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CHER'S MUSIC VIDEOS. GENDER AS A PERFORMATIVE CONSTRUCTION

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting the way Cherilyn Sarkisian's - "Cher"'s music videos are a powerful source in helping her question and deconstruct classical representations of gender, carrying a message of empowerment to women and other minorities and proving that Cher's performance has strong social and political connotations. Of particular interest are Cher's video clips of the songs *Believe*, *Strong Enough*, *Walking in Memphis*, and her performance of the song *Perfection* in *Extravaganza: Live at the Mirage* (the first live music video title by her). I will examine how these videos depict narratives in support of hybrid identities by studying her choices of wardrobes, the presence of Cher's impersonators by her side on stage, and the association of her image to that of a cyborg through the use of the auto-tune in a powerful carnivalistic transgression. Cher is able to deconstruct what Mikahil Bakhtin called the "classic body" and prove that gender is performative.

KEYWORDS

Cher; gender performativity; postmodernism; postfeminism; music videos

1. CHERILYN SARKISIAN - "CHER" AND THE HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION

A careful look at Cher's socio-cultural background as well as at the history of immigration in the United States (and its impact in the culture of the country) is crucial to understand how her music videos came to be strong advocates of gender as a performative construction.

Cher was born Cherilyn Sarkisian on May 20 1946 in California to an Armenian - American truck driver addicted to gambling and drugs and an American mother with, among others, Cherokee ancestry. They divorced when Cher was ten months old and her mother pursued a career

in modeling and acting under the name of Georgia Holt while working as a waitress. The family often moved from place to place with little money. Cher frequently recalls her humble, unsettling origins during interviews.

Since very young Cher expressed fascination for film stars but she would not find many Hollywood actresses she could emulate. She comments that, as a child, her origins made her feel unattractive and untalented. Darker than her mother and half sister, she seems to have felt social discomfort related to her ethnic origins: most of the Hollywood actresses were by then the blonde type and she did not fit in. Napsha (2001, p. 22) cites Cher, "All I saw was Doris Day and Sandra Dee (...) In the Walt Disney cartoons, all the witches and evil queens were really dark. There was nobody I could look at and think, 'That's who I'm like'". Fifty years ago Cher belonged to a "no man's land" and as such, she was the type of woman who was easily unsettling to the national imaginary, even among the "melting pot" of the United States.

Dulles (1965) explores how the 19th century USA, with a predominantly white, protestant, Anglo-Saxon population with a puritan background, started facing the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who ended up threatening to eliminate the distance between the white and the black. These new immigrants, whom, says historian Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998), earned probationary white privileges, are considered to have contributed to the concept of leisure to a culture that was obsessed with work by developing "less dignified leisure activities", including films and vaudeville. Even so, such media do not directly reflect the experience of these ethnic groups: hiding ethnicity is the natural way to success in the American culture. One of the reasons for Cher to be such a relevant case study is precisely the fact that she did not conform to the rules of Hollywood and is, therefore, among the exceptions.

Winokur (1996) considers that the culture historians who came after Dulles and up to the 80's view the Anglo-puritan culture as the founding half of a binary system: in the other half lay all the other cultural influences. He asserts Althusser and Jameson, among others, study the disparity between history and its representation (or lack of it) by hegemonic groups interested in keeping an "official" history. Lipsitz (1998, p. 99), states, "Wild West shows, minstrel shows, Hollywood films, and commercial advertising have not merely reflected the racism that exists in social relations but have helped produce a unified white racial identity through the shared experience of spectatorship". The ethnic woman is even more marginalized since she fits neither into the category of white nor male.

During her adolescence, Cher realized her looks were usually associated with irreverence and started emulating the Hollywood exceptions she began identifying herself with. By the age of 16 Cher had moved to Los Angeles where she took acting classes and worked to support herself. That same year she met Sonny Bono who was working for record producer Phil Spector. In 1965, at his studios, she and Sonny recorded "I Got You Babe" and traveled to England to promote the single. There, due to their outrageous outfits, they were thrown out of the London Hilton and literally became famous overnight: the song topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart knocking *The Beatles* off. English teenagers began to emulate Sonny and Cher's bell-bottoms, stripped pants, industrial zippers and fur vests that made them look like Native Americans. Cher look-alikes emerged as far back as the late sixties. As referred by Negra (2001), Cher came out in the music world when the "noble" American aimed at identifying himself/herself with histories of oppression. Sonny and Cher, both with ethnic ancestry (Sonny's family was Italian), adopted a way of dressing that questioned the social role of the "outsider". In the 70's Cher, not suppressing her ethnic identity, reinforced her public image when she recorded songs such as *Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves* and *Half-Breed*. She would sing the first dressed as a gypsy and the second as a Native American in the corresponding music videos. In this decade, her solo career, as Morris (2013) states, expressed her uncertainty in what concerned her place in terms of race and class, culminating in a revival of the older Vegas and Hollywood styles: an ethnic exhibitionist transvestism. Negra (2001, p. 3) talks about the ethnic woman in Hollywood as often having been represented as "excessive, hypersexual, primitive, animalistic or exotic". A good example of such ethnic exhibition (although highly different from Cher's) is Carmen Miranda's. Sonny and Cher's marriage, though, was not going so well. When Cher turned 26 she was feeling "she abdicated to Sonny any involvement in her career (...) he was also controlling her personal life (...) she had obeyed him for years, she had never once defied him", says Taraborrelli (1986, p. 148). According to Negra (2001, p. 169), Cher's body was, by the time, presented as an idealized, governed body in agreement with the interests of a white patriarchy. Nevertheless, she considers that "Despite these kinds of maneuvers, Cher's career in the 1970's is often best remembered today for the sharp and unruly public put downs she regularly delivered to her husband". I argue that in spite of talking much less, Cher's words were sufficient to ridicule her husband and for her to come out as the smart woman "on top". I consider the show to play with the carnivalistic inversion of roles (the

husband presented as the “fool” and the wife as “sharp”, “witty”). Negra (2001, p. 169) mentions, as an example, a sketch from *The Sonny and Cher Show*, the Mannequin Scene, in which Cher and Farrah Fawcett are two mannequins “whose bodies are positioned and adjusted by male workers”. I do not consider this scene can be viewed in such a manner since the lines of the male characters are the most ridiculous ones throughout the dialogues (these mannequins do talk to each other and therefore present a narrative of their own, much more coherent and rational than that of their counterparts). The target ends up being the chauvinistic male who treats women as objects. The scene, by deliberately using excess femininity, or femininity as masquerade¹, ridicules the “use” of women as objects of the “male gaze”. By recognizing themselves as such objects, these women end up using, in disruptive and challenging ways, the spectacle invested in them as objects of that masculine gaze. The women are in fact presented as strong: the dialogue starts with Farrah Fawcett claiming she can stand staying on her feet for long because it is in her blood since her father was a cigar store Indian, associating strength and endurance with the outcast. In turn, the character played by Sonny makes fun of an homosexual uncle who would love the kind of clothes the “mannequins” are wearing. Ironically, the humans, the two “bozo maintenance men”, are known to the “inhuman” mannequins as having horribly cold hands and when they stick a pin “where nobody will get hurt” (Farrah’s behind), she does feel pain. The women’s stories are linked with stories of other oppressed groups who have to be strong in order to survive. The men, in turn, are the dumb oppressors. As Docker (1994) states, television displays inversion that can be compared to the carnivalesque. When using excess femininity Cher is, as Butler puts it, appropriating the instruments culture offers and using them to work in the opposite direction. Butler (1999, p. 174) refers how Esther Newton in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* suggests that “the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanics through

¹ Mary Ann Doane (1991) considers femininity as masquerade is generally employed “to designate a mode of being for the other [...] the sheer objectification or reification of representation” which is, according to her, what happens in the case of Joan Riviere’s patient (1929), since, when she masquerades, she “renounces her status as the subject of speech [...] and becomes the very image of femininity in order to compensate for her ‘lapse’ into subjectivity (i.e. masculinity in Riviere’s analysis) and to track the male gaze” (p. 33). When studying the film *The Desire to Desire* Doane argues masquerade “makes visible” the artifice of femininity, that is, what is supposed to remain concealed, the gap between an impossible role and the women playing it. Nevertheless, says Rowe (1995), “she hesitates to evoke laughter, seeing it structured, like spectatorship, at women’s expense” (p. 6). Rowe, in turn, argues that masquerade makes clichés both visible and positive within a subcultural group and that it can teach us about the construction of gender within repressive social and symbolic structures as well as how those structures might be changed.

which the social construction of gender takes place" and herself suggests that drag "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity". She adds, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler, 1999, p. 175). That said excess femininity does not reinforce a strong division of the sexes but precisely the opposite. Drag is, therefore, perceived as gender parody of the notion of an original and of political significance as inducer of laughter. Identities perceived as fluid suggests, as Butler (1999, p. 176) affirms, "an openness to resignification and recontextualization". In this scene, the image of Farrah Fawcett helps the message come across since, as Roberts (2003, p. 174) points out, her body is linked to ideals of female independence. He considers Fawcett a fantastic icon and sites Mary Rodger's opinion of them, in her book *Barbie Culture*: she claims they "exaggerate what is actual, possible or conceivable" and says "Fantastic icons are capable of realizing people's imagination and requirements". As one of Charlie's Angels in the series with the same name, that is just what Fawcett embodies. Roberts (2013, p. 86) goes on to say "Farrah, despite all of her connections to athleticism is emphatically feminine; her hair particularly represents the extension of femininity to nearly unattainable extremes". Her image has been recoded in camp and drag.

Cher's persona does not fit into the category of a fixed self but rather into that of a fluid one and as a result, right from its early years, Cher's career has been a product of the impact of the immigration that started in the nineteenth century in the culture of the United States. As a minority herself, her performance has been, more specifically, the result of an insurgence against discriminatory acts towards minorities. Consequently, in Cher's performance, race, class, and gender issues seem to get together in a fight for the rights of minorities. Carlson (2004, p. 276) considers that such appropriation is typical of the politics of postmodern performance. Her music videos embody the debates that Postmodernism, and more particularly Postfeminism, is known to bring about, specifically the fact that they question and ultimately deconstruct classical representations of gender.

2. CHER'S MUSIC VIDEOS: PROVING GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Queer theories, aiming at challenging mainstream society and its heterosexism, emerged primarily thanks to AIDS related activism such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Lesbian Avengers during the 1980's and the

early 1990's, as well as to the debates on race and class exclusions within feminism during the 1980's. As Genz and Brabon (2010, p. 124) state, "Foregrounding the politics of difference, queer theory disrupted binary configurations of the subject by advancing a destabilization of identity". Among them is Judith Butler's notion of gender as performativity. Butler (1999, p. 25), defining the concept says, "Gender is always a doing" a "performance that relies on a certain practice of repetition". She argues, gender is nothing but "a stylised reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalised and consolidated" (Genz & Brabon, 2010, p. 125) and consequently, as Butler (1993b, p. 313) also puts it "all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation", an "imitation for which there is no original". Instead, there is the idea of an imaginary or fantasized original. This parodic imitation, Genz and Brabon (2010, p. 126) claim, is "an involuntary and imposed production within a culturally restricted space (...) put on as a compulsory performance (...) in line with heterosexual conventions". In this line of thought, femininity is, as Butler (1993a, p. 232) puts it "(...) the forcible citation of a norm". Butler aims at disrupting the acts of citation that the performativity of gender consists of and considers that drag acts as a subversive practice that challenges gender identity since "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler, 1993a, p. 402). Butler (1988, p. 42), says, "(...) if the ground of gender is the stylised repetition of acts through time, (...) then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating". Drag proves that sort of repeating is possible and, therefore, that performativity can simultaneously be theorized in terms of subversion that empowers the subject. Engaging in gender parody, Cher's music videos erode the foundations of standard representations of gender and illustrate such a possibility.

2.1. PLAYING WITH MAKE BELIEVE

"Got to go back & polish my Cher impersonation."
(Cher)

Both gay men and divas share experiences of oppression and insecurity, which brings them close to each other. The fact that the latter are ultimately associated with success stories makes every gay man aspire at being able to do the same. For instance, every time Cher "officially" attains recognition, as it was the case of her winning the Oscar for best actress in the film *Moonstruck*, she wins over stigmatized origins and her diva worship

is reinforced. Says Kort (2012) about divas, "They have a hardened, sometimes aggressively feminine side" but "they are almost as hyperfeminine as drag queens" (and he goes on to mention Cher's heavily beaded gowns and overly glittering eye shadow). In 1997 Cher was a guest at *The RuPaul Show*² and during the interview RuPaul proffered he loves the fact Cher did the *The Sonny and Cher Show* (with ex-husband Sonny Bono) while she was pregnant with (then husband) Gregory Allman's child, and about to divorce him, plus the fact that she never used to wear dresses as a teenager (she put one on when she went to see the pope). He said, "From that day on I was like, she rocks, she is cool, I am with her forever and that's how it's been. I am Cher. No, she is Cher but I live for Cher. It's the truth" (and Cher laughs). He asks her how the world would be like if it were a woman's world (because of the album *It's a Man's World*). She basically claims there would be more love. And they talk about how she has been doing well in this "Man's World". Cher says,

I am really glad I'm a woman because I can wear pants and a dress, so can you. It's not my way to be really a bitch but oh, can I, when I want, you know, when I have too, it's all there, I can really be tough. I have to be pushed to be tough. I can be both things and that's why I think it's nice to be a woman. You have this side that is fully developed and then you have to develop the other side.

RuPaul replies, "I think that's why a lot of your fans, specially gay fans really signature with you. Because of the duality. You are as soft as a petal on a flower but at the same time you kick ass". Cher's huge gay fan base understands better than anyone else the fact that she is an advocate of the intertextual body that rewrites itself and that she defends construction in performance.

Both in her performance of the song *Perfection* in the 1992 *Las Vegas Show Extravaganza: Live at the Mirage* (Cher's first live music video title)³ and in the video of the song *Walking in Memphis*, Cher embraces the concept of replica⁴. The first starts with a female impersonator on stage, making

² RuPaul is an American actor, drag queen, model, author, and recording artist.

³ The video includes footage from her two *Heart of Stone* specials filmed at *Mirage Hotel* in Las Vegas.

⁴ In his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin presents the replica, a reproduction of an original piece of art, as opposed to the original work. The first can never possess what he calls the aura but it is of major significance since when the aura is lost singular authority is also lost and an aesthetic interpretation of the reproducible image is allowed. Cher is comfortable with "replicas" of herself since she knows that her inner self, her aura, is not what she reveals. Therefore, these replicas are depicting the images of the Cher she plays but politically they are highly relevant since they precisely point to the fact that we are always performing a certain identity.

the viewers believe for a while that they are in her presence. Then, the two perform together. The lyrics of the song claim the importance of love over the fight for perfection and speak about the burden society places on the individual, demanding that she/he be perfect, specially on those that are à priori labeled as "imperfect": you are supposed to "(...)" be the best, *prove them wrong (...)"*. The subject realizes perfection is worthless if one is incapable of loving/be loved. The song definitely talks about the life of famous people and Cher seems to be specifically talking about herself. She presents herself as someone who is idolized, as a semi-god, yet she understands that is not all. Unlike Mary Shelley's symbol of the Enlightenment (Frankenstein) who ends up lonely because he was unable to love imperfection, Cher embraces these replicas of herself. Cher is telling the large community of her fans that perfection is worth nothing if you disregard the importance of love. As Negra (2001, p. 175) claims, "... Cher herself calls upon the images of the multiple Cher, the constructed Cher (...). In authorizing her own quotation, Cher acknowledges herself as fictionalized production, and proffers to her audience a pleasurable plurality". In an interview on the *Early Show* Cher says she was born to *play* herself. They talk about her role in the film *Stuck on You* (a cameo) and she explains she does not identify herself with the character and would never expose her inner self. When the interviewer tells her how great she is, she thanks and says it took her only four hours (to achieve that look).

In Cher's *Do you Believe?* (1999) tour, when introducing the song *Walking in Memphis*, she talks about its video, which is displaying on the giant screen and says, "I made this really cool video where I got to play Elvis, I actually didn't play Elvis; I was Elvis (...) I want to warn you gay guys, don't fall in love with me because I am a really cute guy". Just as the transvestite RuPaul "considers himself Cher", Cher also has no problem in "considering herself Elvis": you have to thank the power of representation to perform gender that allows for the instability of the subject.

The video starts with Cher (dressed as Elvis) arriving by bus in Memphis. A black and white setting takes the viewer to what seems to be Tennessee in the 1950's in a flashback of Cher who is singing sat on the steps of a bus in modern day clothes. She checks in at *Pink Hotel* and displays a poster of Elvis on the bedroom wall. She eventually goes on to sing at a local bar and the video ends with her leaving Memphis by bus. Knopper (2011) mentions how Marc Cohn, the writer of the lyrics and the first to record the song, considers it to be about a kind of spiritual awakening, about a trip where you are different when you leave. He also thinks that it shows his

acceptance of everybody in terms of what they believe as well as it defines his conflicting feelings about religion.

Cher's version of the lyrics replaces lines such as "but I'm as blue as a boy can be" with "but I'm as blue as a girl can be", Muriel with Gabriel, "they brought me down to see her" with "they brought me down to see him", "she said: tell me, are you a Christian?" with "he said: tell me, are you a Christian?" and "ma'am, I am tonight" with "man, I am tonight", reversing the acting subject in regard to gender. Interestingly, the song talks about the arrival of a white woman/man in "the land of the Delta Blues" asking W.C. Handy not to "look down over" her/him because she/he is a wealthy person ("got a first class ticket") but, nevertheless, "as blue as a girl/boy can be". Cohn built a bridge between different races and social strata and Cher added the gender issue when she chose to simultaneously make this change and appear dressed up as Elvis, making the song extremely appealing to her gay fan community. The woman in Cher's version (or present day wealthy Cher) is empathizing with the poor black community of Memphis as well as with the gay/transvestite one. And when you are able to "travel" in this manner, just like Elvis and Cher did/does, you raise hope in those that feel the need to cross boundaries - and they turn into believers: "When you haven't got a prayer/But girl/boy you've got a prayer in Memphis (...) Tell me are you are a Christian child?/And I said/Man I am tonight!"

Cher's version of the song was used in the final scene of *The X-Files* episode *The Postmodern Prometheus*. In this episode Mulder and Scully investigate reports of a mysterious creature (labeled The Great Mutato) having impregnated a middle-aged woman. They find that this "monster" is the genetic creation of a Frankenstein-like doctor. The Great Mutato watches Cher in the 1985 movie *Mask*, and derives comfort from the loving relationship between her character and her son, who has a disfiguring genetic bone disorder. At first he is ostracized but later accepted by his community. At the end of the episode, Mulder and Scully take him to a Cher's concert, where she picks him out of the crowd to dance while she is performing *Walking in Memphis*.

Garber (1992) claims how Elvis's performances used to cause a double scandal: his music was considered too black and his image was effeminate. Wearing eyeshadow he used to mimic Little Richard, impersonating who was, in turn, a female impersonator. His move was read as a cross move in gender terms. Cher, playing Elvis, is playing a man (Elvis) who crossed dressed as a woman because he played a man (Little Richard) who played a woman (because, as above mentioned, he was a female

impersonator). Elvis's performance ended up disrupting race and gender and so does Cher's. When she is singing, "I saw the ghost of Elvis", the video displays the face of a black young man, not Elvis's. Garber (1992, p. 10), talking about the politics of transvestism asserts that clothes not only construct but also deconstruct gender and gender differences and claims, referring to Susan Gubar, that for her "the 'third-sex' turns out to be largely a way of securing power for modernist women". The lyrics mention the ghost of Elvis roaming Graceland, which alludes to his immortality. Cher is herself associated to this image due to the longevity of her career: she has been called the "Eternal Phoenix" given her capability of reinventing herself during the last five decades and, therefore, of being the perfect example of the subject permanently "under construction".

2.1.1 CHER AND THE CYBORG

Representative work such as that of Donna Haraway on the figure of the cyborg sheds light on the effects of technology on gender and identity and more specifically on the relationship between the cyborg and feminism. Haraway (1991, p. 14) states there is "nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female (...)", pointing to its constructiveness. For Haraway (1991, p. 33), cyborg writing is about

the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other (...) Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control.

Haraway is criticizing Enlightenment ideas when she ponders how women have historically been set aside from the technological world. Genz and Brabon (2010, p. 147), talking about the postfeminist cyborg of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, consider that

(...) cyberspace becomes a location where the distinction between the subject and the object, the self and the other, dissolves" and where the Cartesian dualism of the subject is therefore transcended. The politics of the cyborg claim there is not such thing as "one code that translates all meaning perfectly. (Genz & Brabon, 2010, p. 148)

Furthermore, they consider that by blending sexuality with assertiveness as well as hyperfeminine characteristics with 'tough-girl' strength, the

female cyborg is able to “transcend the patriarchal limits of ‘female identity/femininity’” (Genz & Brabon, 2010, p. 150). The paradoxical and sometimes conflicting ideas of the cyborg are very similar to the characteristics of the postfeminism woman since she seems to conform to patriarchy but is in fact reworking it behind a mask of excess femininity, which is frequently attained by cosmetic surgery.

I consider that in the music video of *Believe* Cher raises the issue of gender trouble when she chooses to present herself as a cyborg. Cher’s image is, throughout the video, interchangeably linked to that of the cyborg (which in turn contains both the image of the human and that of the machine), the human female, and Jesus.

The lyrics of Cher’s 1998 hit *Believe* are about the personal empowerment and self-sufficiency of a girl after a painful break-up. The video starts with a blurry blue image coming out of a black screen – an apparition seems eminent. And then comes Cher, “out of the blue”, dressed in a white suit (which gives her a somewhat androgynous appearance) with a headdress that may surreptitiously evoke Jesus’s crown of thorns. She is inside some sort of glass cage with her arms half open, a position that is similar to Jesus’s symbolic image of welcoming and acceptance, and her eyes are closed. A car with young people arrives. They exit the car, approach her and touch the glass cage: Cher’s eyes glow and her hands assume a praying position. As she sings these fans idolize her. Carlsson (1999) points out; a spiritual journey seems to start.

The story of a young couple among Cher’s admirers is told as the viewer follows the girl’s story (she seems to be recollecting memories of the day she saw him with another girl). Now Cher is presented as human – she is singing and dancing on the stage of a club while the young man and the woman dance to her music. The rejected girl leaves the club and climbs the stairs to the top of the building. She seems to be considering jumping out of it as she sees the couple leaving down below. But Cher intervenes. She once again places her hands in a praying position and then signals the girl to be quite: then Cher shows up behind the girl, the girl takes her place and then walks away. Cher stays in her place and the spiritual journey reaches the end.

The Cher/Cyborg image is linked to that of Jesus and, by displaying herself this way, she is demystifying him and thereby proclaiming the devaluation of the Benjaminian “aura” of the object. Furthermore, she is not only saying this “subject” can be reproduced, she is saying his powers can be “performed” by another “subject”. And this subject is an unruly, “gender troubled” one. She is claiming the power of a divine entity can be found in

the hybrid campy cyborg. That is how she empowers the “marginal” (herself as well as her followers). Carlsson (1999), commenting on the video, views Cher as an electronic shaman, a modern sorceress using the electronic magic of visual special effects.

Cher's visual representation is consubstantiated by the audio processor auto-tune, which alters Cher's vocals and was used in this song as a deliberate special effect for the first time. From then on the effect became known as the “Cher Effect”. Referring to the technique, Dickinson (2001, pp. 334-335) calls it “vocoder”⁵, and considers “this sucking of the human voice backwards into the less nuanced scale types of the computer's tone bank gives it a certain cyborg feel” and wonders, “(...) what happens, then, when these two concepts (human and android) overrun each other?”. Cher, with a campy performance, is engaging in gender parody and raising questions of authenticity. Dickinson (2001, p. 336) considers the body to be “a fluctuating cultural factor” that is woven from and attracts certain politics that are inevitably present in popular music and its discourse. Performing with these technologies, Dickinson reflects, empowers the performer, as I have mentioned, and also those consuming them (the latter being presented by the strength the girl acquires to move on with her life). What you can look for in religion, it seems, you can look for in a diva (to give you the strength to overcome adversity). Says Darcey Steinke, author of *Sister Golden Hair*, whose main character is obsessed with Cher,

I think the idea of the Goddesses never really goes away, whether its Cher or some writer I love ... I think she is a goddess actually. It's important to worship; when you worship God or a good life-giving presence, energy comes back to you, so that feels really good. But if you worship a crappy idol ... I feel that draws energy off you.

In this case, Cher's natural voice is impaired by the autotune effect, which takes her further away from traditional associations of women with “naturalness” as opposed to that of men with science. The whole association makes Cher an agent who questions these assumptions⁶. Cher seems

⁵ Not vocoder but auto-tune was used in *Believe*. While vocoder is an analysis and synthesis system used to reproduce human speech, auto-tune is an audio processor, which uses a proprietary device to measure and alter pitch in music recording performances. The latter was originally intended to disguise or correct off-key inaccuracies.

⁶ Yet, she is interestingly not the scientific subject of the Enlightenment depicted in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or the *Modern Prometheus*. Instead, she is, as Chris Carter put it in the episode of *The X-Files* he dedicated to Cher – *The Postmodern Prometheus* –, precisely that, a Postmodern Prometheus. She is a “guilt-free” Prometheus because when she creates “monsters” she does not discard them as imperfections; she loves them unconditionally, which places her on the side of the half-breed.

to be able to combine sensibility with rationality. Performances such as these benefit a feminist politics of representation. In 2000 Madonna obtained similar results recording the song *Music*.

In the video of the song *Strong Enough* Cher is equally presented as a cyborg when she comes alive on the monitor of a man as he starts building a screensaver to the sound of thunder. The campy images of the people transfixed by her appearance on the screen report to Cher's capabilities to empower minorities in general.

3. CHER: OF VAMPIRES, TYPHOID MARY AND THE TROJAN HORSE IN THE *DRESSED TO KILL* TOUR

“The warriors possess the open mouths and the powerful
song of the Sirens.”
(Catherine Burke)

Susan Sontag, in her essay *Notes on Camp*, defines “camp” as a sensibility that reveals not in content but in artifice, stylization, theatricalization, irony, playfulness, and exaggeration. She writes, “Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical”. However, some postmodernists, feminists, and queer theorists have explored the ways that camp, namely the drag show, can trouble the belief that gender is “natural” or inherent and can, therefore, work against heteronormativity. Sontag’s theory has been discredited, namely by Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam and Pamela Robertson. Butler (1999) interprets the aesthetics of drag camp as a performative critique of gender. When queer influenced camp exaggerates sexual characteristics and certain mannerisms, it can be said it presents behavior as performative. Halberstam (1998, p. 246) considers gay culture crucial to any discussion of camp because masculinity is perceived as natural, it is “unadorned and unperformed”: males performing femininity subvert these “authentic” aesthetics through camp. Pamela Robertson (1996) argues that camp icons such as Madonna and Mae West can and should use pop culture as a political and critical instrument in the deconstruction of masculinity and femininity. That is what Cher does. Through identification with these icons women also take a leap and escape the bounds of reductive views of femininity. Cher becomes the object of gay male gaze when she blurs the lines between artifice and naturalness. By performing excessive gender in a kind of female-female drag she incites a large gay following, camping, and dragging of her. She is, therefore, not objectified

the way women are when objects of the heterosexual male gaze. Her image works to empower minorities.

Cleto (1999, p. 5) defines excess as “the engine of critical reflection” of camp and Babuscio (1990, p. 123) claims “Camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and in particular, sex roles, are superficial - a matter of style”. Camp means the parodic embracing and recycling of what is rejected or abjected by mainstream culture. Camp refutes fixed meanings and refers, according to Cleto (1999, p. 10), “to a quality of the object not existing prior to its nomination”. In Cleto (1999, p. 11) camp is said to take “... pleasure in ‘perverting’ all ‘original’ intention, deviating it toward unpredicted, and often undesired-ends: in short, demystifying the ‘myth’ of authentic origins”.

In the *Dressed to Kill Tour* several of the songs Cher performs are from her most recent album *Closer to the Truth* (2013). By itself, the name of the tour appeals to those who feel they were born trapped in the wrong body: *Dressed to Kill* is the title of the 1980 erotic thriller by Brian De Palma, in which a psychiatrist, although trapped in a man’s body, struggled with a “male” side that would not allow him to go through with a sex operation. Nevertheless, when a woman sexually aroused him, “Bobbie”, the female side of his personality, would feel threatened. *Dressed to Kill* is also the title of the song Cher performs dressed as a vampire and surrounded by a gothic, burning red setting. Before her performance, a film is shown in which a coffin is opened by two women: Cher is inside, eyes closed and arms crossed. Then she opens her eyes and out she comes. She sits on a thrown and is decrowned. Eventually, she laughs sinisterly, showing her vampire fangs. The lyrics of the song is about a woman who is able to “put a spell” on any man she wants and during the performance she keeps walking towards a male dancer as he submissively walks backwards and lies at her feet. Ultimately, he offers her his neck and she “bites” him: sexual stereotyping is transgressed as, as Sceats (2001, p. 118) states, “conventions of activity and passivity are overthrown”: the woman becomes the penetrator and the man the passive recipient. Says Creed (1993, p. 61)

In my view, the female vampire is monstrous – and also attractive – precisely because she does threaten to undermine the formal and highly symbolic relations of men and women essential to the continuation of patriarchal society.

Due to her constant reinventions, it seems that Cher will never “die” and, in that respect, her image and that of the vampire both represent the “Eternal Other”. As Sceats (2001, p. 107) puts it:

whatever they [vampires] are, it is positively Other (...) Being ‘undead’ involves an indeterminate permanently ambiguous metaphysical condition that resonates with questions about embodiment and definition, about life, death, and immortality (...) their ambiguity is manifest, their essence contradictory: they confuse the roles of victim and predator.

While Victorian vampirism, she says,

provided a powerful vehicle for the expression of anxieties about unbridled sexuality (especially women’s) (...) more recently it has been seen and used as a vehicle for the expression of homosexual desire and gay culture. (Sceats, 2001, p. 108)

According to Dryer (1988), heterosexual vampirism may connote a gay culture in the sense that the condition is beyond the individual’s control and there is tension between “going public” and living a “double life”. The fact that a vampire’s victim becomes himself/herself a vampire makes vampirism a “contagious disease”, an activity that may lead to a plague.

On its June 26 2014 issue the Canadian Calgary Herald published an article about Cher’s performance during her ongoing *Dressed to Kill* tour at the Scotiabank Saddledome. The article claims Cher to be “The one source who has and will outlast, outreinvent, outshine, outcostume change, out personality, out fun and (...) out entertain both acts” and goes on to label her the Typhoid Mary of the contemporary, dramatic diva moment. Herself heterosexual, Cher, just like Mary Mallon, plays the role of the healthy carrier who becomes a social threat. They are two ethnic women from a low class background responsible for spreading a social “plague” that, in Cher’s case, culminates in an impressive number of gay fans. To perform *Take it Like a Man* during the tour, Cher comes on stage inside a Trojan Horse pulled by men warriors. In her essay with the same name, Monique Wittig, interrogating a male perspective of the patriarchal epic, uses the Trojan Horse as a metaphor for works that subvert patriarchal norms, conventional modes of thought that bring women back into the history they had been denied. Cher, as she did with *Dressed to Kill*, turns to myth to represent and free the marginal gay from oppression, encouraging him to “take it like a man”. The lyrics, saying, “sometimes it feels; like we’ve got everything to prove; we make believe; But we rise again to face the truth” is evoking the difficulty gay men face to “come out”: they try to pretend they fit into normativity but reality strikes their inner self. She revises it, in that presenting herself as a

war machine siren (campily sings dressed as a warrior among other warriors, the male ones seem to be constantly drawn to her and she systematically “forces” them to keep a distance), she does a feminist reworking of the myth. With a successful career that spans 5 decades, she is a successful warrior that has been able to battle strategically, penetrate enemy lines, and cross borders. One can only expectantly wait for the music videos that will be released for these songs and that inspired me to write this section of the chapter. In the meantime, the controversial Conchita Wurst, winner of the Eurovision 2014 with the song *Rise Like a Phoenix*, has chosen to perform Cher's *Believe* in numerous occasions, associating her image to that of Cher, to that of “a Phoenix”.

4. CONCLUSION

In her music videos Cher frequently plays with gender parody and becomes an advocate of Judith Butler's notion of gender as performativity. Cher assumes there is not such a thing as a pure original identity, which parodic identities imitate, but rather, she parodies the very notion of an original in her performances by claiming she is no original herself. The effect is obtained in videos such as those of the songs *Perfection* and *Walking in Memphis* by playing with excessive drag and camp and by alluding to the figure of the cyborg in *Believe* and *Strong Enough*. When it comes to more recent performances, such as those of the songs *Take it Like a Man* and *Dressed to Kill* one is presented with the symbolism of the Trojan Horse and that of the vampire to work in a similar manner. Such performances reflect the manner in which way the society she grew up in viewed the “hybrid” off-white immigrant and how that view strongly impacted her career and, in turn, they are helping reverse, by way of rewriting, such preconceptions. Evidence of the latter is the number of Cher's steady fans throughout her long career.

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