

"Janelle Monae's Crazy, Classic Refusal to Be Categorized"
by Toni Lester - June 10, 2018

"I'm the random minor note you hear in major songs."
- Janelle Monae - "I Like That"-

Janelle Monae's new film short, "Dirty Computer: An EMOTION PICTURE", shows what many of us have known all along - she is a visionary who so transforms long exhausted artistic narratives that her work is virtually impossible to categorize. And that is a good thing, because at its heart, "Dirty Computer" is a timely statement about how society oppresses joyous, ruckus, intersectional, sensual nonconformity. That she delivers such a bracing social message while creating a catchy, danceable, multi-media experience, is quite a coup. This blog tends to focus on what makes a work innovative, especially when it draws from earlier genres and traditions. Whether it's her dancing, singing, fashion sense, or story telling, if you think of Prince, James Brown, David Bowie, Grace Jones, Nona Hendrix, Michael Jackson, philosopher Judith Butler, and the seminal 1982 book on black feminism - But Some of Us Are Brave, all in the same breath, you've only gotten a glimpse of who Monae is heir to, as she shepards these legacies to new frontiers.

The film transports us into a futuristic world where everyone is monitored and societal outcasts are captured by technicians who forcefully scan their minds in order to cleanse them of unacceptable viral-like memories and outlooks. The protagonist has two love interests - a man and a woman. As deprogrammers scan her brain, we get to see the group romping through a series of past adventures, each one with its own unique soundtrack and visual landscape. The overall message is that even in the face of potential destruction, the risk to be authentically free is worth the ride.

Highlights include "Classic Life" with its Prince "1999"-like lyrics: "I want a crazy, classic life. If the world should end tonight. I had a crazy classic life." Or "I Like That", a touching soul/hip hop ballad about a former bullied-brown-teenage-girl-nerd-turned-glamorous seductress who recalls "when you called me weird, we were in math class, 3rd row, I was sitting by you." Now grown up and confident, she proclaims, "I'm crazy and I'm sexy and I'm cool. Little rough around the edges, but I keep it smooth".¹

While some of the images (like for "Make Me Feel") potentially veer into the kind of sexploitation associated with Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams' "Blurred Lines" video, shots for songs like "PYNK", a paeon to same gender loving women, and the hip hop, "Django Jane", bring a bolder, more transformative aesthetic to her empowerment agenda. Overall, Monae channels the best aspects of the "me-too" movement, post modern feminist, critical race and queer theory at such a fundamental level that no graduate student need ever have to read a Butler book again. A glimpse during the "PYNK" segment of her in a T shirt that reads: "Subject not object" says it all. Somewhere, up there in purple heaven, Monae's mentor, Prince, is probably singing along and shouting, "job well done!"

¹ Monae sites the groundbreaking book, But Some of Us Are Brave (<https://www.feministpress.org/books-a-m/but-some>) as inspiration for this song. See <http://jmonae.com/iamadirtycomputer> for info on her other influences.