.

Hirschberg is certainly right in pointing out such discrepancies, but I do not agree with her conclusions. While I am myself undecided about the value and validity of M.I.A.'s and Gavras's violent provocations in "Born Free" and would indeed in some instances be more comfortable with a slightly more balanced political outlook, I find M.I.A.'s overall politics far from simplistic or naïve (as I have attempted to show elsewhere, in a reading of "Paper Planes," her most successful single to date). The notion of a mutual exclusiveness of creative self-fashioning, technological processing, 'inauthentic' recycling and collage (which dominate M.I.A.'s soundscape) and Romantic notions of political sincerity, I would argue, is not a notion generated by the artist not is it an inherently systemic problem. It is mainly a problem generated by the conventional

reception habits of popular music audiences, including NYT authors. I think such habits need to be critically reevaluated, and we need to be able to initially disarticulate, also in the study of popular music, evaluations of the private, political and artistic spheres of production before studying their successful or problematic intersections.

I, for my part, found it strangely reassuring that M.I.A. reacted to the *Times* piece by posting Hirschberg's private phone number as her own on Twitter, so that a legion of fans who wanted to hook up with her about the cover story were misled to her misgiving critic. Hirschberg, of course, was not amused. She told the *New York Observer* that M.I.A.'s tweet was "infuriating" and a "fairly unethical thing to do." At least when it comes to (admittedly rather childish) attacks on her own private identity, then, the journalist seems to fully buy into M.I.A.'s revolutionary spirit: "I don't think it's surprising," she continued: "She's a provocateur, and provocateurs want to be provocative."