

# “THE ONLY WAY I KNOW U IS FROM A SCREEN”: ON JUSTIN BIEBER’S *BEAUTY AND A BEAT*

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Justin Bieber’s *Beauty and a Beat* (2012) introduces a conceit—the leaked glimpse into the private life of the singer—only to subvert it through the corporate logic of pop, which always places you at its center. There is no private moment; you are always there to help publicize it. At a glance, it might seem that the image of Bieber’s life, in which you are the subject of a highly choreographed tween scene of celebrity worship (where Bieber holds the camera and addresses you), is the video’s secret fantasy behind the formal structure of the leak (the video appears to be shot by Bieber using a handheld camera). In fact, the leak is the fetishized point of entry into the life of Bieber—and is itself the primary fantasy that motivates the Belieber. And it is this fantasy that the video exploits—and integrates—into the corporate logic of Bieber, Inc. If pop is a surface that reflects, approximates, and organizes feelings into marketable sequences of language set to music, then the leak (such as the one that formally structures the video) is the crack in the voice, the typo that exposes not only the corporate use-function of these feelings, but their loose, uncontrollable omni-directionality, too. The leak makes things fleshy again, somehow truer to life, even if what is made flesh only serves to establish what it lacks. For Bieber, that lack seems to be privacy. But he is alive in this world, leaking into it. In *Beauty and a Beat*, his handlers have found a way to formalize that leakiness into his celebrity.

*Beauty and a Beat* was shot between September 8-9, 2012—per a Nicki Minaj tweet (she appears in the video)—and debuted a month later at noon on October 12<sup>th</sup>. Two nights before the release of the video, several blogs, including TMZ,

reported that Justin Bieber's laptop was stolen and that several naked photos were leaked. These photos, which mostly showed the shirtless torso of Bieber (except for one that revealed him gripping his erect cock), didn't show his face; the only mark indicating that Bieber was Bieber was a small tattoo near his waist. The theft, it turns out, was a hoax, but one that we are supposed to believe precipitated a premature release of *Beauty and a Beat*:

**In October of 2012 three hours of personal footage was stolen from musician Justin Bieber.**

**The following footage was illegally uploaded by an anonymous blogger.**

In fact, the video was first uploaded to Justin Bieber's corporate YouTube account, JustinBieberVEVO, and not by an anonymous blogger. What, then, were these leaked photos? Were they part of an elaborate marketing campaign, designed to hype *Beauty and a Beat* two days before the music video debuted? Yes. But who Photoshopped the tattoo—identical to Bieber's—onto the anonymous, naked body of an under-aged boy? The video exploits the desire to not only see Bieber in private, but to see him naked; it plays on the frenzy surrounding other instances in which Bieber shows a little skin—like his Instagram photos of his workouts at the gym (something I'll touch on later), or his nude serenade to his grandmother on her birthday—in order to generate the necessary momentum for a chart-topper. Yet another leak: the creep in the record label office, trawling the net for twinks that look like their consummate prince.

From the start of his career, Justin Bieber has marketed privacy and intimacy to generate an obsessive tracking of his "story": intimate details like his mother's last minute decision to spare him an abortion, the absence of his father (and the

ensuing attempts to create a father out of producers and other pop stars), his struggle with Selena Gomez (who Minaj mocks in the video), and now a series of controversial pictures and videos of his various trysts with international sex workers. These intimacies of Bieber's private life have become talking points for the industry that surrounds him and the totalizing fever it has produced. But the fans who seek to love him more repeatedly find the actualization of their desire, the touch, denied by the expanding lack it cannot encompass. The more his fans know, the more they want to be with him—only to find him receding farther away. The Italian philosopher Franco Berardi recently illustrated the effect of this point in *The Uprising: Poetry and Finance*, in which he writes—with nearly every available #buzzword—about David Fincher's *The Social Network*:

Desire is diverted from physical contact and invested in the abstract field of simulated seduction, in the infinite space of the image. The boundless enhancement of disembodied imagination leads to the virtualization of erotic experience, infinite flight from one object to the next. Value, money, financial excitement [author note: and, I might add, celebrity obsession]: these are the perfect forms of this virtualization of desire. The permanent mobilization of psychic energy in the economic sphere is simultaneously the cause and the effect of the virtualization of contact.<sup>1</sup>

The psychic energy of the social network that constitutes Bieber's fan-base is often directed toward the singer in a desperate plea to be literally “with” him because s/he “loves” him more than anyone else. An appeal to this desperate energy is the simple but powerful operating principle in the video, one that is formally articulated by Bieber acting as cameraman and is visually exemplified in his unique, bifurcated look of “either you can fuck me or I can fuck you, depending on whose drunker.”



Contrary to its marketing campaign, *Beauty and a Beat* doesn't grant special access to Bieber's private life; it negates its possibility: beyond the portal of the personal computer, into its leaked footage of Bieber's life behind the scenes, is only a *more* public life, one composed of an elaborate set that includes a mercenary army of tweens, an entire camera crew and, behind that, producers, directors, personal assistants, and so on. The video's assertion that it is a home video is a fiction that, nevertheless, at the moment of its release, invites the viewer to suspend disbelief in light of the "actual" leak of the days before. Back of this fiction, however, there seems to be a kernel of truth in that anything Bieber shoots for himself, of himself, as home video could be (and very likely would be) repurposed for promotional material to be distributed through the various social and corporate networks that feed information to Beliebers. This *is* a home video insofar as someone who lacks a private life is capable of making one; its assumption of the trappings of a home movie (the handheld camera, the opening sequence of behind-the-scenes footage), however artificial, make it culturally legible as one in a culture long used to celebrities running the track of their lives in public (Michael Jackson being the best example of this). The question remains, for me, where is home for Justin Bieber? If privacy, and by extension a place cordoned off from public consumption, doesn't exist for him, what does? The Internet.



Bieber's Instagram is the central hub for the expression of "Bieber-fever," with users "liking" his photos at an astonishing rate, all of which show him in "intimate spaces," like one of his many bedrooms or his private jet. Instagram creates the illusion of special access to a celebrity's private life by repurposing their phone as a

marketing tool, the singular and increasingly exclusive tool for self-documentation (or branding) for public consumption. Photos taken from a handheld device assume a hybrid pose of both professionalism (effectively displacing Photoshop?) and intimacy through filters—creating the sense that this is both the official portrait and one taken on a whim. In fact, nothing is filtered; rather, information is layered into the image's data in order to reassign it to the genre—or suggestion of genre—of photography: black and white, sepia, “Hudson,” Valencia.”

The sense of proximity to Justin Bieber in his bedroom leads thousands of his followers to confess their love and their hope that Bieber will notice them, even though they are in the midst of a public conversation. They persist to speak to him as though he shot the photo for *them as individuals*, rather than for their tribe. (“Beliebers,” like Lady Gaga’s “Little Monsters,” are consumer hashtags who assume that their clubiness operates above or beyond advertising—but these new tribes of digital natives and the content they produce are, by the terms and conditions that they agree to without reading, essentially property of these social media sites.) Bieber cultivates this feeling in his frequent use of the second-person pronoun in his photo’s captions. All these pictures, Tweets, videos—it’s almost too much. And sometimes it is. Users often express the brutal, alienating agony of access that, on its surface, seems unrestricted. User @graciekaep commented on a photo last year, around the time I gave a version of this essay in Brooklyn:

please notice me this is the only way i know u is from a screen and it sucks because im positive u would like me because im crazy in love with u please when i saw u in concert i cried so hard i couldnt see straight i think about u all the time and i love u so much i cry because i will never know my idol and that u will never kno me cause this is as close as i can get to u and u wont even see this freaking comment but i like u so much anyway

@graciekaep doesn’t desire a real boy; she desires a cybernetic visualization of capital manifesting itself in the form of a real boy. Life and product are collapsed, rebranded, into one another to increase demand for more access, more information—of which @graciekaep already has a nearly unlimited amount.

The central illusion of Bieber, one created by the physical distance between his body and its Beliebers, is the limitation of contact, which is predicated on a virtualization that generates the desire for its non-existent physical analog. You cannot touch Bieber: he doesn’t exist to be touched; he exists to be seen.

After we see clips of Bieber “alone” with friends, the camera cuts to a secret pool party that everyone is invited to attend. Despite the open invitation, Bieber mocks the idea of participation by suggesting the party is so ahead of its time—and perhaps so beyond “us”—that he moves it ahead in time by 1,000 years. Let’s party “like it’s 3012,” he sings, a simple transposition of the first and last digits of

2013 but a telling one in that none of us have, or likely ever will, experience 3012 (at least in the bodies we embody at present). How do we know whether or not we'd want to party like that era? But the problem with the future is that it's always invading the present. Take, for example, Nicki Minaj's brief poolside interlude in *Beauty and a Beat*. She appears, out of nowhere, in the video on a platform at the end of the pool like a missile from its silo. She sings:

In time, ink lines, bitches couldn't get on my incline  
World tours, it's mine, ten little letters on a big sign  
Justin Bieber, you know I'mma hit 'em with the ether  
Buns out, weiner, but I gotta keep an eye out for Selener  
Beauty, beauty and the beast  
Beauty from the East, beautiful confessions of the priest  
Beast, beauty from the streets, beat will get deceased  
Every time beauty on the beat

What is this mysterious ether that she promises to "hit" Bieber with? And, moreover, what could be the "beauty from the East, beautiful confession of the beast" other than some futurist credo.



Minaj's turbosexuality is expressed through her robotic over-pronunciation of her prophecies and in the aesthetic of plasticity she dramatizes in her endless, readymade reinterpretations of "the female" via drag culture. In her vampiric

waterpark cybergothic, Minaj is herself a sign of the terrible future, emerging from a tear in linear time down the line into ours. This is how Nick Land describes the kind of technohorror voyages of the future into the present by virus-like, time-crossing entities. In his writing on “Lesbovampiric Contagion-libido,” which could describe Minaj in *Beauty and a Beat*, he writes that “Crypt-sorcery,” the viral magic of the afterlife of cyberspace,

makes itself real in the same way it spreads. Functioning as a plague, it associates with the experimental production of an anticlimactic or anorgasmic counter-sexuality, attuned to the collective re-engineering of bodies within technobiotic assemblages, ultimately composed of electronic streams or ionic currents in their sense of positive hole-flow. Since Crypt-sex is precisely identical to the infections it transmits, counted in body-shifting vectors, its libidinal composition is marked both by paleoembryonic or oestrogenetic non-gendered femininity and a lateral haemometallic influenzoid virulence.<sup>2</sup>

JK or oh no? The afterlife of the future comes back down through non-linear time to invest death in the spread of the future that ensures it. Pop is the surface of the world and acts as open-access ports for anything that might hope to hack its way in, down below, where we sleep. The singular genius of *Beauty and a Beat* is its outright yearning to become this host-like status, this prayer for the nerve-gas of digital apocalypse, subjected as it were to a future vampire manifest in the (rumored) closet-case, Nicki Minaj, whose description of a “beauty from the East” suggests, in fact, the same quasi-racist belief that the future “begins” and “ends” in China. Perhaps, in her privileged position as hypervirus arching across time, from a party in 3012 to now, the beauty she prophetically describes is herself. And the ether she gives Bieber is nothing more than the ether he gives us: doom-craving, net-based want for more catastrophe. The future.



*Beauty and a Beat* is, finally, a doom spectacle of tweens celebrating the emergent future. Its logic is the same as *Terminator 2*: the future is so bad, it's hacked the present to prevent its own coming into being. The tweens dance in a vitally necessary resource on the verge of its privatization by first world consumers. Water has already become, and likely will continue to be, restricted in the amount that is given to large swaths of the planet's population in order to "conserve" it in the face of its pollution, effectively exiling from life itself those least likely to participate in the spectacle of *Beauty and a Beat*. Nicki Minaj, unlike Bieber, never gets wet because no motherboard, now or down the line, can get wet. Her dryness is a foregone conclusion, perhaps even contractual; Minaj's stiff gyration and rap contrasts with the tween dance, which becomes, in the end, a manic assertion of their right to water. Bodies tessellate into a fevered addiction to a boy star who pays *sotto voce* lip service to vampiric anti-sexuality. You can't touch him, he can't touch you, but some day that will be the way you prefer it.

#### Notes

An earlier version of this essay was originally performed as a "non-lecture" for Adam Fitzgerald's "Six Non-Lectures" series at the Red Door in DUMBO, Brooklyn, New York in January 2013. It has been revised for *ON: Contemporary Practice*.

1. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Semiotext(e), 2012) 116.
2. Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987-2007* (Urbanomic, 2011) 554-555.

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