Of the holy trinity of Material Girls that dominated the 80s, only one is successfully negotiating the 90s. Margaret Thatcher has been reduced to grumbling on the backbenches, and Joan Collins to 'acting' for the BBC. Dynasty has finally been laid to rest and Alexis Colby has gone to the great bubblebath in the sky. Yet Madonna just goes on and on. She was the main attraction at Cannes, where her documentary In Bed With Madonna was premiered. She was on the cover of Vanity Fair; In Bed With Madonna; The Face; and Q. For some time she's in the news, where her documentary Madonna: The Secret Life of the Material Girl is being broadcast by the BBC. She is continually described as smart. Not clever, not intellectual, not thoughtful, but smart. As in sussed, sassy, streetwise — a pragmatic kind of intelligence that is continually devalued by those who prefer their feminism to remain rather abstract. Her acute selfconsciousness about image, our collective use of star images, and indeed her own constant changes of appearance, gives her career a remarkable consistency.

Sometimes this can be plain embarrassing. The bits in the film where we are supposed to be seeing 'the real Madonna' — bleaching her hair and bitching on the telephone are, like many of her onstage routines, just too obvious, too over the top. Too much honesty flips over easily into its reverse. Can we trust anything she shows us? We see Madonna crying at her mother's grave, fellating a bottle, bawling out her tour manager. We come away knowing nothing. The myth is left intact. Onstage it is the real Madonna, off it a pale imitation of a star — charming, infantile, obsessive. Madonna knows her place, and it is at the end of a long line of female icons from Garbo to Monroe who, unlike her, were not in control of their own images, let alone their own lives. This skill amply demonstrates her shrewd manipulation of the history of cinema. Such techniques of irony and media literacy, though prized in the hands of men, become distinctly troubling in the hands of women — and when turned on to the question of femininity itself, transgressive. The tabloids may have shrieked that she looked like a man in drag, because she so clearly reveals in the shiny surfaces of femininity that what is reflected back is their very artifice. This process, known psychoanalytically as the masquerade, is one of which she is a mistress. It can be used by powerful women as a way of disguising their threat. But the threat remains — to put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off.

Which is what makes the promise of the movie — 'Madonna like you've never seen her before' — even more of a come-on. It feeds directly into the very cultural preoccupations which she has so successfully exploited — the dichotomy between image and reality. We want our stars both to be out of the ordinary and yet somehow representative of the ordinary. What makes Madonna ordinary is her upfront aspiration to be somebody, to be important. What makes her extraordinary is that she has done it. Her naked ambition makes us even more uncomfortable than her naked body. Women may know what they want, but they are still not supposed to show what they want.

Somewhere along the line, we still like to think that stars are born, not made. Yet many of our biggest stars, like Schwarzenegger, have completely reconstructed themselves.

There are no more secrets. Politics too is now openly discussed in terms of appearances and sound-bites. Long gone are the times when exposing such conscious tampering with image would have blown apart credibility. Today it is an index of success. Nobody understands this better than Madonna. Whether she is lobbing bitching on the telephone are, like many of her onstage routines, just too obvious, too over the top. Too much honesty flips over easily into its reverse. Can we trust anything she shows us? We see Madonna crying at her mother's grave, fellating a bottle, bawling out her tour manager. We come away knowing nothing. The myth is left intact. Onstage it is the real Madonna, off it a pale imitation of a star — charming, infantile, obsessive. Madonna knows her place, and it is at the end of a long line of female icons from Garbo to Monroe who, unlike her, were not in control of their own images, let alone their own lives. This skill amply demonstrates her shrewd manipulation of the history of cinema. Such techniques of irony and media literacy, though prized in the hands of men, become distinctly troubling in the hands of women — and when turned on to the question of femininity itself, transgressive. The tabloids may have shrieked that she looked like a man in drag, because she so clearly reveals in the shiny surfaces of femininity that what is reflected back is their very artifice. This process, known psychoanalytically as the masquerade, is one of which she is a mistress. It can be used by powerful women as a way of disguising their threat. But the threat remains — to put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off.

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SUZANNE MOORE is a British freelance writer and film critic.