Being Ordinary as a Female Pop Star: Behind-the-scenes in musical documentary portraits of Jada and Beyoncé

Haastrup, Helle Kannik

Published in:
Journal of Scandinavian Cinema

DOI:
10.1386/jsca_00055_1

Publication date:
2021

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Document license:
CC BY

Citation for published version (APA):
JSC Short subject/Post peer review

Title: Being Ordinary as a Female Pop Star: Behind-the-scenes in musical documentaries from Jada to Beyoncé

Abstract

This paper concerns how ‘being ordinary’ (Dyer 1979: 49ff; Gamson 2011:) in behind-the-scenes sequences can be analysed as a marker of authenticity in two contemporary musical documentary portraits, contrasting the Danish newcomer Jada in Jada – lillebitte kæmpestor (Jada – super tiny mega big) (Pil Overby, 2019) with the global pop artist Beyoncé in Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé (Beyoncé & Burke, 2019).

A distinctive feature of our time is ‘the demotic turn’ in digital media culture, which describes ordinary people’s increased access to fame via reality TV and social media (Turner 2004; Turner 2010). However, Krieken argues that celebrity has “always accentuated some degree of ‘ordinariness” (Krieken 2012: 10). Explaining how this works, Dyer (1979) suggests that ordinariness is an integral part of the star image (Dyer 1979: 49) and by extension this can include musical artists. Musical artists can thus be celebrities of merit (Rojek 2001) and have a star image, according to Marshall (1999) and Redmond and Holmes (2007). Therefore pop stars can be said to perform ordinariness (Dyer 1979), and to be ordinary (Gamson 2011) is central to how they strategically present themselves. In musical documentary portraits pop stars can include strategic presentations of self that offer access to this ordinariness via the ‘behind-the-scenes’ sequences. These sequences have been a regular feature of the genre since D.A. Pennebaker’s ‘Direct Cinema’ classic Don’t Look Back (Pennebaker, 1960). This classic documentary not only showed the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan performing concerts, but also observed him ‘being ordinary’, e.g. being bored in the back of a car or walking the streets and window-shopping. These observational behind-the-scenes sequences depicting ordinariness have become a central storytelling device in the musical documentary portrait as a genre, usually structured as a narrative around a concert tour or the recording of an album.

Line of approach

The line of approach is a case study (Yin 2009: 46-47) comparing two behind-the-scenes-segments, both chosen because they, in a condensed format, show how ‘being ordinary’ can be a marker of authenticity and part of the star’s image as it unfolds in musical documentary portraits. In previous
studies of musical documentary portraits, the focus is often on artists from the anglophone world (Cohen 2021). In contrast, this paper compares a Danish pop artist with an African-American global pop star in order to demonstrate that, despite their differences in terms of race, celebrity status, personal style and the stages they are at in their careers, their ‘ordinariness’ holds a similar central position in both documentaries.

This paper consists of three parts. Firstly, a brief theoretical conceptualisation of ordinariness as a part of the star image as it unfolds, and how authenticity is central to documentary portraits. Secondly, a brief contextualisation of the musical documentary portrait as genre, with a focus on contemporary female pop artists. Thirdly, a comparative analysis of each of the two behind-the-scenes sequences, in the Danish television documentary mini-series Jada: Lillebitte – kæmpestor featuring up-and-coming young pop-artist Jada (Emilie Molsted Nørgaard) and in the established popstar Beyoncé’s Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé which depicts her preparations for and performance at the Coachella Festival 2018. The focus of the analysis is on the different ways in which ordinariness contributes to a performance of authenticity and how both Jada and Beyoncé, in their presentation of self, connect their representation of the body with ‘being ordinary’.

**Theoretical framework: Authentic documentary, star image and ordinariness**

In the genre of documentary, authenticity is a central part of the representation (Nichols 2017: xii). This can be expressed via certain cinematographic choices and technologies (Nichols: xii), like ‘the fly on the wall’ observational mode and the voice-over, but must always be understood in relation to both the internal logic of the documentary and the cultural and social context (Nichols: 26). In musical documentaries specifically, authenticity is often discussed in terms of the musical performance being authentic (Cohen 2012: 50). By contrast, this analysis focuses on how authenticity, in the form of ordinariness, can be found in the behind-the-scenes sequences. It is important to maintain, Cohen argues, that both situations (front- and backstage) are performances (Cohen 2012: 54). In addition, the musical documentaries in this analysis are portraits of individual pop stars demonstrating not only their exceptional skills, but also their more vulnerable sides, making them relatable. Musical documentary portraits often qualify as what Birkvad calls ‘a complex documentary portrait’ and relate to the social and cultural context as an example of”Man in Society made comprehensible and relevant to the public” (Birkvad 2000: 295).

Richard Dyer’s notion of the star image provides a useful lens through which to understand how a pop star performs ordinariness in musical documentary portraits. In Stars (1979), Dyer argues that
authenticity is a consequence of the paradoxical co-existence of ‘ordinariness’ and ‘extra-ordinariness’ (Dyer 1979: 49-50). Inspired by Max Weber’s charismatic types of authority (Weber 1968), Dyer argues that stardom entails both a charismatic authority supported by promotion and publicity images and a ‘protestant work ethic’ that shows us that fame is hard work; as well as conspicuous consumption as a means of conveying success (Dyer 1979: 49-50). These four aspects of the star image (authenticity based on the ordinary/extra-ordinary dichotomy, charisma, work ethic and consumption) can all be found in the musical documentary portrait as a media text, either through on-stage performances or in behind-the-scenes sequences. According to Dyer, the ordinary is also connected to the star being accessible and relatable, while paradoxically, simultaneously being unique (the extra-ordinary).

Joshua Gamson (2011) focuses on how the ordinary has become important for celebrities in general, and identifies this ‘ordinary turn’ as being on a par with Turner’s ‘demotic turn’ (2011). However, Gamson argues that ‘ordinary people becoming celebrities and of celebrities being shown as entirely ordinary’ is a widespread phenomenon (Gamson: 1067). Gamson also identifies a common sceptical attitude towards celebrities as ‘fabricated and false, (therefore) the ordinary life has been made to stand in for the real and true’ (Gamson 2011: 1063). The musical documentary portrait is an apt genre for investigating how public individuals perform their cultural and social meaning. Using Goffman’s distinction, the genre is an example of impression management, and constantly shifts between the frontstage performances for an audience and the backstage performances that comprise the ‘behind-the-scenes’ segments (Goffman 1990). The musical documentary portrait of pop stars encapsulates how these shifts occur, and how the subjects’ status as celebrities means that these changes take place in an intensified form. The arguments put forward by Dyer, Gamson and Birkvad make it possible to show how the musical documentary portrait uses ordinariness when portraying public persons to connote relatability and truthfulness, and to make the public person, e.g. the pop artist, relevant to the public.

Taken together, the ordinary must be understood as a performance (Goffman 1990, Cohen 2012) in the behind-the-scenes sequences. In Dyer’s perspective, ordinariness is seen as inextricably linked to the extraordinary in the image of the star, and as such this paradox is a precondition of authenticity, connected to work ethic, charisma and consumption. Gamson, on the other hand, focuses on the ordinary as an important source of truthfulness, and on authenticity as central to celebrity culture in general.
The analytical focus is on three research questions concerning the two musical documentary portraits of Beyoncé and Jada respectively: 1) How does the musical documentary portrait present ‘being ordinary’, how does ordinariness contribute to the creation of an authentic star image (Dyer), and how is it made relevant in the behind-the-scenes-segments (Birkvad)? 2) How is the ordinary presented as synonymous with truthful discourse (Gamson)? 3) How are the ordinary and the authentic performed and supported by the cinematographic choices which need to be understood in relation to both the musical documentary portrait as genre and the cultural context (Cohen, Nichols)?

Context and genre: Female popstars in musical documentary portraits

When discussing female pop artists in musical documentary portraits, *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (Keshishian 1991) is central, because it not only demonstrates how the genre can encompass Dyer’s definition of the star image, but also emphasises the shifts in visual style between onstage performances filmed in colour and black-and-white ‘behind the scenes’ segments (Goffman) in which we see Madonna performing ‘being ordinary’. *Madonna: Truth or Dare* shows Madonna as powerful female pop star in control of her image, in contrast to what we might call ‘victim documentaries’ that focus on investigations of the female pop artist as a casualty of fame: *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015) is about Amy Winehouse as an unruly woman and her harassment by the British tabloid media, as argued by Polacheck (2018), and *Whitney: Can I Be Me?* (Broomfield, 2017), as analysed by Hopkins (2020), is about Whitney Houston’s drug addiction and her status as a celebrity train-wreck. A recent example of this is the *New York Times* documentary *Framing Britney Spears* (Stark, 2021), which focuses on her father’s guardianship, as well as the support offered by her fans and the #FreeBritney movement. At the other end of the continuum are documentaries in which female pop stars are depicted as very much in control, such as *Gaga: Five Foot Two* (Moukarbel, 2017) and Taylor Swift’s *Miss Americana* (Wilson, 2020). All these documentaries are narratives of female pop stars but use behind-the-scenes sequences in different ways to perform ordinariness and depict relatability to stress authenticity.

Jada: ‘It has to be on my terms’

The focus of the analysis of the behind-the-scenes sequence is the opening montage of *Jada – lillebitte kæmpestor*, which introduces us to a new pop artist. The documentary follows the young singer Jada over a period of 18 months and the main conflict is presented from the beginning: We
understand that Jada is on the verge of a major breakthrough on the Danish music scene and at the same time she needs to take time off due to stress even though she is only in the early stages of defining her star image. The montage is therefore an example of how the different elements of a star image is connected and presented in a condensed form. The ordinary is established in the first segment, where Jada is recording herself with her smartphone. She is crying, tears running down her cheeks, sitting alone outside, dressed in casual clothes, as she explains to the viewer how she is both unhappy and embarrassed that she is suffering from stress now that her career is finally taking off. From the beginning, truthfulness and affective self-presentation are at the centre, because she is communicating directly with the audience and recording it herself. The next section of the montage features Jada narrating via voice-over that she loves attention and giving concerts. The footage shows her performing on stage in glamorous outfits for an enthusiastic audience and winning an award for song of the year, to rapturous applause, thereby establishing her extraordinariness. This paradoxical combination, as argued by Dyer, results in a performance of authenticity: she has issues with stress (ordinary) and is a recognised performer (extraordinary). Jada continues voice-over narration as we see her behind the scenes, e.g. in the backstage area and in her wardrobe trying on outfits. Jada proclaims: ‘If I am going to be this star-like person, it has to be on my terms’ (Jada, episode 1, 2019). The last section of the montage shows Jada backstage, alone in costume, while her voice-over talks about being body shamed on social media, and how her critics suggest that she should not crowd surf because she is too heavy. Jada is criticised for not having the traditionally slim celebrity body type. The montage concludes with footage from a concert showing Jada crowd-surfing, as she anxiously asks the audience ‘Can you carry me?’ We are therefore to understand that while Jada is vulnerable, she still insists on doing things ‘on her own terms’. As such, she is performing the ordinary, because she is experiencing stress and being vulnerable to critique online, but still manages to be in control. The montage shows her working hard (protestant work ethic) as she takes charge of her career, and also depicts her charismatic onstage persona (shown in the performance and at the awards show). The conspicuous consumption aspect of stardom is not relevant for her, as we learn that Jada is a student who lives with her fiancé in small flat in Copenhagen.

The authenticity is stressed in the choice of visual style when Jada speaks directly to the camera (a self-recording) in close-up, by her contemplation of online body-shaming in her dressing-room, and through her voice over-narration. Her performance of authenticity comes across as truthful, since this breakdown could not have come at a more inconvenient time and she has chosen to share it in
this confessional way. Likewise, she shares her thoughts about online bodyshaming, and in doing so appears both vulnerable and strong, because she decides to crowd-surf, nonetheless. By addressing the important topics of psychological vulnerability and online bodyshaming, Jada shows off her ordinariness and invites audience identification. She does not have an established star image but via this behind-the-scenes sequence she succeeds in making ‘the ordinary’ a central part of her presentation of self in the musical documentary. By contrast, Beyoncé uses behind-the-scenes sequences to stress how the ordinary is still an important part of who she is and her well-established star image.

Insert Image 1

Beyoncé: ‘I can fit into my costume’

Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé is structured as a countdown to the Coachella Festival, and alternates rehearsals and preparations with sequences from the concert itself. The selected behind-the-scenes sequence is captioned ‘33 days before Coachella’ and occurs midway through the documentary. Leading up to this, we have seen a montage of dance rehearsals with voice-over narration by Beyoncé in which she discusses the challenges of getting back in shape after childbirth, while eating an apple: ‘In order for me to meet my goal I’m limiting myself to no bread, no carbs, no sugar, no dairy, no meat, no fish, no alcohol and I’m hungry.’ We then see her in her dressing room in a sparkly sequined dress, facing the camera. She is very happy and proud, and says, ‘This is seriously a huge accomplishment because I didn’t think I would ever get back into my old costume and I’m actually in it.’ An assistant video-calls her husband Jay-Z, and Beyoncé tells him, ‘Look I can fit into my costume – all zipped up!’ In the context of the harsh dieting regime and the rehearsal, her happiness comes across as genuine and authentic. ‘The ordinary’ is also indicated because women in general will recognise the difficulties of getting back into shape after childbirth. The ordinariness also peaks through when her husband’s reaction is not as enthusiastic as her own. This is shown in slow motion close-up, in which we see Beyoncé roll her eyes at his reaction. The behind-the-scenes sequence with the voice-over framing shows Beyoncé’s work and dietary sacrifices, the rehearsal conveys her protestant work ethic, and her charisma remains intact as we see her trying on her costume. Conspicuous consumption is implicit, as Beyoncé is surrounded by staff and assistants who address her husband as ‘Mr Carter’. The ordinary is connected to her physicality (her post-partum body), through dancing and getting in shape, but also via a glimpse
into the private dynamics between husband and wife. Her performance of the ordinary comes across as authentic and as a contrast to her extraordinary performance on stage and her status as an exceptionally successful female artist on a global scale.

Concluding remarks
The analysis of the two behind-the-scenes sequences with Jada and Beyoncé shows that being ordinary is central in both segments, but in very different ways. In both cases, these short sequences confirm the authenticity of the star image through ordinariness: in Jada’s case, when she is in tears as she talks about her breakdown due to stress, as well as later when she voices her concerns about bodyshaming; for Beyoncé, on the other hand, authenticity is conveyed when she discloses in the voice-over narration that she struggles with dieting to get rid of her post-partum weight, and we witness how she needs validation from her partner. The ordinary is presented as synonymous with truthful discourse when Jada is crying to the camera and when Beyoncé shifts from being genuinely happy to rolling her eyes when her husband is not as enthusiastic about her weight loss as she is.

The ordinary is performed and comes across as authentic, supported by the cinematographic choices and the voice-over narrative, such as when Jada uses the confession-cam style in combination with a voice-over through the introductory montage. For Beyoncé, her sense of accomplishment is both narrated and shown in a visual style that imitates (or is) a smartphone camera, and close-up frames are shown in slow-motion to enhance both this moment of joy and her subsequent disappointment.

In a larger cultural context, both female pop artists seem take control of their strategic performance of the ordinary as a contrast to their professional excellence, and thus regard it as central to their star image. Both explicitly choose to address the reigning cultural norms in contemporary media culture, which demand that female celebrities in general should be slim and white (Taylor 2018; Redmond 2019). In this way, both portraits are made relevant (Birkvad 2013) to contemporary discussions on representation of the female body in popular culture (e.g. Gill 2007). However, each has a different focus. Jada challenges the norms of slimness for female pop stars as a way of ‘being true to herself’ by crowd-surfing. Beyoncé’s particular brand of ‘black female superstardom’ (Koojiman 2018: 6) demonstrates that, on one level, she is defying cultural stereotypes as one of the most successful female black pop artists. Yet in this sequence she abides by the slim body-norms, and the focus is on her being in control of her body through hard work and stamina. As Dyer
argues, performing the ordinary is paradoxical, but can contribute to the discussion of the representation of star image and body-norms as particularly challenging for female pop artists (e.g. Taylor 2007). The analysis of specific media texts, like the musical documentary portrait, can provide insights into star images as cultural signs of the times and how ‘the ordinary’ as performance is central to the issues at stake becoming a part of the cultural and social conversation.

Film and TV references
Broomfield, Nick (2015), Whitney: Can I be me. (United Kingdom & USA).
Kapadia, Asif (2015), Amy (UK).
Pennebaker, D. A. (1960), Don’t Look Back (USA).
https://www.dr.dk/drtv/episode/jada- -lillebitte-kempestor_126704 (00.00-02.00) Accessed 25 May 2021.
Stark, Samantha (2021), Framing Britney Spears. (USA).
Wilson, Lara (2020), Miss Americana (USA).

References:


