

Received: July 6, 2015
Accepted: July 10, 2015
Original scholarly paper
UDC: 78.071.2 Мадо̀на:141.72

Katarina Mitić

musicologist, music supervisor in record label Mascom Records, Serbia
katarinamitich@gmail.com

Madonna: Feminist or Antifeminist? Domination of Sex in Her Music Videos and Live Performances From the 20th Century to the Present Day

Abstract: After a nearly four-decade career, Madonna has not stopped with a modernist/postmodernist strategy of shock, which provides the reader or viewer the possibility of different interpretations of her art. While some art theorists condemn her as a ‘total antifeminist’, others praise Madonna’s work and point out her feminist side, through which she represents the ideal of a strong, independent and successful woman confirming her own power and sexuality. Breaking conventional stereotypes through her videos and concert performances, the ‘Queen of Pop’ constantly demonstrates sexual dominance over both genders. In this paper, based on the contemporary research of Douglas Kellner and other theorists, I will analyze music videos and live performances from the 1990s until the recent video for the song *Bitch, I’m Madonna* and consider why Madonna can be interpreted in two ways – as someone who ‘undermines her own feminism’ or as someone who is transparently presented as a feminist in the world of pop culture.

Key words: strategy of shock, feminist, antifeminist, video, live performance

In today’s pop culture the element of shock is successfully implemented only by the most experienced and most cunning artists, or those backed by marketing machinery that is ready to come up with a new strategy to win the audience. What is characteristic for Madonna is that she has been pushing the boundaries of pop culture for almost four decades. Although she is not the only woman on the world music scene that can boast such a successful career, she is the only one who was able to create music that changed and assumed the style of other musical genres (electro, rock and house), as well as their image, attitude and appearance, in order to adapt to the needs of each consumer era. Recently, in an interview for *Rolling Stone*, Madonna said: “Women my age accept the fact that some of their behavior patterns are no longer allowed. I never followed the rules. I will not start now.”¹ This statement clearly reflects Madonna’s attitude towards social conventions and norms, which in her opinion should be a

¹ Brian Hiatt, “Živi bili pa vidjeli“, in: Toni Moškov (ed.), *Rolling Stone Hrvatska*, Zagreb, S3 Mediji, 67.

matter of choice, as well as the deconstruction of traditional (opposed) gender roles that should be universally accepted.

Keeping in mind the chapter of Douglas Kellner's book *Media Culture*² that is dedicated to Madonna, and considering the views of various authors who will be discussed, I came to the conclusion that when it comes to Madonna's 'moving' cultural boundaries within which we can speak about her relationship to sexuality, gender discrimination and feminism, one can speak of a constant element of shock³. After the 1980s and *Material Girl*, Madonna entered a phase in which she opposed conventional notions of sexuality which were followed at the beginning of the new millennium. The pop queen transformed into a mature woman who set the standards of freedom of speech/behavior. In this regard, her career can be divided into phases that are related to certain shocking videos and performances that have contributed to her 'messages' being transferred to the audience. In looking at Madonna's videos and performances, art theorists can analyse their relationships to female rights and dominance. For the purposes of this article, I chose three examples with which Madonna has managed to achieve an element of shock in the audience and among critics.

My name is Dita

One of the first slogans of MTV was "One World, One Image, One Channel MTV".⁴ As a medium that was primarily intended for the younger population, artists who were selected by the editorial policy of MTV (which is actually the propagation of the products of American popular culture 'under the veil of democracy')⁵ enjoyed a direct breakthrough to the world market. Madonna was one of the main 'products' of this editorial policy. By genre, but also ideologically, the albums *Erotica* (1992), *Bed Time Stories* (1994) and *Ray Of Light* (1998) are very similar and are linked to an early stage of Madonna's career. It was during the nineties that she grew from a young, rebellious girl into a woman that directly expresses her views and is not ashamed of her sexuality, believing that everyone has the right to 'express yourself', similar to the song *Express Yourself*: "Girls, do you believe in Love? Well, I have something to tell you... Express yourself!"⁶ Although this imperative is retained in subsequent tracks, it takes on another dimension – a direct association with sex – that Madonna would constantly explore during the 1990s.⁷ According to Mandzuik, Madonna's songs constantly "equate pleasure with power and sexuality with control".⁸ She notes that Madonna's assertion that personal freedom and sexuality are inextricably linked is part of a larger debate over political articulation in contemporary feminist theory. Mandzuik claims that "Madonna is a fitting representation of

² Douglas Kellner, *Medijska kultura*, [trans. Aleksandra Čabraja], Beograd, CLIO, 2004.

³ Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, in her book *Stvaralačka prisutnost evropske avangarde u nas*, uses the term *element of shock* that binds to Igor Stravinsky and the first phase of his work. See: Mirjana Veselinović, *Stvaralačka prisutnost evropske avangarde u nas*, Beograd, Fond za izdavačku delatnost Univerziteta umetnosti u Beogradu, 1983, 270.

⁴ Carla Freccero, "Our Lady of MTV: Madonna's 'Like a Prayer'", *boundary 2*, Summer 1992, Vol. 19, No. 2, 165.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Douglas Kellner points out that the video for the song *Express Yourself* perhaps represents the culmination of her second period, which begins with the album *Like a Prayer* (1989). According to him, this Madonna video is an "extremely complex modernist text, which plays on gender, sex and class". See more at: Douglas Kellner, op. cit., 459.

⁷ Madonna published the book *Sex* in 1992, which includes explicit erotic photographs that caused great fanfare at a time when the book was published.

⁸ Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms – Feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms*, London, Routledge, 2002, 153-154.

feminism's theoretical struggle to come to terms with the intersection of cultural images and political practices".⁹ She notes that, for feminism, "the postmodern holds out a theoretical enticement to leave the public sphere of reason for the private, localized regions of pleasure." Mandzuik asks whether feminism's enticement by the postmodern has resulted in feminism "relinquishing something too precious by celebrating the political potential of images" like those projected by Madonna. She expresses a deep concern with feminism and postmodernism entailing a large step from praxis back to theory.¹⁰

Just three years later (1992), Madonna made a video for the song *Erotica*, which is one of the most controversial videos in the history of MTV. Madonna herself might have failed to repeat that kind of explicitness in one video, so that is understandable that it is rarely played on MTV.¹¹ At the beginning of the video Madonna makes it clear that she plays a role – she is Dita, referring to Dita Parlo, the German actress who had a very turbulent career, full of scandals, but did not care what others said about her.¹² In this video Madonna does what she wants, with whomever she wants, in any role that suits her – she (or her alter ego) can be a dominant or subordinate object of desire, but as Dita is the narrator of this erotic story, she keeps everything under control.¹³ The atmosphere of the album *Erotica* was transferred to two other albums released during the nineties: *Bedtime Stories* and *Ray of Light*. The next moment of 'shock' would occur in 2003 at a live performance in which Madonna ensures her dominance in the next decade.¹⁴

Everybody comes to Hollywood

In her article about Madonna's tour during the eighties in Puerto Rico and its impact on feminism there, Carmen Lugo-Lugo indicates the influence that Madonna had on teenage girls from Puerto Rico during this period.¹⁵ In addition to socially-engaged texts dedicated to issues that were taboo for the female population (abortion, sex, sexual orientations), the largest (shocking) impact on girls from Puerto Rico were Madonna's performances.¹⁶ Kellner speaks about the phenomenon of her tours, where the 'shock technique' was constantly present, particularly throughout the *Blonde Ambition* tour when she "played a deconstructive drama of gender roles, often in men's clothes, clutching his crotch and declaring that she is the boss".¹⁷ On this tour, her dancers wore fake breasts, women's clothes and were "subordinate to her power and domination". Kellner concludes her message is that 'men' and 'woman' are only "structures" that should be dismantled, and that every woman can occupy men's positions, roles and behavior, and vice versa.¹⁸ Kellner's conclusion on Madonna's portrayal of sex opposites can be related to Judith Butler's idea that „gender and sex, that is, gender and sexual difference

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Douglas Kellner, op. cit., 463.

¹² Georges-Claude Guilbert, *Madonna as Postmodern Myth*, Jefferson, Mc Farland, 2002, 132.

¹³ Many famous people appear in the video, such as Naomi Campbell and Big Daddy Kane.

¹⁴ Miško Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza*, Beograd, Orion Art–Katedra za muzikologiju FMU, 2010, 378.

¹⁵ Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, "The Madonna Experience: A U.S. Icon Awaken a Puerto Rican Adolescent's Feminist Consciousness", *A Journal of Women Studies*, 2001, Vol. 22, No. 2, 118-130.

¹⁶ Ibid, 124.

¹⁷ Douglas Kellner, op. cit., 466-467.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

[is a] discursive, social and cultural construction.”¹⁹ The deconstruction of traditional gender roles is something Madonna aspires to from the beginning of her career; her performances are the space of continuity in the implementation of this idea. In keeping with this attitude, almost two decades later, Madonna would again attract the attention of the global audience – with one kiss on stage. The performance from 2003, in which she kisses Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, speaks about women’s freedom and domination. The kiss (actually, two kisses, but somehow the kiss with Christina Aguilera remained in the shadow of the kiss with Britney Spears) at the MTV VMAs (Video Music Awards) in 2003 occurred in the context of performance art, in which Madonna was in a black women’s tuxedo and trousers with a cylinder, while the two younger colleagues were dressed in a provocative imitation of wedding dresses. Madonna’s dominance comes along with an erotic moment which represents the pinnacle of the performance, in which she clearly wants to set a new standard as a mature woman who makes all the decisions. In contrast to the conflicting roles during the nineties in which Madonna is depicted as “a feminist who keeps her life under control” and “as just another woman’s body, which is a provocation for men and fashion model for women”²⁰, the queen of pop in the first decade of the new millennium wants to make a different impression. With her behavior Madonna indicates that absolutely everything is a matter of choice, and that she chooses to be an independent woman. Through engaged texts such as the songs *American Life*, *Hollywood* and *Die Another Day*, Madonna goes beyond the erotic stage and wins the throne of the queen of pop as the first woman in the world music industry that succeeded to link aesthetic practices with marketing strategies.

The icon of feminism or *Material Girl*?

In an era with Lady Gaga wearing a dress made of meat and Marina Abramović performing with Jay-Z²¹, it is difficult to achieve an element of shock in any segment of popular culture. The last two albums by the pop queen, *Hard Candy* (2008) and *MDNA* (2012), received bad critiques. The new album *Rebel Heart*, released in early 2015, promised a provocative move to surpass the previous hierarchy. Madonna succeeded in this at the BRIT awards on 25 February 2015, where she performed the lead single from the new album, *Living For Love*. It is interesting that Madonna once again chose clothing worn by men: a matador costume adapted for this purpose. However, what produced the greatest moment of shock, but not intentionally, was Madonna’s fall from the stage. Despite the fall, Madonna performed as a true professional to the end and triumphed over all the men costumed as bulls. With only two other girls, also matadors, she proudly raised horns as a symbol of victory over the bull/men. After this performance, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Madonna answered the question of whether it still seems that in pop, and generally in life, age discrimination is acceptable: “It’s the final frontier, you know? We fought for civil rights, we fought for the rights of homosexuals. Today there is so much political correctness, people do not even condemn someone because he is gay, black, Muslim or whatever else. But there is still one subject of discrimination – age. And that applies only to women, not to men. In this regard, we still live in a very sexist society.”²²

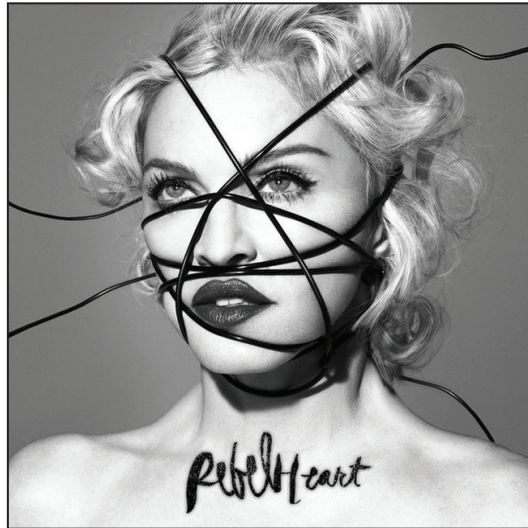
¹⁹ Ana Vujanović, “Džudit Batler”, in: Miško Šuvaković and Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Figure u pokretu. Savremena zapadna estetika, filozofija i teorija umetnosti*, Beograd, Atoča, 2009, 519.

²⁰ Kellner, op. cit., 462.

²¹ In 2011, on the MTV Video Music Awards, Lady Gaga wore a dress made of living flesh; in 2013 Marina Abramović created a performance with Jay Z at the Pace Gallery in New York under the title *Picasso Baby*.

²² Brian Hiatt, op. cit., 69.

That statement shows that Madonna continues to struggle with the big issues of modern society, including discrimination against women, which in her opinion is generally present. The question is whether the unequal position of women in relation to men is a concern for personal reasons, or if it is a problem to be solved for the common good? I could dedicate a special study to this subject, analyzing all of her most important interviews and statements made on this topic, developing the interpretations of various art theorists.



The cover of Madonna's new album *Rebel Heart* (2015)

Recently, Madonna released the video for the song *Bitch I'm Madonna* – an explicit message that may be able to offer some solutions for the interpretation of Madonna's current status in pop culture. The video features some of the biggest stars of today - Beyoncé, Kanye West, Nicki Minaj, Katy Perry and many others. Each of them justified their presence in the video with the sentence "Bitch I'm Madonna."²³ This video has had the opposite effect of shock, because it seems that Madonna, after almost four decades, needed 'confirmation' that she is still the queen of pop, and that her age does not represent any limitation. But once again she succeeded – the song *Bitch I'm Madonna*, featuring Nicki Minaj, brought Madonna back to the *Billboard Hot 100* for the first time since 2012.

We can say that Madonna represents the archetypal postmodern, (post)feminist woman, constantly contesting and reworking her identity. According to Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, the key to her identity is that it cannot be fixed. As she explains in an interview in her documentary *Truth Or Dare* (1991) – or, as it was known in Europe, *In Bed with Madonna* – we never have access to the 'real' Madonna.²⁴

²³ *Billboard*, one of the more well-read magazines on popular music, published an article titled "Why Madonna's Bitch I'm Madonna Video is the Video She Needed to Make". In it, they discuss why this video spot was necessary to Madonna – to restore/sustain positive comments on her latest album, *Rebel Heart*, which was assessed as its complete fiasco. See more at: <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop-shop/6605116/madonna-bitch-im-madonna-video-analysis>, ac. 25. 06. 2015 at 18.10 PM.

²⁴ Stéphanie Genz, Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Text and Theories*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, 118.