

7.1 'Strike a pose': Madonna and gender subversions

Roney Gusmão¹⁶⁰

A b s t r a c t

This research aims at analyzing how Madonna's career presents dialectical articulations with the postmodern period, emphasizing the strong relationship established between her performances and cultural identities of ghetto groups. It is interesting to note the ambiguities contained in the binomial perpetuation / rupture, as seen in the way in which Madonna provokes the visualization of subaltern expressive forms and, at the same time, seems to reproduce the hegemonic *ethos* of the capitalist nexus. Thus, the present research has been developed through bibliographical investigations of concepts such as gender, postmodernity and myth, whose theoretical interlacings have made possible to understand Madonna as part of a time loaded with ambivalences, making it an archetype of contemporary culture.

Keywords: *Madonna, gender, myth, postmodernity.*

gender,
differences,
identities and
diy cultures

¹⁶⁰ Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia - Center for Culture, Languages and Applied Technologies. Salvador da Bahia, Brazil.
E-mail: roney@ufrb.edu.br

1. Introduction

I think it was a time where something new was needed. Something new and artistic. Something out of the norm. It was timing more than anything in the '90s. I think it was the time when the world was ready for it. And it would take somebody like Madonna to bring that to the forefront (Gould & Zwaan, 2016).

The transcript above was extracted from the speech of Jose Gutierrez in the documentary *Strike a Pose* (2016), which dealt with the *Blonde Ambition Tour* (1990) and the film *Truth or Dare: In Bed with Madonna* (1991). Gutierrez, in addition to participating in the tour, also composed the troupe of dancers in the video clip *Vogue*, noted that in a context of association of AIDS with the gay community, the artistic scenario could serve as a place of refuge and empowerment. It was in 1990 that Madonna released the hit *Vogue*, performing the hip-hop style called “voguing”, much practiced in the suburbs of New York since the early 1980s. Voguing consists of enhancing divas poses, making the pastiche, style and rhythm in playful ways of advertising gay pride. At the heart of conservative discourses on moral degeneration, Madonna provoked visibility into LGBT artistic expression, performing in the mainstream media what was confined to the American ghettos.

In a pertinent debate on this subject, Butler (2003) analyzes the discourses contained in the body based on problematizations around the gender. The author mentions the strong association of the body with the idea of danger and pollution, since sexual practices contribute to demarcate boundaries between bodies from cultural delimitations. Anal sex, for example, would be a form of pollution that would corrupt the body physically and socially. Likewise, AIDS consisted of an explicit mode of pollution, mainly because it was associated with marginal groups, whose unregulated permeability seemed to be a place of pollution and danger. Thus, AIDS

is represented as a ‘gay disease’, but in the hysterical and homophobic reaction of the media to the disease there is a tactical construction of a continuity between the polluted status of the homosexual, due to the violation of borders that is homosexuality, and disease as a specific modality of homosexual pollution. The fact that the disease is transmitted by the exchange of bodily fluids suggests in the sensationalist graphs of homophobic signifying systems the perils that permeable bodily boundaries represent for the social order (Butler, 2003, p. 189).

In this sense, the notion of “pollution” applied to the body as a place of discourse can also be interpreted from aesthetic notions that escape hegemonic norms. Thus, when traits and behaviors confront heteronormativity, associations with the “degeneration of the body” appear as a legitimizing mechanism of hegemonic discourse. Thus, voguing, and all cultural expression associated with the gay community in the early 1990s, was subjected to hostility, since it defended the maintenance of cultural identities queertified

far from the limits stipulated by the agreed morality. It is in this context that Madonna provoked the visibility of gay performances, intending hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces around notions about gender.

The single *Vogue* became one of the most successful of Madonna's career, which has since become increasingly associated with the gay public. While *Vogue* played on radios and nightclubs of various segments, militant opinion was not unanimous: some believed that music would generate greater visibility of ghetto groups, while others held the view that Madonna had achieved a mere cultural appropriation for marketing purposes.

Anyway, what most calls attention in the career of Madonna are exactly the contradictions that it provokes. Such fact only inscribes it more intimately in the postmodern historical context, whose contours must be understood from the interpretation of the many meanings negotiated socially and (re)constructed in the course of time. On this subject, we agree that "artistic creation is inscribed in the social world itself and, as such, subject to determinations, but being particularly relevant, it also influences it through the knowledge and interpretations it generates about the world" (Guerra, 2017, p. 510). In this way, studying Madonna and the debates she brings about requires considering the social context that surrounds her, since both those who love her and those who hate her do so on the themes she provokes and the norms she transgresses.

2. *Body and speech*

For Butler (2003, p. 29) the concept of gender "does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence between specific sets of relations, culturally and historically convergent". From this, the author suggests a discontinuity between sex/gender between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders, an idea that deconstructs the subordination of gender to binary sexual forms.

Through this debate, we can assume that the body does not end with the idea of gender, but it is through the body that the social construction of the gender is expressed, having in it printed subversive or conventional forms of identity. Therefore, the body expresses discourses that are not definers of gender identities, but, instead, are products of the psychic feeling of gender. But Butler (2003, p. 194) insists on the argument that "acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an inner core or substance, but produce it on the surface of the body through the play of significant absences, which suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause".

These gestures are performative, whose identities are expressed by corporeal signs,

(...) by means of which men both fix rules and conduct, and seek to transform themselves, by modifying themselves in what they have of more singularity by following a work in the which includes certain aesthetic values that meet certain style criteria
(Milanez, 2006, p. 188-189).

Therefore, the body has its physiologically constituted real dimension, but also presents a discursive, political and cultural materiality.

This debate is interesting for the research presented here because it

questions issues about the many possibilities of gender expression through performance. Dance, tricks, walking and talking are ways in which subjects announce speeches by drawing them in corporeal materiality. The body, then, is a fundamental expression of the otherness of subalternized groups, having its surface as an announcement of discourses and subversive forms of social existence.

The voguing style, therefore, represents one of those corporeal expressions of minority cultural identity, whose resistance discourses are driven by performance. However, in transposing this style to the mainstream media, would Madonna contribute to militancy or would only make the discourses of otherness ephemeral? By breaking with the gender demarcations, by incorporating homosexuality into their performances, would not only reinforce stereotypes?

First, in order to penetrate these problematizations, it is important to note that discourse / body / memory ideas are intimately associated. By referring to voguing as a gay expression of segregated Afro-Latino groups, Patton (1993, p. 91) recalls that

MTV is an important new site for the struggle control of popular memory. Because of their short duration, music videos provide important raw material for the bricolage construction of memory links (...) Vogue exemplifies the transient but pivotal moments in the reconstruction of gay and Afro-Latin history in contemporary popular culture.

In the postmodern period, characterized by the ephemerality of signs and the thickening of images, the media instruments can offer subsidies for the memory of ghetto groups by amplifying the reverberation of speeches. Madonna, for example, has been very present in MTV's history since the early 1980s, participating in awards, interviews and marathons to promote her videos and shows.

Among Madonna's most iconic performances is *Vogue's* presentation at the 1991 *MTV Video Music Awards*, which Patton refers to. At the time, Madonna, accompanied by two backing vocals and the seven performers of the *Blonde Ambition Tour*, used a choreography that clearly showed her dancers in poses and gestures that violated sex binarisms. The lyrics, in turn, is a reverence for detachment from social modulations through rhythm, having already in its beginning an imperative: "Strike a pose!".



Figure 7.1.1 - Madonna performing "Vogue" in "MTV Music Awards" (1991)

Source: <https://popcultura.com.br/2016/08/25/melhores-apresentacoes-vma/>

As we discussed in the first part of this text, the early 1990s were marked by hostile events for the gay community, especially as regards the proliferation of AIDS as an occasion for homophobic discourses. In this scenario, *Vogue* content was quite attractive to gay groups because it added empowerment to dance bodies as opposed to discourses that persisted in the moral corrosion of traditional values. *Vogue*, therefore, is an invitation to a fearless performance, capable of printing gender identity on the bodies of those who belong to the segregated gay community:

Look around, everywhere you turn is heartache. It's everywhere that you go. You try everything you can to escape the pain of life that you know. When all else fails and you long to be something better than you are today. I know a place where you can get away. It's called a dance floor, and here's what it's for, so come on, Vogue (Madonna, 1990).

The music is basically composed by phrases in the imperative, summoning the listener to a place: "the dance floor". This is where identities can be extravasated in the body and where gender identities go beyond binarisms: "Ladies with an attitude, fellas who were in the mood. Don't just stand there, let's get to it. Strike a pose, there's nothing to it" (Madonna, 1990).

"Ladies with an attitude" may be referring to female empowerment, lesbians or also drag queens, so present in voguing dances. Immediately after this sentence, Madonna mentions "fellas who were in the mood" dealing with boys also present or the fluid exchange of gender identity. About being "in the mood", Guilbert (2002, p. 129) understands that

It evokes the stereotyped refusal of the wife on Saturday night, 'not tonight darling, I'm not in the mood', similar to (but franker than) 'not tonight, darling, I have headache'. So a woman who is in the mood is a woman who accepts the male desire, so the expression. Applied to a 'fella' could designate a man who accepts male desire, couldn't it?

It is important to emphasize that both the performance and the lyrics of *Vogue* were disseminated by the mass media, giving prominence to the gender discourse proposed here. Thus, *Vogue* constitutes a place of memory for underground groups of LGBT culture and militancy because of the wide popularity, taking this style even to spaces of heterosexual coexistence in that it promotes the intertextuality of identities that contests hierarchies (Patton, 1993). In short, "the dance floor" can be interpreted as the place to legitimize gender flow and expose in the body the language of empowerment. "The dance floor" is, above all, a place where gender identities can finally be transitory.

3. *Madonna and postmodernity*

In the course of her career, Madonna has become one of the show business biggest exponents, collecting records that other artists can hardly beat. The magnitude of her image marked generations, subverting norms and sustaining others, a fact that inevitably made Madonna a postmodern myth loaded with ambiguities. But what is a myth? Why can Madonna be considered a myth in contemporary society?

Barthes (2013, p. 223) understands that the function of myth is "to transform a sense into form", that is, myth is a mode of signification capable of embodying language. Obviously, the author also mentions that myth has full articulation with historical time as it materializes socially (re)constructed senses. Thus, studying a myth requires understanding the surrounding ideological interests within a society, as well as the set of interests negotiated in a historical time that shape the mythical character.

Thus, by studying Madonna as a myth, we need to understand that her career has become so successful precisely because of her ability to subsume the logic of postmodern capital. This fact is noticeable, both in her business vocation, and in her ability to reinvent herself as a strategy of perpetuation in such an ephemeral market. Given this, it is also possible to perceive that her interest in provoking the public with unconventional themes is also part of a context conducive to the deconstruction of hierarchies.

Jameson (1985) notes that, after World War II, new social perspectives began to reverberate on the planet. Allied to the reintroductions in capitalist production that impacted styles and desires of consumption, a greater ephemerality of the signs was observed, which caused a collapse of references of the past by the desire of a perpetual present. In this context, the media played a crucial role in historical amnesia as it transformed reality into images in a series of perpetual presents. Art also played a fundamental role, because it was where the outbreak of minorities groups that challenged the agreed norms and claimed visibility became more evident. It is in this respect that the author coherently concludes his reasoning: "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernity reverberates and reproduces - reiterating the logic of capitalism in society. The most important question is whether there is also a form of resistance to this logic" (Jameson, 1985, p.26).

Thus, subversion and conservation are characteristics that coexist in postmodernity, mainly because it is marked by the productive restructuring of late capitalism, but is simultaneously compounded by the outbreak of previously invisible groups. Hence, Jameson (2007, p. 73) suggests "that we make at least the effort to think dialectically the evolution of late capitalism as progress and a catastrophe at the same time."

Of course, the erosion of hierarchies with the visibility of minorities must also be understood by the integration between aesthetic production and the production of goods. We are not suggesting that contemporary social transformations have been determined by capitalist production, but rather we understand that the cultural face of postmodernity establishes a relation analogous to the economic conjuncture, whose analysis requires a dialectical understanding of the historical period.

Madonna then serves as an archetype for the understanding of postmodernity, since her mythical image reveals many of the characteristics of the period in question. Kellner (2001, p. 373) observes that "the way Madonna evaluates depends on one's politics and morality, and anyone who cultivates an aesthetic of shock and excess like Madonna will certainly offend and become the target of criticism". In other words, just like postmodernity, Madonna may be the target of criticism or acclamation, depending on the angle the subject chooses to evaluate, after all, the ambivalences, continually reproduced by postmodern society, are, somehow, revealed in the characters myths that make up this context (Guerra, 2014, 2016).

Vogue performance can also be used as an expression of these ambiguities, since, at the same time as it suggests the deconstruction of hegemonic systems of gender, it can also be interpreted as an acclamation to consumption, built on concepts around fashion and the Image. In this discourse, Madonna ratifies the construction of alterity mediated by narcissism and consumption, suggesting a subversion by the adequacy to the norms of the system. In the documentary *Truth or Dare: in bed with Madonna* (1991), this realization is clear when *Vogue*'s presentation on the *Blonde Ambition Tour* is edited with the overlay of images that reveal the glamor of fame, of fashion, of money and consumption.

Madonna is thus a symbol of the narcissistic 1980s, a period that still exerts a strong influence when the cultivation of the individual self and the obsessive pursuit of one's own interests were venerated as cultural mythologies. The imperative 'goes deep!' Echoed throughout the 1980s and Madonna went deep and got there. However, as she became the most famous artist of her era (and perhaps of all time), Madonna produced works that had consequences and contradictions, and which, in a number of ways, helped subvert prevailing conservative ideologies (Kellner 2001, p. 374).



Figure 7.1.2 - Video clip *Vogue* directed by David Fincher in 1990

Source: <http://www.openculture.com/2015/04/david-finchers-five-finest-music-videos.html>

In addition to bringing references to Voguing as a marginalized cultural identity, *Vogue* also makes a mention of fashion, style and consumption contained in *Vogue Magazine*. This further reinforces the ambiguity of music, which is situated here between the challenge and, at the same time, the maintenance of the current system. At the recent *MDNA Tour* (2012), Madonna continued to subvert gender hierarchies for her dancers' costumes (crossdressed), but at the same time, with each imperative contained in the refrain ("Come on, Vogue!"), Cameras move away and reveal the *Vogue Magazine*'s logo gleaming on the stage. Perhaps the idea is that fashion, consumption and narcissism are prerequisites for the summoning sung in the



Figure 7.1.3 - "MDNA Tour" (2012) during the performance of *Vogue*

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/madonna>

4. Considerations: 'Beauty's where you find it'

The fragment presented in this subitem is extracted from the song, through which Madonna seems to democratize the concept of "beauty". However, the following question remains: Is this democratization achievable only by the combination of the various consumer goods offered in postmodern society? It is useful to remember that Barthes (2013, p. 221) warns that the myth periodically presents an innocent appearance, nevertheless "the myth hides nothing and also nothing sports: it deforms; the myth is not a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection". As such, the myth has an ambiguous function of squandering hegemonic interests, mainly because it conceals the social hierarchy, and at the same time, subverts it.

By deforming language, myth offers little resistance and, by captivating by its strong emotional charge, introduces ideologies very articulated to subversive and/or conservative interests. Therefore, myth is an expression of utopia, since it expresses a "concordance with the world, not as it is, but as it intends to be" (Barthes, 2013, p. 249).

At the same time that it distorts reality, the postmodern myth integrates a vast network of (re)construction of meanings. It is the object of desire, speculation, fetish and passion, mainly because it gives shape to the identities of groups, sometimes seducing minorities, sometimes negotiating values with the current norms. Thus, in the game of seduction exercised by the mythical image of postmodern celebrities, one has the possibility of sublimating every fragment of pain written in daily life, in a seduced consented of the subjects to the utopian image of the mythical figure, even though it succumbs to perversity of the system.

Of course, projection-identification intervenes in all human relations, as long as they are colored with affection (...). And so the imaginary is committed to the everyday fabric of our lives; but what is important here is to emphasize that the irruption of mass culture in information develops in certain types of relations of projection and identification that go in the direction of romance, tragedy and mythology (Morin 1997, p. 101).

Art, therefore, can seduce this projection treated by the author. Through it, a load of affection is expended, emotionally connecting the spectator to the myth he has voiced. It is also through art that one has the opportunity to overflow the interdict and to express repressed desires. There, the catharsis of censored identities, of suppressed desires and of asphyxiated fetishes is carried out, also reinforcing the cohesion of subjects invisibilized by normative forces. And when we apply this reality to music and dance in the postmodern context, we can deduce that these expressive forms can serve for the cohesion of subalternized groups, since it allows the sharing of identities by the language of empowered bodies. In *Vogue*, "the dance floor" may mean this place of catharsis, self-acceptance, and social cohesion for resistance.

When we consider the importance of music and dance as powerful ways of expressing individual emotions and ideas, we are also associating them with forms of expression of experiences shared by a community and of social cohesion, integrating them into groups and promoting cooperation (Guerra, 2017, p. 512).

In fact, as we have tried to show in this text, Madonna can be understood as the archetype of postmodernity mainly because both operate through contradiction. She is an icon of subversion, but she is also a simulacrum for a voracious society for consumption; Madonna also echoes the voices of minorities (especially the gay community), but also participates in the same game of marketing seductions that produces the exclusion of so many. Her business vocation, her obsession with staying in the market, her ability with imagery has made her a consecrated artist in the course of three decades, and such a feat has only been made possible by the incorporation of this very incongruity that constitutes postmodern society (Guerra, 2013).

Finally, we must recognize that Madonna, like any other postmodern celebrity, has built her career under the same logic of commodities - treated as a brand and associated with consumer products. In fact, it should be noted that the extinction of this ambivalence (contestation x surrender to the system) would annihilate her subversive potential, after all the visibility of her performance occurs only through the negotiation of values within the capitalist nexus. If the extinction of her career would be better for militancy, we cannot say; but it is true to say that contradiction is a fundamental component of the contemporary culture that Madonna embodies.

If, on the one hand, *Vogue* is basically composed of imperatives ("look around", "use your imagination", "come on", "let your body move", "go inside", "get up for the dance floor"); on the other hand, it is important to remember that the interpretation of these verses is given to the public, which constructs meanings from socially negotiated references. What cannot be lost is that the imputation of meaning is a dangerous temptation in academic research, after all, Madonna, like any sign unit, can produce multiple interpretations, being possible even, as Barthes (2006) affirms, the coexistence of many readings in a social group or even in the same individual. Thus, according to Madonna's (Keshishian, 1991) own words: "I do not endorse a way of life, but describe one, and the audience is left to make its own decisions and judgments. This is what I consider freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of thought".

References

- Barthes, R. (2006). *Elementos de semiologia*. São Paulo: Cultrix.
- Barthes, R. (2013). *Mitologias*. Rio de Janeiro: Difel.
- Butler, J. (2003). *Problemas de gênero: feminismo e subversão da identidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.
- Gould, E & Zwaan, R. (2016). *Strike a pose* [documentary]. Los Angeles: CTM Docs/The other room.
- Guerra, P. (2017). António e as Variações identitárias da cultura portuguesa contemporânea. *Ciências Sociais Unisinos*, 53(3), pp. 508-520.
- Guerra, P. (2016). Keep it rocking: the social space of Portuguese alternative rock (1980 – 2010). *Journal of Sociology*, 52(4), pp.615-630.

- Guerra, P. (2014). Punk, expectations, breaches and metamorphoses: Portugal, 1977–2012. *Critical Arts*, 28(1), pp.111-122.
- Guerra, P. (2013). *A instável leveza do rock. Gênese, dinâmica e consolidação do rock alternativo em Portugal (1980-2010)*. Porto: Edições Afrontamento.
- Guilbert, G.-C. (2002). *Madonna as postmodern myth*. North California: McFarland Company Publishes.
- Jameson, F. (1985). Pós-modernidade e sociedade de consumo. *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, 12, pp. 16-26.
- Jameson, F. (2007). *Pós-modernismo: a lógica cultural do capitalismo tardio*. São Paulo: Editora Ática.
- Kellner, D. (2001). *A cultura da mídia – Estudos Culturais: identidade e política entre o moderno e o pós-moderno*. Bauru: EDUSC.
- Keshishian, A. (1991). *Madonna: Truth or Dare - In Bed with Madonna* [documentary]. Los Angeles: Warner Bros.
- Madonna (1990). Vogue. Madonna & Shep Pettibone [compositores]. In *I'm Breathless*. New York: Sire & Warner Records.
- Milanez, N. (2006). *As aventuras do corpo: dos modos de subjetivação às memórias de si em revista impressa*. (Doctoral dissertation). Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio Mesquita Filho – UNESP, Araraquara – SP).
- Morin, E. (1997). *Cultura de massas no século XX: neurose*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária.
- Patton, C. (1993). Embodying subaltern memory: kinesthesia & the problematics of gender & race. In C. Schwichtenberg (Ed.), *The Madonna Connection: representational politics, subcultural identities and cultural theory*. Colorado: Westview Press.