

# Sia's Strained Girl: Performing Persistence in Neoliberal Environments

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## Abstract

Australian singer-songwriter Sia (Kate Isobelle Furler) has become known as much for hit songs such as “Elastic Heart” and “Chandelier,” as for unusual claims to anonymity and privacy: Sia performs with her face covered by an oversized wig topped with a big ribbon or a hat, while child-dancer Maddie Ziegler takes the spotlight. Sia discussed her avoidance of visibility as an attempt to preserve a sense of privacy and freedom that celebrity culture does not usually afford stars. Ziegler has become the face and body of Sia's videos and concerts, sometimes accompanied by other child actors. In Sia's videos, the girl signifies multiply. She not only catalyzes the artist's larger preoccupation with consumption and sacrifice in celebrity culture, but performs the entrapment, vulnerability, and will for a livable life of a neoliberal youth subsumed to the logic of self-investment (Wendy Brown). This article analyzes how the girl, usually a figure of preoccupation, hope, and worthy investment (Angela McRobbie, Anita Harris), appears as one of strained persistence who defies both concern and hope, while, instead, spurring questions about the affective modalities available to young women in the age of increased neoliberal precarity.

1 Australian singer-songwriter Sia (Kate Isobelle Furler) has become known as much for her unusual claims to partial anonymity and privacy as for her hit songs, “Elastic Heart” (2013), “Chandelier” (2014), and “Cheap Thrills” (2016). Sia appears in performing spaces—whether stages, television sets, or the carpool karaoke—with her face covered by an oversized wig, usually topped with a big ribbon or a hat. In her few live shows she draws attention away from herself by singing in the back of the stage or hidden behind stage decor. Instead, the spotlight is on the carefully staged choreography of dancers.

2 Sia's reluctance to make herself visible has been discussed, including by the artist herself, as an attempt to escape the relentless gaze of the entertainment industry while preserving a sense of privacy and freedom that celebrity culture does not afford. As she explains in an interview:

I would like to be able to make great pop music for another 20 years. And it feels like creating a sort of inanimate blond bob and allowing other people to play the role of the pop singer, it affords me a little bit more freedom in terms of my expiration date. (Wiig n.p.)

Here, Sia speaks to the hyper-visibility of stars and to the industry's habits of subjecting musicians, in general, and women artists, in particular, to a cycle of consumption where we build them up and take them down (Bradshaw, Schlotterbeck, Smit). Indeed, a cursory look at the career of popular

musicians—from Janis Joplin and Nina Simone to Britney Spears and Amy Winehouse—shows this narrative trajectory of rise to fame followed by fall out of grace. Popular artists who challenge or diverge from such biographical storyline are rare.<sup>1</sup> That is because, as Melissa Brashaw notes, the narrative of rise to fame followed by demise is reflective of both a capitalist economy, where popular artists are consumed and discarded like all other goods, and of the audiences’ emotional inconsistency towards stars as “a stand-in for the fetishized mother... that we ambivalently adore, mourn, and hate” (Bradshaw 71-72). The female music star’s trajectory, at the intersection of capitalist practices and gender expectations, begs asking: What insights might we gain from reading star personae as manifesting our cultural moment’s ideological nexus of economic and gender ideologies? How can a music artist intervene in negotiating the dominant cultural imagination?

3 I propose that, in challenging prevailing narratives of star intelligibility to attempt a long-lived creative career, Sia has crafted the persona of ‘the strained girl’ as one critical not only of the culture of celebrity consumption, but also of neoliberal logics of subject formation increasingly modeled after star culture. I examine how Sia’s music videos accomplish a larger commentary on agency and vulnerability in late capitalism, arguing that she does so by appropriating the culturally ‘protected’ figure of the young ‘can-do’ girl and deploying it as one of strained effort, unlikely mastery, zany emotional labor, and vulnerability. In appropriating the idealized neoliberal subject of power and ambition, Sia positions the young girl as neither a super-heroine, as neoliberal postfeminist culture would have it, nor as a shattered feminine subject, as celebrity culture demands. Instead, Sia’s girl performs overwrought strength in precarious conditions. Through this persona, Sia interrogates consumption and sacrifice both in celebrity culture and as modes of being in this neoliberal capitalist moment of the Anthropocene.

4 I begin by discussing how neoliberalism normalizes exploitation of both the environment, through consumption, and of humans, through a logic of self-investment that understands people as equal only to their value-producing labor. The logic of consumption, in other words, overtakes subjects who understand not only materiality as potential capital and value, but themselves as a series of experiences, relations, and identities to be turned into exchange value and potential profit.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse Schlotterbeck explores such an exception: Todd Haynes’ biopic *I’m Not There*, which stages a series of symbolic deaths and rebirths, what the author calls a “thanatography.” See Schlotterbeck 231.

5 The girl has been the idealized subject of capitalism since the 1990s, hailed as a figure of hope and worthy investment by both the neoliberal capitalist economy and by feminism, albeit with different political agendas. I read Sia’s music videos as deploying the figure of the girl so as to make visible that which neoliberalism obscures: (1) the affective labor of continuous self-investment and production of a subject living by the logic of the market; and (2) the relations and environments that support the neoliberal girl’s “compulsory success” (Burman 358). Under neoliberalism’s logic, both the subject’s and the environment’s labor and potential depletion are invisible and only treated as ‘externalities.’ The system operates by making invisible or irrelevant the two ends of the cycle of value production. At one end, the support networks, practices, and conditions that have readied people and environments for the value-reaping stage. At another, the ‘externalities’ of that process: waste, pollution, disease, and species extinction. In late capitalism’s logic of disavowal, what is readily available for cultural representation are only subjects of power and enjoyment and objects of value, but neither the labor of production, nor the waste of consumption. Sia’s music videos, I will illustrate, foreground the obscured and implicit dimensions of life in neoliberal capitalism, dramatizing how the culture of consumption and self-investment leave both subjects and environments strained.

### **Neoliberalism’s Reach: The Girl and the Logic of Self-Investment**

6 As the leading ideology of the Anthropocene, neoliberalism produces the economic and financial structures of an unsustainable world. In it, subjects living in strained ecological, political, and social systems increasingly experience life as relentless self-investment (Brown) and, those caught in systemic poverty, as slow death (Berlant). Neoliberalism accelerates the goals of the Reagan-Thatcher era, “dismantling . . . publicly owned industry and deregulation of capital, especially finance capital; . . . eliminat[ing] public provisions and the idea of public goods; and [submitting] everything to markets and to unregulated markets” (Brown in Isquith n.p.). It holds that society will function better if business reigns free and puts the state in the service of business through the language of state non-interventionism. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown proposes that neoliberalism is more than an extreme form of capitalism. It is also a system that turns market-thinking into a totalizing form of reason (10). Brown explains that, if in earlier forms of economic liberalism, people would see themselves as market actors when they are in the marketplace, but use another form of reason for when they are in family, religious,

and political communities, in neoliberal capitalism humans think of themselves as market actors at all times (32-34). Brown calls this a totalizing logic of self-investment, known to children as young as the sixth grade:

As a proper bit of self-investing human capital, that child will be thinking at every turn . . . . *How do I enhance my attractiveness to future investors?* And future investors will be excellent, private high schools; or excellent colleges; or excellent employers. Each thing the child does—whether it’s volunteering at a charity in order to build up the résumé in order to look like a good civic citizen, a hardworking, willingly civic human being; or whether it’s an unpaid internship where one is simply using the internship in order to enhance one’s appearance of experience and knowledge and networking—becomes a way of making herself more attractive to future “investors.” (Isquith n.p.)

The spread of this rationality, scholars of the Anthropocene would argue, goes hand in hand with our dis-investment from systems on which our sanity, humanity, and very embodiment depend, from local communities and families to the Earth’s ecosystems.

7 Like all hegemonic ideologies, neoliberalism works at both the level of everyday experience and at the level of representation. Representationally, it normalizes which subjects are worthy of symbolic and material rewards, whether those material rewards follow or not in real life. Scholars have argued that young women have become the exemplary subjects of neoliberal governmentality, as figures of competition, ambition, talent, great capacity, and can-do-ness (McRobbie, Harris, Gonick). They explain the rise of the girl as a convergence of both progressive and conservative forces. According Marnina Gonick, the feminization of exemplary neoliberal subjectivity follows the transformation of the economy from manual production, dominated by men, to a service economy dominated by women (5). Women’s increased centrality in the economic system has evolved alongside a feminist activist push for female empowerment and, since the 1990s, a postfeminist discourse of empowering the female consumer. In other words, women’s movements have pushed the cultural agenda towards the affirmation of women’s power and the political agenda toward equality and rights for women. As women’s power became part of the neoliberal economy, the meaning of ‘empowerment’ was co-opted. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explain:

Postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, . . . to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment . . . Postfeminist fictions

frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as an economic necessity rather than a ‘choice.’ (2)

Tasker and Negra usefully underscore that, despite idealizations of female power since the 1990s, experiences and practices of female empowerment have remained profoundly fractured, full of contradictions, or simply unfulfilled.

8 Such short-changing of women is part of an increasingly short-changing of young people by a neoliberal economy predicated on “the dismantling of postwar social structures, rising levels of youth unemployment, welfare and education cuts, and credential inflation” (Gonick 5). Social class will smooth over the incongruity between cultural ideals of success and the economic realities of depleted infrastructures of support, by allowing middle- and upper-class families to fill the gap in supporting young women’s success. Meanwhile, Gonick notes, working class girls are left stranded with personal insufficiency as the sole explanation for their failure. For them, the postfeminist discourse of ‘empowerment’ becomes what Laurent Berlant would call a cruelly optimistic one.

9 In a representational economy where contexts and environments are removed from our cultural imagination and only a self-investing individual—idealized for her can-do attitude, productive work, and material consumption—is visible, Sia’s music becomes a powerful commentary on the current predicaments of our age. It foregrounds what neoliberal logics exploit—the body, labor, emotion, and environments—and forces us to confront their sustainability.

### **Brilliant Bodies of a Dystopian World**

10 The postfeminist girl lives in hypervisibility. As Anita Harris writes:

Good girls, bad girls, schoolgirls, Ophelias, third wavers, no wavers, Bgirls, riot grrrls, cybergURLs, queen bees, tweenies, Girlies: young women suddenly seem to be everywhere. They are the new heroes of popular culture, the dominant faces on college campuses and the spokespeople of public education campaigns. (2004 xvii)

Girls are both represented by institutions that hold the power of representation, and are themselves seeking visibility, as entertainment figures. Since reality television has changed the perception of surveillance to cast perpetual monitoring as pleasurable and profitable (Andrejevic), young female ‘influencers’ and producers of content have become the faces of *YouTube* and Instagram, now billion-dollar businesses populated in great proportions by girls (Blattberg, Sandoval, Shobhit).

11 Sia's choice of protagonist for her music videos, Maddie Ziegler, is consequential for understanding the cultural significance of her 'strained girl.' Ziegler gained fame as a very talented child star dancer on *Dance Moms*, a reality television show where a tyrannical dance teacher works with young girl dancers and moms hungry for fame. Sia rerouted Maddie's fame by turning her into the performative substitute for the singer's body.

12 What emerges out this collaboration is the performance of hypermastery, an ideologically dominant mode of visibility for the postfeminist girl and for the young neoliberal subject. But despite displays of vocal and bodily hypermastery in Sia's videos, the heroine never comes close to the celebratory visibility we reserve for 'the can-do girl.' Instead, Sia's girl is on the edge, either about to lose her hold on reality, or adamantly resilient, if extremely vulnerable, in environments that accentuate her precarity. Such representation makes visible what the neoliberal imagination has made irrelevant: the environments that support the subject, their material and symbolic agency, and the emotional lives mandated of late capitalism's subjects.

13 The ensuing analysis takes three examples of Sia's strained girl—the music videos “Chandelier,” “Alive,” and “Big Girls Cry”—illustrating how they articulate three disavowed registers of neoliberalism: a frenzied search for support (“Chandelier”), the fatigued composure of the perpetually vigilant subject (“Alive”), and the zany animation of perpetual adaptation (“Big Girls Cry”).

### **“Chandelier:” Amassing a Holding Environment**

14 Like most of Sia's videos, the opening shots of “Chandelier” are silent, displaying drab settings that the child-dancer will animate with her movement. Here, a carpeted room with sparse old furniture, a hallway, and yet another room with stained carpet, worn out paint, and a few old portraits on the wall, signify a deserted home in an apartment building. The child's presence is almost eerie, as if she was forgotten in a place that has none of the attributes of a 'home:' protection, care, or the presence of adult effort. This unfriendly dead space will soon be animated by the child's playful body and bouncy blond wig. Through a choreography of tireless frantic movement, Maddie tries to compose a supportive environment out of the abandoned objects of domestic care—beds, sofas, tables, and carpets—which reveal themselves as insufficient the more the girl animates them.

15 In the vocabulary of classical ballet—which Maddie references in her supple embodiment, her tan leotard, as well as her dance movements,<sup>2</sup>—a male dancer acts as the stable holder, the stabilizer of the woman’s pirouettes, the frame on which her gracious body lands safely and off of which she projects effortlessly into the spotlight. “Chandelier” reassigns that role to the space and the objects surrounding Maddie. From the early seconds when she appears hanging ghostly in the doorframe and staring down the viewer to the last moments of the clip, Maddie moves continuously through abandoned spaces (see fig. 1).

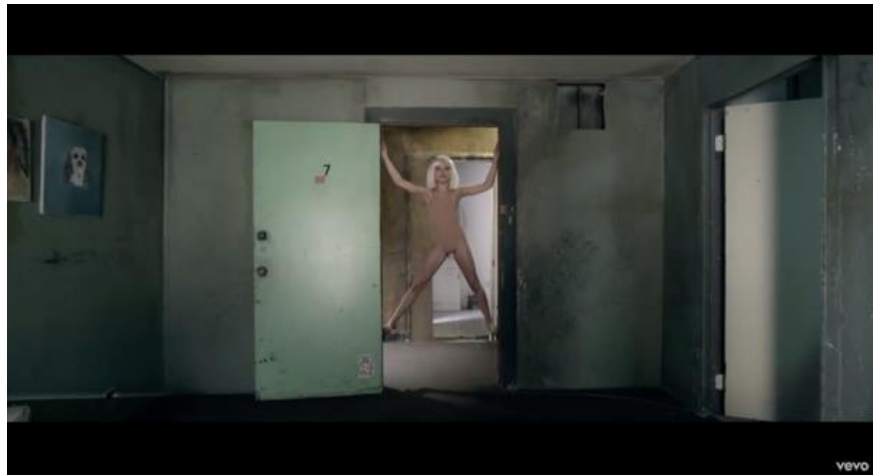


Fig 1. Maddie in inhospitable space. “Chandelier” (Youtube)

She bounces off the run-down décor, she dives onto old mattresses and couches, hangs from curtains, plays at the table, drags herself through rooms and swirls through hallways. Her choreography, thus, dramatizes a post-feminist neoliberal environment as a precarious ‘holding environment’ for the youthful subject of talent (see fig. set 2).



Fig. Set 2. Maddie’s movement enabled by space. “Chandelier” (Youtube)

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<sup>2</sup> She turns into a grand jeté followed by a petit jeté, breaks into pirouettes, battements, pique turns, and jeté coupes, and peppers her choreography with series of chaînés. I am grateful to Dance Professor, Sandra Mathern-Smith, for clarifying the ballet terminology.

16 I borrow the concept of ‘holding environment’ from the psychoanalytic work of Donald Winnicott. To Winnicott, a reliable holding environment is key to becoming an individuated healthy adult, one who feels real to oneself, can be spontaneous, and can experience aliveness. Such holding environment is cultivated early in life by a “good enough” caretaker (Winnicott, 1987 188). This is someone who is able to adapt to the needs of the child with reliability until the child can express aggression, and then teaches them the play between aggression and compassion (1990 22). To Winnicott, our material and symbolic holding environments—from parents and relations to schools and other institutions—need to provide enough support, if individual and collective life are “given a chance” (1990 107).

17 Born out of the experience of working with children displaced by World-War II, Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory has been used to theorize neoliberalism’s erosion of democracy. Bonnie Honig draws on Winnicott’s “hard-earned, war-tossed appreciation of the importance of stable, worldly *things*” to develop a theory of democracy as reliant on the “public things” that form our holding environment (40). In Honig’s words, “[p]ublic things—objects of both facticity and fantasy—underwrite our collective capacities to imagine, build, and tend to a common world collaboratively . . . [and] achieve stability, integrity, and adhesion to things and to each other (Honig 38, 40). Honig’s conceptualization of public holding environments only makes more poignant Wendy Brown’s critique of neoliberal capitalism’s attack on all things public and other scholars’ descriptions of the Anthropocene as manifesting the consequences of an aggressive relation towards our planet as a holding environment.

18 Such theoretical perspectives not only reposition humans among non-human actants, but usefully foreground object-relations as the arena in which the neoliberal imaginary plays itself out. As self-investing neoliberal subjects, our relation to space has become one of temporary inhabitation, use, and mobility, an ethos that “Chandelier” dramatizes through barren and destitute interiors. But individualization and a democratic shared life depend, according to Winnicott, Honig, and Brown, among others, on our trustful reliance on and careful consideration of good enough environments. This ontological perspective is rendered invisible in the dominant ideology of neoliberal self-investment.

19 The neoliberal girl is a subject position of material and relational disconnection, whose agency in the world is supposed to manifest as individual mastery and environmentally-depleting



consumerism. Maddie performs visually the physical mastery of a top girl, while lyrics have as protagonist the consumer top-girl. Indeed, lyrically, the song references the oblivious rhythm of partying familiar to both music stars and to “the phallic girl,” a praised subject position for young women in neoliberalism since the 1990s (McRobbie 83). To Angela McRobbie, the postfeminist phallic girl is glorified for adopting masculine views of sex “as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport” and risky behaviors such as heavy drinking. At the same time, she is to still observe norms of feminine embodiment that gratify the male gaze (McRobbie 83).

20 The lyrical protagonist of “Chandelier” alludes to the phallic girl and exposes such ideological demands as experientially painful. Thus, she moves from gleefully accepting the rewards of her social role (“I’m the one ‘for a good time call’ / Phone’s blowin’ up, they’re ringin’ my doorbell / I feel the love, feel the love/. . . I’m gonna live like tomorrow doesn’t exist”), to the end of her night (“Sun is up, I’m a mess / Gotta get out now, gotta run from this / Here comes the shame, here comes the shame”) and the addiction and desperation that accompany this cycle (“I’m gonna swing from the chandelier,/ And I’m holding on for dear life, won’t look down won’t open my eyes”). Unlike the hegemonic glorification of the phallic girl, “Chandelier” exposes the self-destructive cycle of drinking, partying, and oblivion as a painful one.

21 Read melodically and visually, the music video of “Chandelier” belies neoliberal ideals for girls and young women by dramatizing the anxiety and fragility that come with the territory of being a hegemonically-recognizable top girl. By placing Maddie’s mastery in spaces that hold her just enough for her to demonstrate her excellence, but not enough for her to carry a livable life, “Chandelier” dramatizes the demands placed on women and the emotional and environmental costs of neoliberalism in the Anthropocene.

22 Sia’s music video refuses to position the girl as either a conqueror of her conditions, or as their victim. Instead, this strained girl displays willful persistence as much as desperation, she exudes pleasure in exercising her capacities and subjecting herself to the camera’s gaze as much as she reproaches the spectator for intruding and then for deserting her. And instead of the satisfaction of seeing a normalized pacifying femininity at the end, Maddie delivers the final customary curtsy with an unsettling zany smile (see fig. 3). By dramatizing Maddie’s frantic and defiant interaction with space, “Chandelier” exposes our ideological attachments to not seeing our environments and their insufficient ability to ‘hold’ us.



Fig. 3. Maddie’s unsettling curtsy. “Chandelier” (Youtube)

### **Vigilantly Alive**

23 Another masterful strained girl is featured as protagonist in Sia’s music video “Alive.” The girl looks much younger than Maddie. She wears the signature shiny wig, and a white karate uniform tied by a black belt. During the duration of the video, the girl performs a karate training sequence interspersed with free style fragments, in a public setting that looks like a deserted underground section of a building.

24 The girl seems to have made a home in this space: she squats by a two-burner stove, stirring a pot and brewing tea, with a vigilant expression that she maintains for the duration of the five-minute music video. If Maddie in “Chandelier” flickers between enjoyment, desperation, reproach, and mockery, the girl of “Alive” has only one affective register: controlled vigilance and focused expressions of well-contained anger (see fig. set 4).



Fig. Set 4. Expressions of controlled vigilance. “Alive” (Youtube)

Alerted by a threat coming from outside the frame, in the deserted public building, the girl launches into a karate choreography. Gestures of strength come into focus, as the camera pans, sometimes in slow motion, over her hand perfectly energized, her foot intently placed and swiftly moving, and her frowning face (see fig. set 5). Her gestures never fail or hesitate, even when exhausted by the effort of self-defense.

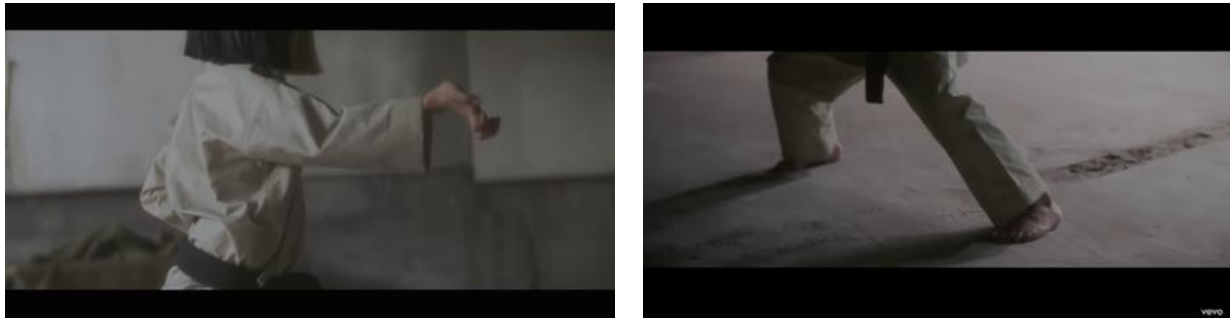


Fig. Set 5. Vigilant gestures. “Alive” (YouTube)

Her composure comes through especially when her poised movements are superimposed over outcries of Sia’s powerful voice. Composure is not an easy state, we are to understand, but an exercised skill of redirecting one’s fear and frustration into more skill, like in the martial arts she practices. As such, the girl’s composure aesthetically manifests a double demand on neoliberal subjects: to both do ongoing emotional labor and to be stoic.

25 Lyrically, “Alive” is a song about survival against all odds: “I was born in a thunderstorm / I grew up overnight / I played alone / I played on my own / I survived.” The theme of survival is frequent in Sia’s songs—from “Elastic Heart” to “Bird Set Free,” “Reaper,” “Unstoppable,” “Broken Glass,” “The Greatest” and, of course, “Alive”—a preoccupation born out of the artist’s experience. As Steve Knopper describes Sia’s survival story in *The New York Times*, the artist’s introvert personality clashed with the rhythm of touring and promotion of popular singers, and with the perfectionist pressures of star visibility. Like many, Sia adopted the industry’s coping rituals: drugs, alcohol, and consumerism, which brought her on the brink of suicide. Saved by a limited visibility (as the wigged Sia), the artist’s presence on the social scene remains minimal. In the few interviews she gives, Sia diplomatically voices anger at the star culture and its un-interrogated consumerism:

anywhere you go now where there’s a camera, it’s actually work . . . [Y]ou realize, ‘If I’m going to go [to an event], I’m going to need to get a tan. I’m going to need to have my roots

done. I'm going to have extensions, probably. I'm going to get a stylist for sure. I'm going to have to work out five times that week with Jennifer Aniston's trainer.' This is commerce and I'm \$5,000 in the hole just to go to a party . . . That is not what I'm going to be doing in the future. But it's funny to hear people in the biz say, 'Oh, it's nice you showed your pretty face.' You, of all people, should know. (Wiig n.p.)

Such criticism is uncommon in the industry, as anger expressed by women in defense of their wellbeing is culturally punished.

26 In the industry, we have seen female musicians critical of industry practices either marginalized or pilloried for their criticism (Frith and McRobbie). In the larger culture, Soraya Chemaly writes, women's expression of anger provokes aversion. They are perceived as more "hostile, irritable, less competent, . . . unlikeable" and even "'crazy,' 'irrational,' and 'demonic' . . . , the kiss of death for a class of people expected to maintain social connections" (xvi, xvii). As a result, Chemaly notes, girls and women learn to "contain" themselves: "our . . . hair, clothes, and, most importantly, speech" (xix).

27 Angry speech as the epitome of truth speaking about "trespass, violation, and moral disorder," (xx) remains that dimension of traditional femininity that postfeminist subjects are still to refrain from (McRobbie). While otherwise encouraged to exhibit virtues palatable to neoliberal consumerism, such as the glamor, the work flexibility, the can-do-attitude, Angela McRobbie explains, the postfeminist girl is to keep her quietness.

28 Sia's critical voice in the press and her distinctively intense singing voice breaks through the quietness required of neoliberal subjects. Under the guise of the wig and the child's body, she is able to express musical outrage that is a meaningful commentary both about the music industry she knows so well, and about demands on young women, more generally. Sia performs musical anger in both body and voice. Musically, the contrast in pitch and emotional intensity between verses, on the one hand, bridge and chorus, on the other, performs the tension between composure and expressed anger, respectively. The opening silence that establishes the girl as alone in the unwelcoming public space is interrupted by strong bases accompanying, in emotional tone, lyrics about endurance and the suppression of hurt: "I had a one-way ticket to a place where all the demons go / Where the wind don't change / And nothing in the ground can ever grow / No hope, just lies / And you're taught to cry into your pillow / But I survived." The repetition of "I'm still breathing" in the bridge and of "I'm alive" in the chorus lets grief and rage reverberate in Sia's voice.

29 The artist's voice has become famous for its ability to convey deep emotion, which popular commentators reductively describe as "gritty and frequently scream-y" (Cliff n.p.). Roland Barthes's notion of "the grain of the voice" affords a more productive perspective (179). Borrowing from Julia Kristeva, Barthes contrasts the aspects of a voice we can easily communicate about (style, ideology, mastery), on the one hand, and the "grain of the voice," on the other (179). The latter seduces and "sways us to *jouissance*" (183). Barthes's difficult-to-represent characteristics of the grain of the voice would be characterized by the more recent vocabulary of affect studies as the affective dimensions intimately lodged into our embodiment:

the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucuous membranes, the nose . . . The 'grain' of the voice is not—or it is not merely—its timbre; the *significance* it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else . . . The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. (Barthes 183, 185, 188)

Sia's vocal performance suffuses songs with the characteristics of her embodiment and with an affective intensity only partly tamed by her pop accessibility. Such embodied affective intensity erupts in the girl's explosive martial arts movements. Indeed, the paradox of Sia's performance persona is that, as she denies herself embodiment to avoid the tabloid spectacle of the mature woman's 'degradation,' she becomes, for other singers, the model for embodying one's voice.

30 The martial arts girl of "Alive" performs an extreme composure—not letting go of her intent facial expressions while engaging in a carefully executed choreography—that renders Sia's eruptive voice capable of performing an anger otherwise denied to mature women. Anger comes through in the long bridge toward the end of the song, which conveys the frustration of a postfeminist subject who has trusted neoliberalism's siren calls only to pay its hidden costs: "I have made every single mistake/ That you could ever possibly make / I took and I took and I took what you gave/ But you never noticed that I was in pain." At this time more than any in the song, the ensuing chorus, "I'm alive," conveys the wailing exhaustion of a pyric victory, rather than any celebratory victorious emotion. It is in this strained quality of her voice that we may locate the appeal of Sia's brand of 'victory' songs. There is no easy idealization in the victory of staying 'alive,' quite the contrary. We hear in Sia's clarion-like melodic yells and in her raspy, coarse, and broken intensities, as well as in the girl's vigilant gestures, that staying alive is difficult.

31 Both bodies 'speak' from a habitus of a resilience well ingrained in their flesh. The girl intensifies and delivers for audiences an affective questioning of the neoliberal pyric victories sold

to girls and women as strength. Such stylization of agony gives public language to untenable modes of being and feeling at risk—always adapting, desperately searching, manically self-investing, and constantly vigilant—that have otherwise not found expression in popular music.

### Zany Habits in “Big Girls Cry”

32     Maybe no music video dramatizes the demands of neoliberalism on its subjects more than “Big Girls Cry.” Here, Maddie’s ‘dance’ consists of mostly upper-body movement and facial expressions. The head, the body part most equated with the self, wars with the hands, with hair, and the automatisms of a body that seems to take over and exhaust its subject with capricious animation (see fig. set 6). Gleeful facial gestures, however, also erupt unexpectedly, looking both ‘fake’ and urgent, as performed by a face otherwise expressive of exhaustion, perplexing collapse, or exasperation (see fig. set 7). There is no relief, no stable moment of repose in Maddie’s movements, which seem to follow an inner compulsion brought up by the spotlight. The light, changing in intensity and color during the duration of the video, fails to fulfill its traditional function of showing a comfortably-coherent, ready-to-please performing subject. It delivers, instead, a consumed girl who cannot stop her movements.



Fig. Set 6. Uncontrollable animation. “Big Girls Cry” (YouTube)



Fig. Set 7. The strained girl depleted. “Big Girls Cry” (YouTube)

33 This aesthetic is strongly indicative of what Sianne Ngai identifies as zaniness. To Ngai, zaniness is about performing “dangerously strenuous activity” incessantly (8). Such performances have “something impotent and ‘reactive’” about them, that distance the spectator (187, 8). A zany aesthetic, Ngai proposes, expresses late capitalism’s demands for constant flexibility and adaptation. It stands in clear contrast with the rigidity required by the Fordist/ Taylorist capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one “Bergson famously captures in his image of ‘something mechanical encrusted on the living’” (Ngai 174). As Ngai explains:

In contrast to the isolation of workers, the fragmentation of the production process into individualized tasks, and their close supervision in the Fordist/ Taylorist factory, the new capitalist work paradigm . . . places a premium on the autonomy and self-management of workers and emphasizes creativity, communication, and networking as opposed to control. . . . [H]uman competences once viewed as outside capital—affect, subjectivity, and sociability—are systematically put to work for the extraction of surplus value. (202)

Twenty-first century’s economy produces subjects who frantically try to satisfy, in their elasticity, ongoing demands to produce value on fluctuating markets. Thus, the zany is an aesthetic about work, speaking “to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and

working,” between private and work lives, and between “affective bonds” and “useful relationships” (Ngai 188, 203).

34 Relying on Anthony Giddens and Eving Goffman, Ngai explains current economic exchanges as rooted in modernity, where increasingly “abstract systems” interact with laypeople (197). These systems have not stayed abstract and impersonal, but became ‘personable’ by employing what Giddens calls “access point” service workers: people who, through “front region” performances of friendliness, reliability, and even intimacy, create trust in corporations and other mass institutions of modernity (Goffman in Ngai 197). This work of deriving profit out of the flexibility of one’s emotional, relational, and intellectual labor is doubled by the expectation that one would self-regulate and know when to put boundaries between labor and non-labor. Ngai cites Hochschild’s study of Delta Airlines’ flight attendants as demonstrating the “difficulties [of] ‘coming down’ from their deep acting when their shifts ended,” and speaking of a common affective challenge for service workers (200). The labor “of producing affects like trust and conviviality . . . at access points” spills into people’s time away from work (200). Like the flight attendants in Hochschild’s study cannot stop being friendly, Sia’s girl here cannot stop her “adjustments and adaptations to one situation after another” (Ngai 174). The internalized spotlight seems to follow her in all environments, undermining neoliberal assumptions that boundaries between labor and non-labor can be easily set.

35 In a 2009 interview on French television that preceded her retirement into anonymity, Sia explains the emotional labor stars have to do, when the industry’s rhythm of promoting a new album is marked by the repetitiveness of interviews. Such repetitiveness, however, is not expected to be affectively-flat, but emotionally ‘genuine:’

And you, know, people care, people actually care about this stuff . . . Just the attention . . . . And, you know, you want sunshine to come out of your nose, and your eyes, and your ears when you’re making friends with people. And most people don’t have to meet, like, fifty people a day and make sunshine come out of their nose and their eyes and their ears. So, if you’re having a shit day, it’s like, oh my god, I’m gonna die. And I think that’s why, I imagine that’s why Amy [Winehouse] was doing some crack and I imagine that’s why Britney [Spears] was on the uppers or the downers. (Nagai)

Sia’s explanation of the music industry only underscores the popular artists’ similarities to the affective labor of neoliberal subjects at access points. “Big Girls Cry” dramatizes the affective experience of these “absolutely elastic subject[s]” (Ngai 174).



36 Lyrically, we are encouraged to read the dark setting as the private space of a top girl who has to experience the relational deprivation brought by (over)investing emotional energies in work: “Tough girl in the fast lane / No time for love, no time for hate / No drama, no time for games / Tough girl whose soul aches / I’m at home, on my own / Check my phone, nothing, though / Act busy, order in / Pay TV, it’s agony.” Maddie’s movements, instead of performing the quiet desolation indicated by the lyrics, dramatize instead an inner life still caught up, like the flight attendants in Hochschild’s study, in deep acting of social interactions. Despite being spent, she continues to live in the emotional automatisms of her thoughts and body.

37 Maddie performs the emotional ‘externalities’ of service labor like a twenty-first century Charlie Chaplin who leaves the social scene of work and continues adapting and ‘keeping busy’ to the point of exhaustion. The engulfing darkness of the setting speaks to the totalizing logic of neoliberalism that Brown emphasized, one that cannot be escaped. Under the spotlight’s pressure and expectations, Maddie performs endlessly. The girl is delivered to viewers consumed by an animation that does not have the intentionality of agency, but the automatism of emotional habit. Sia’s song illuminates how zany exertion and adaptation becomes the norm for women when a culture of compulsory success, a service economy, and a gender socialization in maintaining relations coalesce in neoliberal capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

38 ‘The strained girl,’ as the face of Sia’s on-stage persona, signifies multiply. For Sia, the girl catalyzes an aesthetic that protects her against the music industry’s practices of consuming and sacrificing celebrities. It allows the artist to comment on the ruinous effects of those practices while containing the risks of the mature woman’s visibility. Sia’s powerful voice and counter-cultural demands to privacy already position her as an unruly woman. By foregrounding the girl’s body, Sia eschews the visual spectacle of the unruly diva that the industry likes to deride and marginalize.

39 At a broader cultural level, Sia’s use of the idealized postfeminist girl illuminates the dark side of both this idealized subject position and of the neoliberal ideology gaining legitimacy from it. In our cultural moment, celebratory of the girl, Sia’s music videos bring into focus the vulnerability and desperation of a neoliberal youth subsumed to the logic of self-investment in a culture of compulsory success. Both the culture of celebrity and the culture of self-investment

direct our attention only to top subjects who are joyously pursuing their value, or to objects enjoyed for their value. Sia, by contrast, renders visible the labor and ‘externalities’ of a neoliberal economy. She facilitate an imagination of the conditions of possibility for the girl’s celebratory demonstration of power, pointing to those “public things” that a neoliberal economy actively dismantles (Honig). Sia articulates visually the subject’s reliance on such “holding environments” (Winnicott) by consistently featuring drab or conspicuously unsupportive settings. Such settings become an integrative part of the girl’s choreography, affectively intensifying her vulnerability, while spotlighting her exceptionalism.

40 In addition to foregrounding the materialities and the work involved in the production of valuable subjects and objects, Sia’s music videos also articulate aesthetically the depletion brought up by an economy with porous boundaries between private and public selves. While the videos do not overindulge in the girl’s performance of victimization—only in “Big Girls Cry” do we see her completely distraught, while in “Alive” the girl is mad and composed and in “Chandelier” she enjoys her strained power—they do articulate aesthetically the ongoing labor of the girl, as well as the unfairness of her condition.

41 Such ongoing labor takes on the qualities of zany exertion and automatism. Sia’s music videos expose the hailed subject of neoliberal capitalism as exhausted, overactive, and too elastic for her own good. A subject who, like her environments, remains spent and unable to regenerate. If Sia’s vision for the future is dire, the aesthetic of interdependence between self and environments, between professional and emotional selves, and between the girl and the woman, that she constructs, opens productive avenues for other popular voices to develop.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Ava Schlotterbeck for turning my attention to Sia’s music and for enticing me to think about the cultural work it might do for a young audience. Also, gratitude goes to Jesse Schlotterbeck who kept Sia’s music vibrantly present in our household long enough for my academic curiosity to peak, and for always inspiring my thinking with rich conversations about popular music.

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