

The Rebel Madame: Madonna's Postmodern Revolution

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The aim is to examine Madonna's revolution regarding gender, sexuality, politics, and religion with the focus on her songs, videos, and live performances. The main argument indicates that Madonna has used postmodern strategies of representation to challenge the foundational truths of sex and gender, promote gender deconstruction and sexual multiplicity, create political sites of resistance, question the Catholic dissociation between the physical and the divine, and bring visual and musical influences from multiple cultures and marginalized identities.

Keywords: Madonna, postmodernism, pop culture, sex, gender, sexuality, politics, religion, spirituality

Introduction

Madonna is not only the world's highest earning female entertainer, but a pop culture icon. Her career is based on an overall direction that incorporates vision, customer and industry insight, leveraging competences and weaknesses, consistent implementation, and a drive towards continuous renewal. She constructed herself often rewriting her past, organized her own cult borrowing from multiple subaltern subcultures, and targeted different audiences. As a postmodern icon, Madonna also reflects social contradictions and attitudes toward sexuality and religion and addresses the complexities of race and gender. Her use of multiple media—music, concert tours, films, and videos—shows how images and symbols associated with multiracial, LGBT, and feminist groups were inserted into the mainstream. She gave voice to political interventions in mass popular culture, although many critics argue that subaltern voices were co-opted to provide maximum profit. Madonna is seen as a symbol of the affirmation of cultural diversity, but also as a permanent user of self-marketing strategies and a provisional challenge to the mainstream politics. In her artistic production, the boundaries between high and low culture, good and bad taste, beautiful and ugly were infringed on the need for reinvention and incorporation of everything, which revealed aesthetic concepts compatible to postmodern values (Guilbert, 2002; Gusmão & Araújo, 2019; Jesus, 2009, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Schwichtenberg, 1992, 2019).

As a postmodern individual, Madonna is a global hybrid fluid artist in the context of technological breakthroughs in communication and globalization, in which a constant flow of information and material mobility gave rise to global hybrids, among whom international pop stars play a significant role. She is prominently featured in all the media in the world and absorbed many cultural features along her life and career. Her messages transcend the physical borders of her lyrics, and her concerts defy the concept of traditional shows featuring songs with hi-tech lighting and multimedia resources, dance, cabaret, circus, street theater and Broadway/West End musical influences (Jesus, 2017a; Jesus & Kamlot, 2016, 2017; Prieto-Arranz, 2012; Urry,

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2000). On her stagecraft, Madonna is a practitioner of a self-referential pastiche and evaluates her self-fashioning as a queen. One example is her performance at the 2012 Super Bowl Halftime Show, when she impersonated a postmodern version of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. For her fans, this attitude creates an aura that, together with the structure and thematic of her stage productions, approaches a post-modern religious experience. Madonna's cultural output evokes intertextual chains developed over time as her star persona has been constructed by an embodied and eroticized narcissism, and celebration as a form of catharsis (Troidahl, 2013). The aestheticization of her performances allows the emergence of political nuances, anchored in the fictionality of pop culture. Madonna's political narrative includes sex, gender, religion, political activism, and the practices of the music industry (Lima, 2017). Her video trajectory is intertwined with the development of the videoclip itself. Since the 1980s, Madonna's continued popularity has given her and her collaborators support to innovate in this format in all creative phases regarding thematic, imagery, musical, narrative, and choreographic elements. The artist's image is associated with versatility, creative control of her work, controversial verve, and the ability to reinvent herself through diverse appropriations of different artistic personae (Barreto, 2005).

Despite all the controversy, Madonna is a vital figure across generations, popularized the debate on politics regarding differences and diversity and promoted a message of empowerment of subaltern communities based on self-liberation and sexual expressiveness. As a young star she capitalized on video as a marketing tool and made explicit the nexus among sex, pop, and capitalism. While she challenged notions of the male/female gaze with her art, much of her allure was based on her image and competence to combine an inclusive sexuality with costume changes and personae, which influenced younger stars such as Lady Gaga. Nevertheless, becoming a mature woman and a mother has made her compete with younger women and be subject to similar pressures to look young and beautiful, besides dealing with ageism and all the pressure on creative and artistic productions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jesus, 2020; Jesus et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018).

The aim of the article is to examine Madonna's revolution regarding gender, sexuality, politics, and religion with the focus on her songs, videos, and live performances. The main argument indicates that Madonna has used postmodern strategies of representation to challenge the foundational truths of sex and gender, promote gender deconstruction and sexual multiplicity, create political sites of resistance, question the Catholic dissociation between the physical and the divine, and bring visual and musical influences from multiple cultures and marginalized identities.

Madonna's Revolution Regarding Gender and Sexuality

Since the beginning of her career, Madonna has used postmodern strategies of representation to challenge the foundational truths of sex and gender and promote gender deconstruction and sexual multiplicity. Despite the criticism from feminists based on an identity politics, she has brought previously marginalized groups, such as LGBT people, as a model from which a multi - faceted coalitional politics can be built (Schwichtenberg, 1992). In her songs, videos, and live performances, Madonna has shown that women can become sexual subjects, invent their own sexualities, and use performances—created by and for men—for their own pleasure (Butler, 1988, 1990, 2003; Rubin, 1978). Since the release of the *Like a Virgin* song and video, Madonna has challenged the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, showing that gender was not passively scripted on women's bodies. In *Express Yourself, Justify My Love, Erotica,*

Human Nature and *Girl Gone Wild* videos, for example, Madonna exposed the reifications that serve as substantial gender cores and her multifaceted gender performances subversively played with gendered meanings and showed how they could be redefined (Butler, 1988, 1990). Madonna's status can be understood as a hybrid fluid regarding gender issues mainly because of her emphasis on pastiche and collage (Urry, 2000), a melting pot of whatever was considered peculiar. In the *Vogue* video and live performances, Madonna has drawn inspiration from Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Marlene Dietrich and reinterpreted their styles with a new meaning, not rarely recurring to the androgyny/sexual ambiguity interplay. The control that women have of their own bodies and sexualities was clear in the *Like a Virgin* performance on the *Blond Ambition Tour*—where she simulates a female masturbation on bed—and most acts of the *The Girlie Show Tour*. In the first performance, sensuality was emphasized by the brassiere. Its golden color highlighted the visibility of what was a piece of underwear, as well as the cones covering Madonna's breasts, which were reinvented on the *MDNA Tour*. Madonna once again vindicated sex in her *Like a Virgin* performance on the *Confessions Tour* and *Holy Water / Vogue* performance on the *Rebel Heart Tour* riding a pole, this time for middle-aged women who can be mothers or wives—in 2021, Madonna has six children—but contend that being the object of sexual desire need not weaken their position of powerful women. Pleasure can be derived from exhibitionism, but women remain in control (Prieto-Arranz, 2012). Women's independence from men and the need to fight for their sexual freedom were constantly reiterated in her artistic work, such as in the songs *Bye Bye Baby*, *What It Feels Like for a Girl*, *Like It or Not*, *Living for Love*, and *Unapologetic Bitch*. Madonna's songs and videos reject female subordination to the prevailing norms and express the emancipating attitude towards the asphyxiated identities and imprisoned desires. The subversive performances undermined compulsory coherence but did not exclude suffering. The *Bad Girl* video highlights the solitude of a wealthy woman who, even in line with the patterns of the American dream, reveals the emotional maladjustments of enclosure amidst the urban life in a creative metropolis (Butler, 1988; Figueiredo et al., 2019; Gusmão & Araújo, 2019).

Madonna has also brought many elements of the LGBT culture to the mainstream and created queer spaces of resistance that escape the assimilationist logic that expects LGBT people to adjust to the culture and orientations of the dominant heteronormative rules (Jesus, 2017b). She has built inclusive places of affection, eroticism, and sex that directly confront the heteronormative status quo and allow the expression of sexual desires. She recognized that the LGBT people and other groups on the fringes of society brought innovative cultural meanings which could break away from rigid cultural conventions, particularly the culture that was produced in urban spaces and accommodated diversity, such as Harlem in the *Secret* video and a Los Angeles residential neighborhood, a small restaurant and the London Underground in the *Hung Up* video (Gusmão & Araújo, 2019). For example, voguing—which occupied the space of intersection of race, gender, and sexuality—was created by black and Latin gay men. It functions as a cultural memory, which is, from the outset, a pastiche and critique of white feminine iconization and an aspect of difference and belonging for these men, a subversion of the signifiers of gender (Patton, 1992). The use of homoeroticism in the *Justify My Love* video, the mobilization of elements of gay disco culture in the *Deeper and Deeper* video—the song talks about sexual desire, although it has been argued that it is about a young man coming to terms with his homosexuality—and the criticism to the violence against LGBT people in the *Dark Ballet* video—which features transgender rapper Mykki Blanco playing Joan of Arc—subvert the stable notion of gender as the edifice of sexual difference and offer the potential for a radical

sexual politics (Schwichtenberg, 2019). Madonna's interaction with queer subcultures shows her rejection of the hegemonic heteronormative constructions of Western culture and results in the fluidity she achieves through the appropriation of aspects of these subcultures (Tsanev, 2006).

Madonna's Political Sites of Resistance

Madonna's criticism of materialism was satirical in the *Material Girl* video, in which she brought an alternative reading of Marilyn Monroe's performance of the song *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend*. The mimicked scenes are interspersed with scenes of a Hollywood director trying to win the heart of an actress, played by Madonna herself. Differently from the song's lyrics, the woman was not impressed by money and expensive gifts, which can be understood as aspects of a capitalist society. Madonna's reading practices of race may also function as sites of resistance. The *Like a Prayer* video presented not only a criticism to racism, but aspects of the Afro-American culture, such as the church, and touches on the need for white people's antiracist attitudes and action. During the *Like a Prayer* and *Erotica* eras, Madonna has also tried to raise consciousness about HIV/AIDS issues and fight against the stigma and discrimination of HIV+ people (Schwichtenberg, 1992).

In her cover of Don McLean's *American Pie*, Madonna used images of different sectors of the US population, including gay and lesbian couples, marginal families, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and for almost the video's total run, a yellowing, ragged US flag. A satire of the American dream was brought in the *American Life* video, screened when the 2003 Iraq War was about to break out, which presented the horror of war as a bloody fashion show. Both singer and dancers wore military-inspired clothes in a criticism to the American way of life. The *Hollywood* song and video from the same album, *American Life*, brought the criticism to the beauty and dream cultures instigated by Hollywood productions (Jesus, 2011, 2012; Prieto-Arranz, 2012). More recently, during Donald Trump's administration, Madonna released the singles *I Rise* and *God Control* as parts of her 2019 *Madame X* album. The first draws attention to gun violence in the US, and the video features footage of Stoneman Douglas High School shooting survivors, LGBT supporters, women's rights protesters, and other social movements. The second talks about gun control and the US political climate during Trump administration. The video brought scenes that have evoked the 2016 Orlando nightclub and 2018 Thousand Oaks shootings and ended with and a quote from civil rights activist Angela Davis, who says she was no longer accepting the things she could not change, but she was changing the things she could not accept.

Religion, Spirituality, and Transculturality in Madonna's Work

In the beginning of her career, Madonna's image, soon to be copied by teenagers across the world, included the frequent use of the crucifix as a fashion complement. Religious themes appeared not only in her image but also in her songs and videos. With religious symbols bound to shock, the early Madonna brought elements that would remain constant throughout her career, such as iconicity, which is visible when Madonna constructs her body as a complex and meaningful text, and the sex-religion interplay, with multiple layers of signification. Madonna linked sexuality to both spirituality and gender construction and challenged the Catholic dissociation between the physical and the divine. More than simply using religious signs because of their aesthetic function, Madonna reconstructed the concepts of gender and religion/religiosity as well as the relationship between them, although many critics understood she was deliberately obscene and sacrilegious and aimed to shock and court

controversy (McCarthy, 2006). In the *Papa Don't Preach* video, shot in Staten Island, industrial district of New York, the character interpreted by Madonna was trying to tell her father about her pregnancy. The song and the video deal with teenage pregnancy, a controversial theme for more Catholic and conservative individuals and families. When the song and the video were released, women's organizations criticized Madonna for encouraging teenage pregnancy, but others saw in the video and the song a positive anti-abortion message. Another controversy took place when *Like a Prayer* was released because of the use of burning crosses and the fact that Madonna kissed a black saint in the video. Madonna has deliberately consolidated her popularity on ambiguity, appealing to many social groups and subcultures. Her production in the late 1990s and 2000s brought deeper reflections about religion and spirituality with her yoga and kabbalah-inspired lifestyle. She aimed not only to deal with more complex themes regarding the human condition and the respect for religious and cultural differences, but also amplify her criticism to political institutions and call people's attention to many world problems. From the *Ray of Light* to *Hard Candy* albums, many Madonna's songs, videos, and live performances touched on religious or spiritual issues, from her Hindu goddess Laxmi impersonation in the *Ray of Light* era to songs such as *Nothing Fails* and *Isaac*, as well as her *Confessions Tour* onstage performance of *Forbidden Love*—which valued the mutual respect among religions—and her crucifixion in the *Live to Tell* performance. After the second chorus of the song, the counter above her stopped at 12 million (the number of children in Africa who are orphaned by AIDS). Then she took off her crown of thorns and as the screens behind her showed explosions, she lay down on stage as if she were dying, mirroring the fate of people who raise their voices but never get understood (Jesus, 2013b; Jesus et al., 2019; Prieto-Arranz, 2012).

As highly diverse contemporary societies become more globalized, transculturality captures some of the living traits of cultural change and offers a conceptual landscape for considering cultures as relational webs. Although Madonna emphasizes her Italo-American label, she brought visual and musical influences from multiple cultures in her artistic work, as well as marginalized identities. This is closely related to postmodernity since cultural categorizations become fragile in the context of intertextuality, which is explored in the *Ray of Light* video. The video breaks with linearity using glittering images that blend abstraction and concreteness at an exceptional speed. It aestheticizes daily life and exasperates the tastes and dislikes of convulsive dynamics of urban life, which concatenates multiple temporalities and mixes historically constructed signs (Guilbert, 2002; Gusmão & Araújo, 2019).

Since the beginning of Madonna's career, the emphasis on ethnic minorities has been present in her artistic work, including the Latin traits of the characters and external locations of the *Borderline* video. In the same video, street art and graphite were used as counter-hegemonic languages imprinted on icons of a conservative society, which alludes to Madonna's subversive aesthetic profile. Transculturality became more frequent in her artistic works, such as the Hispanic atmosphere of *La Isla Bonita*, *Take a Bow*, *You'll See* and the songs from the movie *Evita*, the Asian imagery of her *Rain*, *Frozen* and *Nothing Really Matters* videos and the *Drowned World Tour*, the Lusophone elements of her *Madame X* album—including the Portuguese fado and the Brazilian carioca funk—and the US iconography, such as the cowboy imagery in the *Music* album, more evidently in the *Don't Tell Me* video. Whenever Madonna used US imagery, this was much more than simple patriotic homage, specially in her live performances. A remix of *Sorry* for one of the *Confessions Tour* interludes included visual input showing the Iraq War, Saddam Hussein, and George W. Bush, thus transforming what originally was presented as a

woman's complaint to her ex-lover into a political statement. A similar strategy of political criticism was used on her *Sticky & Sweet Tour* (Jesus, 2013a; Prieto-Arranz, 2012).

Final Considerations

Pop culture has shown that, even under capitalism, there is the possibility of rising forces that point out flaws in the system. Under such a view, pop culture can therefore evoke progressive needs towards a critical view of everyday life (Huyssen, 2006). Madonna's iconicity has been based on a twofold complexity derived from the sophistication of her onstage and music video performances and the multilayered meaning of her messages. As a postmodern artist, Madonna has been hybrid and global fluid and defied pre-established national, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities. Her use of pastiche and collage has been an inspiration for other artists, but also the main strategy for the reinvention and resignification of her own work. She has blurred the borders between old and new, the elitist and the popular, the artistic and the commercial, and created multiple interpretations of her songs, videos, and live performances (Prieto-Arranz, 2012). Her political revolution now embraces the fight against ageism, but, for almost 40 years of her career, Madonna has used postmodern strategies of representation to challenge the foundational truths of sex and gender, promote gender deconstruction and sexual multiplicity, create political sites of resistance, question the Catholic dissociation between the physical and the divine, and bring visual and musical influences from multiple cultures and marginalized identities.

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