

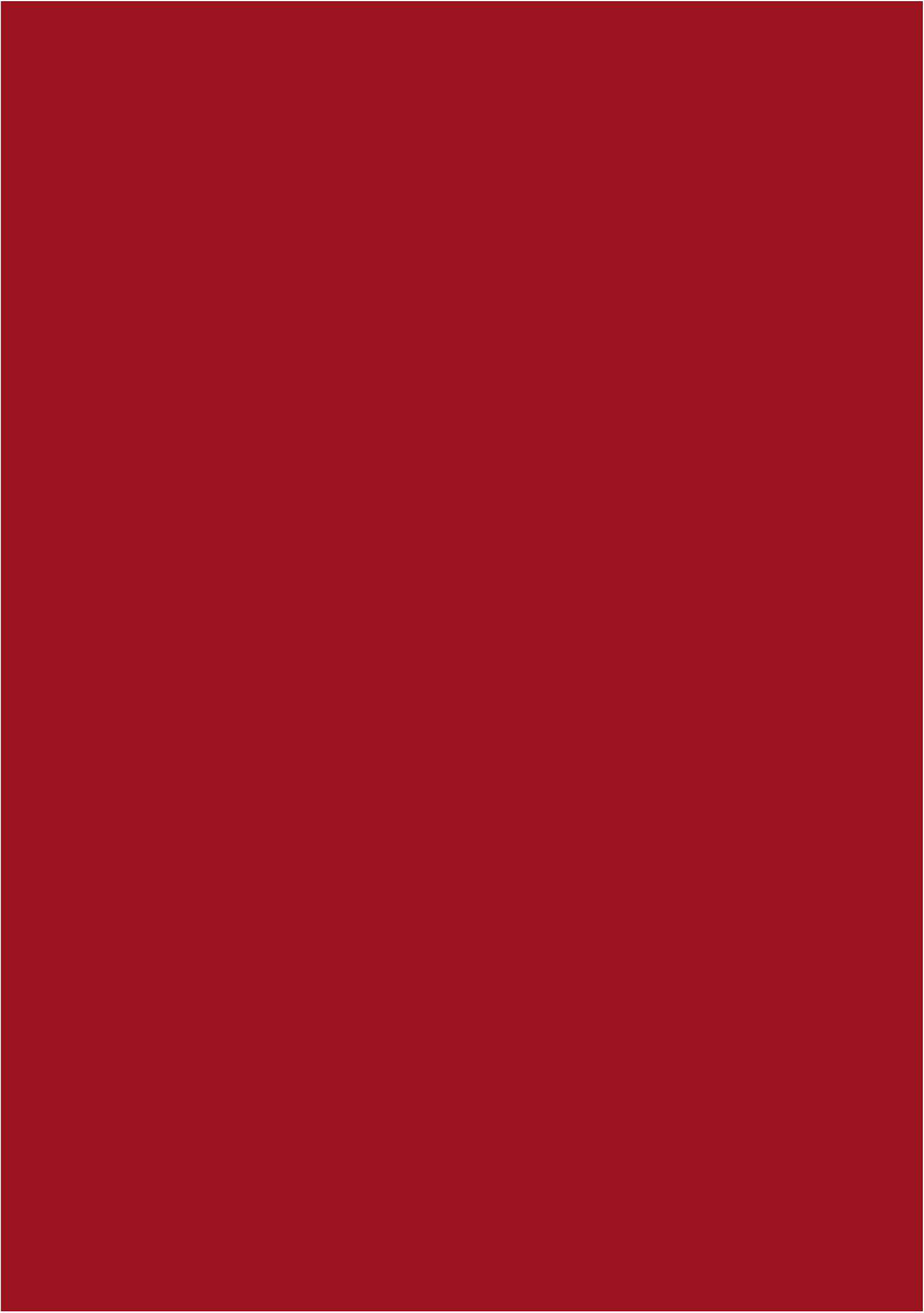
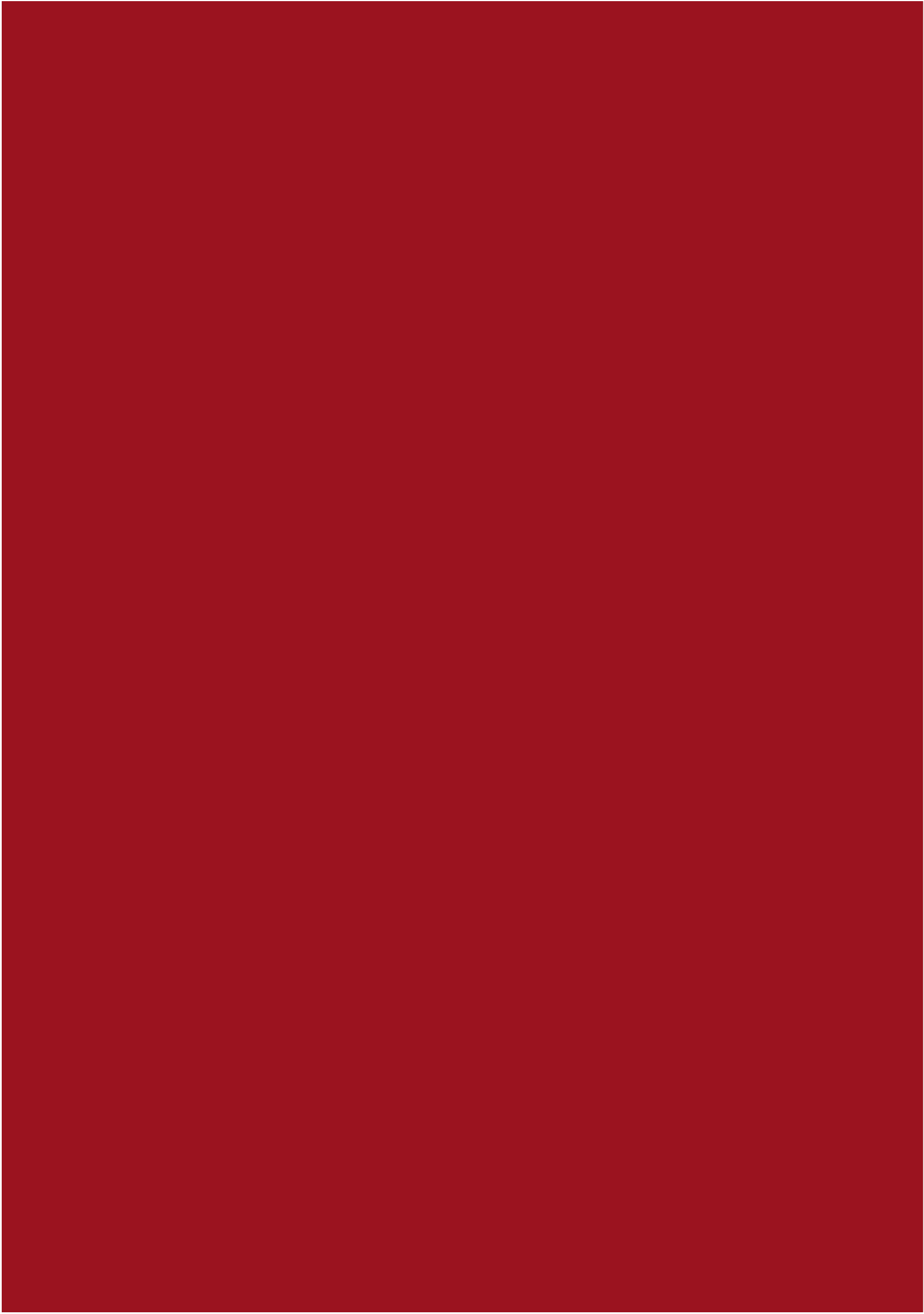


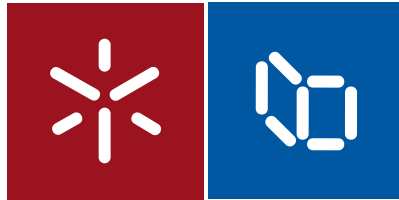
Orquídea da Conceição L. F. M. Santos Cadilhe

'Cher', between the myth of celebrity and the empowerment of minorities. Transmutations of the 'unruly woman'

Universidade do Minho  
Instituto de Letras e Ciências Humanas







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Tese de Doutoramento

**Doutoramento em Modernidades Comparadas:  
literaturas, artes e culturas  
Literatura Comparada**

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação da

**Professora Doutora Ana Gabriela Vilela Pereira  
de Macedo**

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## **Acknowledgments**

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Professor Ana Gabriela Macedo, who once listened to a very incipient research proposal and believed enough in what she heard to accept the case study. Professor Macedo has guided and encouraged me to carry on, often with long doses of patience, through the subtleties of scientific writing.

I am also very thankful to the teaching and research staff at the Centre for Humanistic Studies at the University of Minho (CEHUM), which have taken time to discuss and enrich my work and provide me with a very stimulating environment. Particularly valuable were the research seminars that I have attended and participated in throughout these years, as well as a wide range of opportunities to present my then, work in progress. My gratitude to the professors of the Doctoral Program in Comparative Modernities, who have always encouraged my work, namely professor Orlando Grossegeesse (then CEHUM director), to professor Laura Triviño Cabrera, and professor Rogério Miguel Puga, who have created the financial conditions that allowed me to participate in conferences at the University of Malaga, Spain, and at NOVA University in Lisbon, respectively. These experiences will leave marks beyond this thesis.

I would like to thank all my PhD colleagues, with whom I have shared moments of both anxiety and excitement.

Some special words of gratitude go to my friends who were a major source of support when things would get a bit discouraging: Laura, Carol, Sam, Fabi, Ella, Adriana, and Mansour, as well as my dear friends Fátima, Nani, and António who were always 'at hand' whenever I needed them. I want to express deep gratitude to my dear friend Sarah Tesdale who, from across the Atlantic, has always gone off her way to make me feel strong enough whenever times, for a variety of reasons, were somewhat tough. Thank you guys for always being there for me.

To my mom, who would be very proud of me, only if she could be at least 'mentally' present. To my daughter Mafalda. To Cher who, without being aware, has provided me with so much inspiration, resilience, and empowerment.

## **STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY**

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration.

I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Code of Ethical Conduct of the University of Minho.

# **‘Cher’, entre o mito da celebridade e o empoderamento das minorias. Transmutações da “mulher desviante”**

## **Resumo**

Esta tese propõe o estudo do conceito de “mito da celebridade”, enquanto fenómeno cultural, em diálogo com os estudos performativos e os estudos de género. O objetivo foi investigar o impacto de ícones da cultura popular na sociedade contemporânea, questionar até que ponto estes contribuem para ruturas e mudanças sociais e, por último, demonstrar o potencial destas figuras para desconstruírem representações dominantes e terem, portanto, um papel político-social. Em particular, investiguei como a artista Cher tem vindo a dar um contributo crucial a esta dinâmica uma vez que persistentemente representa o mito da “mulher desviante”, a qual adota um infinito número de atitudes transgressoras e ameaça normas específicas da ideologia dominante. Analisei igualmente as relações intersemióticas entre tais representações alternativas como reescritas empoderadoras de representações dominantes, nomeadamente representações que abordam questões étnicas, papéis de género e de cidadania. Analisei ainda como Cher insiste em se colocar em espaços liminares, ajudando a promover a interseção entre margem e centro e a eliminar as linhas de divisão entre grupos sociais.

**Palavras-chave:** Cher, cultura da celebridade, fandom, performance, reescrita

# **‘Cher’, between the myth of celebrity and the empowerment of minorities. Transmutations of the ‘unruly woman’**

## **Abstract**

This dissertation discusses the concept of the ‘celebrity myth’ in the context of cultural studies in dialogue with performative studies as well as gender studies. It aims to research the impact of popular culture icons in contemporary society and question up to what extent they are catalysts of social ruptures and changes, ultimately demonstrating the potential for such figures to deconstruct dominant representations and thus perform a socio-political role. In particular, I have studied how the performer Cher has been playing a crucial role in these dynamics since she persistently embodies the myth of the ‘unruly woman’ who adopts an infinite number of transgressive attitudes and threatens distinctive roles of the dominant ideology. I have worked on the intersemiotic relations between such alternative representations as empowering rewritings of dominant ones, namely in performances that deal with ethnic, feminine, and feminist issues. I have also analyzed how Cher constantly places herself at liminal spaces and helps promote the intersection of margin and center as well as eliminate the lines of division between social groups both through her performances and her activism.

**Keywords:** Cher, celebrity culture, fandom, performance, rewriting



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Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.

– Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying – An Observation* (1891)

## **Introduction**

Keeping in mind the role myths play in society, I will be studying whether the celebrity who has risen to the status of a myth may work in a similar manner. This thesis will raise issues in the field of cultural studies, namely the celebrity cult, in the interface with gender and performative theories.

I will be debating these issues through the study of a number of examples and case studies, the most crucial of which being that of the entertainer Cherilyn Sarkisian (Cher). I will be looking at appropriations and adaptations of classical texts (by artists and their fans alike) and consider the way they both empower particular communities and result in the passing on of a legacy that may eventually lead to social transformations. Such texts will include the lyrics of songs, as well as their corresponding music videos and their live performances, films and their screenplays, television series and TV shows, some advertisements, art exhibitions, and magazine articles. I will explore and emphasize the positive outcomes of the celebrity culture and, ultimately, the theory will be applied to the study of Cher and how she rewrites the myth of the 'unruly woman', reflecting the transformation in American culture since the white ethnic revival of the 1970s and how its effects still linger today. In the process, she establishes herself as the personification of such myth when she engages in narratives that support hybrid identities.

Regarding the structure of this thesis, and taking into account that a parallel can be established between a myth (both as a god and as a tale) and an iconic celebrity, the first chapter, 'Myth', starts by elaborating on definitions of the word 'myth' and the reasons that underlie the creation, appropriation and rewriting of mythical stories in different social and cultural contexts throughout history. To further understand the connection between myths and the fandom phenomenon, this chapter also emphasizes the importance of Roland Barthes' theoretical studies on mythology as well as his use of Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to question the role of the author in producing the meaning of a text and allowing for multiple readings, namely in the context of postmodernism. The second part of the chapter, entitled 'The Myth of the Unruly Woman', refers to the origins of patriarchy and the subsequent depiction of women in the arts as sources of evil, in particular through specific stock figures such as Eve, the witch, the siren, the woman vampire, and the mermaid. Finally, the third part of the chapter, 'Celebrities and Myth', determines the reason why certain celebrities become icons and emphasizes the importance of studying them, in particular postmodern performers, in the context of cultural studies. This last part of the chapter also sets

the stage to the main body of the thesis, more specifically to its division in three chapters since it debates the types of representations that such performers tend to engage in, as well as the aesthetics, style, and politics that side them.

Chapter Two, 'Ethnicity and 'Unruliness' in Cherilyn Sarkisian's (Cher's) Performance', starts by offering a short biography of the performer chosen to be the central case study, followed by an overview of the impact of the arrival of 'new' immigrants in the beginning of the twentieth first century in the U.S.A., more specifically their relevance for the establishment of what would be known as the 'American identity', taken into account that her body of work has significantly been influenced by such background in combination with her own roots and upbringing. As a result, the chapter proceeds with the analysis of subversive ethnical performances of the artist that empathize with the marginal and help build a collective experience that culminates in an impressive number of followers and, therefore, with meaningful cultural and political implications.

Chapter Three, 'Femininity and Feminism in Cher's Performance. The role of religion', in turn, looks at the way representations of women have always been conditioned by the prevailing mentality of a particular time in history. I apply the notion of frame to representations of gender in popular culture and examine the way women have been resisting and reworking them. I start by studying the archetype of the 'damsel in distress' and a variety of portrayals of this 'framed woman', reporting as far back as to the Greek mythology to further analyze the processes adopted by feminist artists to 'unframe' such 'damsels', in particular Cher. I analyze her reworkings of the 'damsel in distress' in portrayals of characters on television shows, video clips, and films, as well as in public interventions for specific causes and show how counter-stereotypical images may be a highly effective way of fighting gender bias.

The aim of Chapter Four, "'Gender Trouble' and Monstrosity', is to present results of the impact of certain popular icons within the LGBTQIA in standing for the sexual rights of minorities, For the purpose, it was imperative to start the chapter by providing the reader with the repressive socio-cultural background of the post-World War II U.S.A., since it sets up the stage to the understanding of the significance of the figure of the rebel star for the gay community up to the present day. In particular, the case of James Dean is analyzed through the lenses of director Robert Altman and the film *Come Back to the Five & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, as well as Cher's major contribution for the cause in this particular film and in other performances throughout her career path both as an artist, with strong postfeminist, unruly performances and in her personal life. I will also focus on the negative role of religion in undermining such human rights and how she frequently defies religious standards of morality and analyze how, through the use of laughter and powerful carnivalistic transgressions, she is able to deconstruct what Mikahil



Bakhtin (1984) called the “classic body” and prove that femininity is a “masquerade” (Mary Russo, 1995) and that gender is socially constructed, as Judith Butler has brought to the fore in her groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble* (1999), and before that in *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of ‘sex’* (1993).

Chapter Five, ‘Why does it matter to Talk about Popular Icons?’ discusses the cultural relevance of popular icons and how their significance is associated to the fandom phenomenon, which, in turn, leads to ‘poaching’ (appropriation and remixing of positive role models, as defined by Henry Jenkins), participatory culture, and political intervention. As a final remark, we emphasize the fact that the domain of representation in popular culture is particularly important for historians to, as much as possible, try to accurately depict past events.

The Conclusion elaborates on the reasons which led us to determine that Cher is a pivotal case study worth reflecting upon, namely the fact that she has been a postmodernist and a postfeminist since her early years, and, therefore, much ahead of her time. She has undoubtedly proven to be an ‘unfinalized’ popular icon, with a huge media representation and consequent social impact as a controversial ‘celebrity’ that has never stopped being a ‘rebel with a wide variety of causes’, and has, therefore, remained a phenomenon of irreverence within popular culture, defying the myth of the celebrity’s passivity over decades.

## Chapter 1: 'Myth'

### 1.1. Myth, an Intertextual Story

The present chapter aims to give a general overview of the conceptualization and history of the concept of myth and the establishing of a mythography, within a variety of contexts, while taking into account the role played by performance in the context of cultural studies. The relevance of the concept of intertextuality and its articulation with myth theories will also be discussed here.

Definitions of the word 'myth' generally refer to gods and tales of human origins as the focus of belief. Such tales are, according to the American literary critic Meyer Howard Abrams (1999), stories in a mythology, that is, in "(...) a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (...) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (p. 170). On the gods and heroes in such stories, authors Peter Childs and Roger Fowler (2006) add that such characters, "may have instituted *a change*<sup>1</sup> in the workings of the universe or in the conditions of social life" (p. 146), while, in regards to why myths are invented, David Leeming (2005) explains, "(...) it has always been that adults have told stories to children to describe our journey, and leaders have told their people stories for the same reason", that is, because "We are always aware of the journey aspect of our existence" (p. vii). In this respect, myths can be seen as both dreams and metaphors. Just as the paintings in the Paleolithic caves are expressions of humanity's willingness to "leave a story" and an attempt to find an identity, so is myth. Leeming (2005) adds one must think of myths as both "cultural and universal human dreams" (p. vii). When comparing myths, it is inevitable to come across intricate and meaningful webs of intertextuality.

In 1957, while studying the social condition, Roland Barthes wrote in *Mythologies* (1991)<sup>2</sup>, "A myth ripens as it spreads" (p. 151). He was speaking about the way myth is, as Julie Sanders (2007) explains, "(...) persistently relocated in a new social and cultural geography at each occasion of adaptation and appropriation" (p. 63). Myths do not only spread; they are constantly being rewritten. Barthes (1991) goes on to say that, "Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication (...)" (p. 108). He was influenced by the work of the anthropologist

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<sup>1</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>2</sup> First published as *Mythologies* (1957).

Claude Lévi Strauss<sup>3</sup>, namely by his chapter “The Structural Study of Myth” from the book *Structural Anthropology* (1963), where he discusses what he considers an apparent paradox in myths: on the one hand they seem arbitrary (since they do not abide any logic and anything can happen in a myth), on the other hand, many cultures present similar myths. While context varies, both across cultures and across times, the structure of myths remains the same. He asserts that myth functions like language in the manner Ferdinand de Saussure described in “Nature of the Linguistic Sign” (1959) when he differentiates between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’ and concludes the linguistic sign is arbitrary (its meaning derives from its function within a linguistic system and, therefore, at a certain moment in time). After Saussure, the linguistic sign is considered unstable. Similarly, a myth has its ‘langue’, the synchronous structure that enables the specific ‘parole’ of a certain myth. Levi Strauss holds that a myth is not static and the different times see different versions of the same myth. There is, according to him, no ‘correct’ or ‘original’ version. All are valid for study because they are a product of contradicting values, which exist in every culture. The myth works to symbolically resolve cultural contradictions. He notes binary oppositions and the attempt at balancing them as common to myths and folk tales and concludes that they lay bare a human desire to reconcile conflicting aspects of life. Barthes understood that myths are political tools that tell cultural stories; that they belong to politics, economics, and ideology. Hans Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth* (1979) proposes that the function of myth is to help human beings cope with the inexorability of reality and considers the forms and variations of myths that survive are those that prove able to cope effectively with the changing social environment. Still, according to Blumenberg, myth is best conceived as an ongoing process, not as a fixed, final story.

Barthes made use of Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality when, eleven years after writing *Mythologies*, he moved away from structuralism and influenced the development of post-structuralism by questioning the role of the author in the production of the meaning of a text in “Death of the Author”. He states that, “(...) a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes, 1977, p. 143). According to him, the intertextual nature of any literary work always guides the reader towards new textual connections, which does not allow for the literary meaning to be established in its totality. The writer is considered the orchestrator of the ‘already-written’ and not its creator.

The term ‘intertextuality’ itself emerged in the mid-sixties and has roots in theories such as that of the Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (originally published in 1929). Bakhtin (1999) challenges the canonical historicist critique, which sees the novel as a homogeneous representation of reality that expresses the direct worldview of an author. In opposition, he develops the

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<sup>3</sup> First published as “*La Structure des Mythes*” in *Anthropologie Structurale* (1958).

concept of the polyphonic novel, which does not directly comply with the ideology of the author, but rather expresses the different 'voices' often contradictory, that permeate the text. The polyphonic novel is also characterized by a carnivalistic standing that questions the power of the dominant ideologies and institutions and thus the reality of any system<sup>4</sup>. The Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalization of literature is, in itself, already a theory of intertextuality. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982), written in the 1930s, Bakhtin defends that any language is intrinsically dialogic, that is, anything that is said is in answer to something that has been said before as well as it anticipates whatever will be said about it. As a result, language is dynamic, relational, and constantly 're-describes' the world. The dialogic work informs and is continually informed by the latter. Such a dialogue allows for the earlier work to be changed by the newer and vice-versa without losing its identity.

In 1966, under the influence of Saussure and Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva writes *Séméiotikè – Recherches pour une Sémanalyse* where she introduces the concept of intertextuality. In the chapter "Le Mot, le Dialogue et le Roman" she asserts the literary text is a work of assimilation and transformation because it is never just the product of memory: it rewrites its memory. Therefore, the intertextual perspective is always critical and 'text' means now 'a system of signs'. Kristeva (1980) writes, "(...) any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p. 66). Intertextuality is, as Manfred Pfister, Douwe Fokkema, and Susan Suleiman among others advocate, one of the most significant characteristics of postmodernism. For Fokkema (1984), "Postmodernism is convinced that the social context consists of words, and that each text is written over an older one" (p. 46). In turn, Suleiman (1991) states, "The appropriation, misappropriation, montage, collage, hybridization, and general mixing up of visual and verbal texts and discourses, from all periods of the past as well as from the multiple social and linguistic fields of the present, is probably the most characteristic feature of what can be called the "postmodern style" (p. 118). On her turn, Linda Hutcheon (1988) argues that the contradictory double code that is characteristic of postmodernism questions the available modes of representation while simultaneously recognizes that it must use such codes (p. 49). When postmodernism uses past forms, it establishes an ironic distance and, therefore, its use is linked to the concept of parody, which, in turn is intimately linked to that of intertextuality. Hutcheon considers that postmodern literature may involve a radical questioning of the forms of representation and, therefore, of the kind of knowledge available in a certain culture. As a postmodern literary genre, historiographic metafiction plays here an important role. Hutcheon (1987) coined the term and it is used for works of

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<sup>4</sup> 'Carnavalesque' refers to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos.

fiction that combine the literary devices of metafiction<sup>5</sup> with historical fiction<sup>6</sup>. Such works are also distinguished by frequent allusions to other artistic, historical and literary texts in order to show the extent to which works of both literature and historiography are dependent on the history of discourse. Hutcheon argues that some postmodern novels remind us that there is no historical narrative that transparently reports or represents the events: every historical narrative depends on the available narrative modes: the comic, the tragic, the romantic or the satirical, depending on the author's convictions. The historical facts reach the historian through what Gerard Genette calls 'paratexts': the historical documents he has to rely on and that are impregnated with traces of previous authors, with her/his own ideologies, assumptions, and discriminations. History consists, thus, of a wide web texts and the new narrative is the product of the struggle of the author to negotiate the path through a net of previous representations and forms.

As a result of the concept of intertextuality, as Ana Gabriela Macedo (2008) argues, the strategy of rewriting is pivotal, which, in turn, is closely related to the "death of the author". According to Macedo, intertextuality values the writer as a reader of cultural texts who rewrites them because of the undetermined textual construction of history and society and points to Barthes' statement, "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (p. 148). Matei Calinescu, in his influential essay "Rewriting" (1997) considers it consists of a group of ancient techniques of literary composition that includes imitation, parody, burlesque, transposition, pastiche, adaptation, and translation and that it is a core stone of postmodernity. Rewriting sets a new structure and a new perception into an older text.

According to Hutcheon, elements of the Greek parody<sup>7</sup> were adopted during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the artists who aimed at narrating the past while registering the differences brought about by modernity. Still, according to Hutcheon, postmodern parody does not despise the context of the past representations it cites but it makes use of irony to show one is inevitably alienated from such a past. In terms of historiographic metafiction, postmodern parody is, for Hutcheon, a way of rereading the past, which confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history. "Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 98). Moreover, as Graham Allen

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<sup>5</sup> Metafiction is a literary device used self-consciously and systematically to draw attention to a work's status as an artifact.

It poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.

<sup>6</sup> Historical fiction is a literary genre in which the plot takes place in a setting located in the past.

<sup>7</sup> In the Greek parody full elements of a work are withdrawn from their context and reused but not necessarily to be ridiculed.

(2000) asserts, intertextuality reminds us that every text is potentially plural, open to the readers' presuppositions, with no definite boundaries. Intertextuality reports to the impossibility of singularity, unity, and, therefore, unquestionable authority.

Rejecting the notion of an original, in a postmodern fashion, Marina Warner (1994), a storyteller and social anthropologist deeply interested in myths and myth-making, considers there is a secret cunning in myths in the sense that they *pretend* to present matter as it is and must always be (p. 419), which does not mean that they are immutable. In her opinion, myths can work as lenses onto human culture in their historical and social context and their stories can lead to others. These new stories, Warner adds, are as authentic as those of antiquity, which, in turn, derive from a long tradition of borrowing and mending, an activity of tailoring we should all engage in<sup>9</sup>. On myth, comments Hans Blumenberg (1990), "(...) one should think not only of attitudes of reverence and seeking favor but also of those of provocation, of forcing commitment, and even of malicious cunning, like that of Prometheus (...) To make the gods endure curses, mockery, and blasphemous ceremonies is to feel out and possibly to displace the limits on which one can rely" (p. 17).

As we will show, the myth of Prometheus is highly relevant to our research and must, therefore, be kept in mind throughout this thesis.

## 1.2. The Myth of Prometheus

There are different versions of the myth of Prometheus but one of the best known is Hesiod's. It tells how Prometheus toiled diligently over the creation of the first man from a lump of clay and how, when he realized his brother Epimetheus had bestowed all the qualities from the gods upon the other animals and had left none for humans, he devised the plan to steal fire from the gods and give it to them. Such actions

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<sup>9</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> Myths are not immutable and neither is the work of art. The questioning of copy and original recalls Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1939), where he discusses how the reproduction of a work of art can shape our view or 'reality'. In traditional societies, art was linked to a ritual or a religious experience and it could not be massively reproduced, therefore, it was only within reach of the upper classes. You were supposed to experience the 'aura' of the object, meaning the distance and reverence that only its uniqueness could offer. With the arrival of new art forms such as photography, differentiating between a copy and its original no longer makes sense and, thereby, the "aura" of the piece of art loses its meaning. The replica, a reproduction of an original piece of art, 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. The same applies to the myths that are rewritten.

share the principles subjacent to Prometheus' behavior: on the one hand, he is a thief and a transgressor, and, on the other hand, he is a savior. The literary theorist Ihab Hassan (1977) says, "Prometheus is himself the figure of a flawed consciousness struggling to transcend [...] divisions" (p. 207). Prometheus crosses borders between the human and the divine and allows mankind to overcome its limits through art and technology. His story symbolizes the defiance of tyranny and authority. Comparisons have been drawn between Prometheus' defiance of Zeus and the French revolution as well as between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (his attempt to reanimate life in the lifeless) and also the French revolution.

In *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley used the myth as a symbol of optimism: Frankenstein wishes to "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (Bennett, 1990, p. 40). According to Shelley, Prometheus "used knowledge as a weapon to defeat evil, by leading mankind, beyond the state wherein they are sinless through ignorance, to that in which they are virtuous through wisdom" (Lederer, 2002, p. 65). In the end of the novel, when Victor Frankenstein is dying, he tells his friend Walton:

Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of your distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed (Shelley, 1992, p. 210).

In the beginning of the novel the monster is a curious, rational, and intelligent being with feelings. Abandoned by his creator he undergoes a process of self-education and search for human companionship. He struggles with matters of identity and personal history and tries to find a place in society but suffers from loneliness and is sad that he cannot find an equal. He becomes an assassin because he rebels against his creator and the treatment he gets from humans. The challenge Frankenstein embraced does not seem to be what Shelley wants to condemn. She criticizes the fact that he rejects the creature he created.

Another myth one can simply not ignore is that of the 'unruly woman'.

### 1.3. The Myth of the 'Unruly Woman'

The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

Who surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a (...) divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her ((...) to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she is trouble.

- Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976)

The feminist critic Mary Daly (1984), drawing on the scholarship of a number of leading mythographers, writes that mythologies around the world originated in the worship of the mother goddess as the source and destination of all life, that is, she was considered to be the origin of the universe and all creation was perceived as being of her substance (p.47). However, according to Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor (1987), the advancement of food-management techniques and the decrease in the need for hunting during the Neolithic period altered men's role in society. The latter speculates that the new task of guarding food supplies from thieves, in parallel with substantial developments in the use of metals during the Bronze Age, generated an interest in warfare. Women, who had had a primarily role in society, became, along with children, animals, land, and resources, prizes in a new regime of raid and conquest and male gods started to make sense. The link between the body of the god and creation could no longer be established since the male body can neither produce offsprings nor feed them. As a result, the notion of an original oneness became dualized and the universe, including god, was dislocated from the self and objectified. Sjöö and Mor relate this change to the emergence of the rigid class system of royal masters and slave laborers that coalesced around the new patriarchal elite. A pattern of structures of binary opposition have organized our thinking and decreed that woman shall operate as the negative of man. They started appearing in myths and legends as only passive victims or as sirens.

Associations of the feminine with transgression and monstrosity in Western culture can be traced as far back as to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Eve's characterization symbolizes the essence of women as a group, that is, one of inept, immoral, and corrupt human beings. The number of classical representations of 'daughters of Eve' is countless, manifesting patriarchal concerns with the role of



women in society, namely the threat they represent to men's status quo as well as trying to assure traditional roles will remain as such. On the subject, comments Virginia Allen (1983), "(...) the original source of the *femme fatale* (...) is the dark half of the dualistic concept of the Eternal Feminine - the Mary/Eve dichotomy" (p. ii). The polar oppositions of soul and body, spirit and flesh were established in the scriptures and the feminine maternal woman is not supposed to be erotic or else she will not attain virtue. In her influential book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) refers, "All Christian literature endeavors to exacerbate man's disgust for woman" (p. 221). She further asserts that Christian ideology played a major role in women's oppression. Looking at John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, one finds a classical example of such representations. At a point Adam asks why God created women and the rhetoric is blatantly misogynistic:

(...) Oh! why did God,  
Creator wise, that peopl'd highest Heav'n  
With Spirits Masculine, create at last  
This novelty on Earth, this fair defect  
Of Nature, and not fill the World at once  
With Men, as Angels, without Feminine,  
Or find some other way to generate  
Mankind? This mischief had not then befall'n,  
And more that shall befall, innumerable  
Disturbances on Earth through Female snares,  
And strait conjunction with this Sex (...)  
(Milton, 1968, X. 888-98)

Virginia Woolf (1989) in *A Room of One's Own* stresses Milton's patriarchal view when she advises the reader to "look past Milton's bogey" (p. 117). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000)<sup>10</sup> in their

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<sup>10</sup> First published in 1979.

pioneering work *The Madwoman in the Attic* also address Milton's passage to conclude that he hints that Eve is a monster. Interestingly, as they point out, Milton's Eve falls for the same reason that Satan does, that is to say, her concern with questions of equality: by looking for nourishment in the Tree of Knowledge she is aiming at being "as Gods" (p. 196) and when she is excluded from the garden of the gods, she is in fact being excluded from "the garden of poetry" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 191) and thus not being allowed to have 'a voice'.

The phrase 'femme fatale' appeared around 1900, while many of the images to which authors refer to when they use it showed up before. She was a recurrent figure of the arts and literature of the Aesthetics, Decadents as well as Symbolists and visually speaking she was a presence in the style of the Art Nouveau. Virginia Allen (1983) refers "(...) one social factor underlying the birth of the femme fatale was the threat to men inherent in feminism" (p. ix). By the time, many women were beginning to declare their sexual and political freedom and being viewed as 'femme fatales', a phrase that, as V. Allen states, expressed what many men felt regarding such women: desire and fear. According to the latter, it seems that the 'femme fatale' is nothing but a variation on the ancient theme of the temptress with a stronger emphasis in the erotic. In this context, Susan Bordo (2003) considers that "during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially (...)" there is a trend to represent the "dark, dangerous, and evil female" (p. 161).

A set of cultural expectations, namely in terms of gender roles, is indoctrinated through classical fairy tales where the role of the witch is of particular significance. Barbara Creed (2007) considers that the witch is a figure "represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order" (p. 76). Frequently deformed and displaying animalistic traits, she has become the most widely recognized symbol of female monstrosity. Creed points out how a witch is defined as "irrational, scheming, and evil" (p. 76) and associated with "abject things: filth, decay, spiders, bats, cobwebs, brews, potions, and even cannibalism" (p. 76). In the storybooks, she often has dark hair and is of dark complexion, helping to establish the prototype of the dark-evil women. Cixous (1976) perceives men as colonizers of a 'dark continent' (Freud's term), meaning colonizers of women. As she puts it, women are "dark" and "Dark is dangerous" (p. 878) and therefore men fear "being 'taken', being lost in them" (p. 877). Another group of women transgressors are the hybrid sirens and mermaids that possess tempting beauty in a body that is partially human and partially animal. These, rather than just use their beauty, they apply their voice to seduce and bring misfortune to those who listen to them, symbolizing the danger women's voice represent to the male world. The vampires, with bat-like fangs and wings, are also among the mythological figures that possess animalistic features. Sarah Sceats (2001) considers Victorian

vampirism “provided a powerful vehicle for the expression of anxieties about unbridled sexuality (especially women's) (...)” (p.108). When speaking of women vampires Creed (2007) asserts, “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” (p.61). In turn, Sceats (2001) states that when the vampire is the woman, “conventions of activity and passivity are overthrown” (p.118): the woman becomes the penetrator and the man the passive recipient. As she puts it, “whatever they [vampires] are, it is positively Other (...) Being ‘undead’ involves an indeterminate permanently ambiguous metaphysical condition and definition, about life, death, and immortality (...) their ambiguity is manifest, their essence contradictory: they confuse the roles of victim and predator” (p. 107).

As Ana Luísa Amaral and Ana Gabriela Macedo point out in *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista* (2005), taken to extremes, the concept of ‘deviance’ is akin to Creed’s definition of the “monstrous feminine”<sup>11</sup> (p.35), which, in turn, implies that what lies behind the construction of woman’s monstrosity is always her gender. She is always defined in terms of her sexuality and her ‘subalternity’.

We will now concentrate on the relation of the concept of myth and that of the making of a ‘celebrity’.

#### 1.4. Celebrities and Myth

Sometimes a woman is destined to be super. She can be prophesized and called to duty, or she can be created in a lab. She can be an Ink-stained Amazon gracing the pages of comics, or a warrior woman of the digital or silver screens.

- Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: superwomen in modern mythology* (2010)

Far more than men, women [stars] were the vessels of men's and women's fantasies and the barometers of changing fashion. Like two-way mirrors linking the immediate past with the immediate future, women in the movies reflected, perpetuated, and in some respects offered innovations on the roles of women in society.

- Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (2016)

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<sup>11</sup> The *Malleus Maleficarum* (2007) describes how the aberrant witches were supposed to possess an extra nipple.

There is a substantial difference between the entertainer who merely becomes a celebrity and the one who ascends to the status of an icon and, therefore, functions, in many regards, as a myth does. To determine what makes a celebrity an icon one must look at the definition of both words. While 'celebrity' refers to the state of being well know or famous, 'icon' points to someone who is regarded as a representable and enduring symbol and as worth of veneration. Since being labeled an icon is the product of the number of fans a celebrity gathers and the cult that they build around themselves, one must look at the 'dialogue' that is established between the entertainer and the public and at the 'readings' produced by the latter. Says Matt Hills (2002), "[Icons] become cult figures when their image is wrested from the industry and adopted by the audience" (p. 138).

Entertainers have a place in the production/consumption dialectics of a media text, that is, its ideology, and, in order for them to be venerated and, therefore, a cult to be established around them, they must embody what is to thrive and survive in an oppressive society, emotionally reaching out to fellow oppressed. Such entertainers expose social contradictions and/or embody an alternative or oppositional ideology to the dominant one. Judith Mayne (1993) claimed that, "(...) the appeal of stardom is that of constant reinvention, the dissolution of contraries, the embrace of wildly opposing terms" (p. 138). They are 'subversive' or interventionist performers who struggle over representation. They may raise political issues directly, indirectly (through aspects of lifestyle) or by what Richard Dyer (1998) calls "sex-role typing", meaning how some artists "(...) 'resist' some aspects of the stereotyping process" (p. 3). Diane Negra (2001) looks at stars as cultural texts that show our understanding of gender, ethnicity, as well as national identity, which explains the fact that cultural studies have been highly interested in looking at stars. Stars are related to ideologies and many attempts to reconcile apparently disparate facets of social experience. Negra (2001) emphasizes how stardom is a relevant form of social knowledge due to the fact that so many people are familiar with it at high levels (p. 8). When we talk about stars we are indirectly talking about our culture and the belief systems that structure it. They serve as a crucial link between representation and reality and are representative of the complex relationship between representation and social history. On his turn, Barry King (1986) considers that stardom provides a 'collective register'. He claims:

In principle, the role of stardom must be seen, if I can coin a phrase, as that of providing a 'collective register'. This term is intended to indicate two aspects of a recurrent process. Firstly, that the stars are taken to indicate something about the state of collective experience, conscious or unconscious. Secondly,

that what the stars represent is otherwise suppressed by the prioritized realities of the dominant culture (p.155-6).

One must consider that stars function to represent the organizing concept of a film but the star persona has its own kind of continuity that precedes and transcends any individual film role. According to Dyer, so that the image created by the performer achieves a high level of sincerity, her public as well as her publicly personal image must collide. Only this way can the performer reach wide audiences<sup>12</sup>. In order to do so, she must display a fluid shifting self, a self 'under construction'. Dyer is of the opinion that a series of shots of an entertainer whose image shifted throughout her career, other than work to fragment her, can confirm a core, a coherence, a unity, and a name that says it all. All is in her name. In *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), Dyer points out; "A major trajectory of 20<sup>th</sup> century high literature has examined the disintegration of the person as stable ego, from the fluid shifting self of Woolf and Proust to the minimal self of Beckett and Sarraute" (p. 50) and in *Stars* (1979) he mentions how some entertainers present certain 'male/female characteristics' as personality driven other than gender-specific, such as aggressiveness and gentleness. Merely for historical and cultural reasons are they associated with one gender of another. In *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, the feminist film critic Molly Haskell (2016) chronicles women's images in film and mentions the superwoman as an intelligent, imaginative female character who adopts 'male characteristics' (p. 112) in order to enjoy male prerogatives or survive. When Dyer and Haskell point to these particular traits of the empowering performer, they are setting the stage to an understanding of the powerful role of the postmodern performer in these dynamics.

Postmodernism, in fact, questions and deconstructs classical representations of gender. Judith Butler, being one of the most influential proponents of a postmodern approach to gender, advocates the latter is a mere performativity and that the hyperfemininity of drag performance works as an illustration to the constructed nature of gender. The aesthetics of 'drag camp'<sup>13</sup> is thus seen as a performative critique of gender. When queer influenced camp exaggerates sexual characteristics and certain mannerisms, it can be said it presents sexual behavior as performative. Judith Halberstam (1998) considers gay culture

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<sup>12</sup> When the actors are chosen to play cameos, they are in fact having their onscreen personality being matched with their off-screen one. It does not mean that they are a perfect match but they are viewed as a close call and the latter might, in fact, substantially influence the first, which allows for a certain 'aura' to be created around them and fandom to be established.

<sup>13</sup> Camp is a style characterized by superficiality and based on deliberate and self-acknowledged theatricality and, therefore, liked and embraced by postmodernists.

crucial to any discussion of camp because masculinity is commonly perceived as natural. It is “unadorned and unperformed” (p. 246): males performing femininity subvert these ‘authentic’ aesthetics through camp. Pamela Robertson (1996) argues that camp icons such as Madonna and even Mae West, a former vaudevillian, used pop culture as a political and critical instrument in the deconstruction of masculinity and femininity (p. 134). In the film industry of the 1930s and 1940s the actress Mae West played a major role in depicting outrageous women who would perform comic attacks on Puritan attitudes toward sexuality and as she aged she kept making a spectacle of herself with grotesque campy performances of femininity, what Rowe (1995) calls a model for the Muppet femme fatale Miss Piggy. In *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), West is a burlesque barroom singer, who has an ironic attitude toward romance and presents herself:

(...) especially her gendered self, as visual construct or image, created through a performance of femininity that exaggerates its attributes and thus denaturalizes it; and a comic gender inversion that reduces men to interchangeable sexual objects, while acknowledging (...) that men make the rules of the game (Rowe, 1995, p. 119).

For West, being a spectacle is a way of ensuring her power over men. In a similar vein, Robert C. Allen (1991), points out that burlesque created an “upside-down world of enormous, powerful women and powerless, victimized men” (p. 206). He goes on to say that:

(...) burlesque's principal legacy as a cultural form was its establishment of patterns of gender representation that forever changed the role of the woman on the American stage and later influenced her role on the screen (...). The very sight of a female body not covered by the accepted costume of bourgeois respectability forcefully, if playfully called attention to the entire question of the "place" of woman in American society (R. C. Allen, 1991, p. 258-259).

West had an ambiguous sexual image that made her appealing to gay men as a ‘female-female’ impersonator, that is, she kept representing sex as a matter of style, by adopting the style typical of male drag queens. This campy image has been presented outside the romantic comedy in the figures of

actresses such as Joan Crawford and Carmen Miranda<sup>14</sup>, the famous Portuguese-Brazilian actress and singer, symbol of cultural hybridity.

Through identification with these icons women also take a leap and escape the bounds of reductive views of femininity. By performing excessive gender, says British performance artist Catherine Elwes (1985), in a kind of female-female drag, such women incite a large gay following, camping, and dragging of them. They are, therefore, not objectified the way women are when objects of the heterosexual male gaze. Their image works to empower minorities. Fabio Cleto (1999) defines excess as “the engine of critical reflection” (p. 5) of camp and Jack Babuscio (1999) claims “Camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and in particular sex roles, are superficial - a matter of style” (p. 123). ‘Camp’ means the parodic embracing and recycling of what is rejected or considered abject by mainstream culture. Camp refutes fixed meanings and refers, according to Cleto (1999), “to a quality of the object not existing prior to its nomination” (p. 10). 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” (Cleto, 1999, p. 11).

In a wider context, feminist scholars have been reinforcing the importance of the postmodern dispersal of the subject since deconstruction seems to support their efforts to open up the “subject category” (Angela McRobbie, 2005, p. 107) to women. McRobbie (2005) talks about a new set of interests in cultural studies and in sociology that emerged in the mid-1980s when postmodernism first came forth. She mentions “(...) a concern with surface, with meaning being paraded as an intentionally superficial phenomenon (...) stripped of its old hidden elitist difficulty (...) already familiar (...) a cover version of an original which never was (...) full of jokes (...)” (p. 2-3).

When looking at postmodern female performers in the field of music, one must not disregard the aggressively feminine postmodern diva. “They have a hardened, sometimes aggressive feminine side (...) they are almost as hyperfeminine as drag queens” (n/p), says psychotherapist Joe Kort (2016)<sup>15</sup>. As such, divas are particularly appealing to the gay community. They are emulated and venerated because hyperfemininity mocks the strong division of sexes (as drag does). These images can be read as gender parody, an acknowledgment of fictionalized production. The meaning of the word ‘diva’ is closely related to that of ‘prima donna’: usually a soprano, she is a leading female singer and, therefore, one to whom

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<sup>14</sup> In 2016, Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez published *Creating Carmen Miranda: Race, Camp, and Transnational Stardom*, in which she describes the methods Miranda used to shape a performance of race, gender, and camp culture.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-kort-phd/diva-worship-and-gay-men\\_b\\_1531309.htm](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-kort-phd/diva-worship-and-gay-men_b_1531309.htm).

the prime roles are given. Hyper femininity and drag can both be read as camp performances linked to the concept of replica and the instability of the subject.

Patriarchal representations are committed to repetition and try to establish and control the 'Other'. For that not to happen, says British performance artist Catherine Elwes (1985), women performers should "never stay the same long enough to be named, fetishized" (p. 173). Addressing the same issue, Judith Butler (1999) considers gender is a category constructed in 'performance', encrypted and forced upon by society. However, she argues that roles pre-established by society can be reversed if the cultural means are used to support another cause. Authors such as Bakhtin, Derrida, de Certeau, and Adorno value performance as a way of resisting dominant cultural models of behavior and suggest the concept of 'deviance' in repetition as responsible for the occurrence of cultural changes. In this context, Derrida introduces the notion of 'iterability', that is, a repetition with "a deferred, delayed, deviant, deferring force or violence that causes a difference" (apud Doria Leibetseder, *Queer Tracks: Subversive strategies in Rock and Pop Music*, 2016, p. 15). In this, Derrida sees a possibility for deconstruction of previous representations, bringing difference to the surface. Earlier on, in *Rabelais and his World* (1984) Bakhtin proposes that all words coexist in three dimensions, emphasizing the polyphonic nature of the 'word' itself as an ideological "arena"<sup>16</sup>:

(...) as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other's* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and finally, as my word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression (pp. 88-89).

Henceforth, Bakhtin sees all speech as involving citation of a previous speech, stressing though that no citation is ever entirely faithful since the context always varies. He argues that people continually "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" words from others, although they carry something of "their own expression, their own evaluative tone" (Ibid.).

According to Marvin Carlson (2004) speech always involves reproduction and flux, a creative tension between repetition and innovation, which, as he states, "deeply involved in modern views of

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<sup>16</sup> Expression used by Bakhtin in: M. Bakhtin (Volosinov, V.N.), (1929;1973), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Seminar Press, 1973.



performance” (p. 59). De Certeau further debates ‘the practice of everyday life’, in which the role of the spectator expands into that of participant. As Joseph Roach (1995) explains, “De Certeau’s ‘practice’ has itself enlarged into an open-ended category marked ‘performative’” (p. 46). Such spectator, when he/she becomes participant, is most certainly using repetition to deconstruct normative representations, of, for instance, gender, ethnicity, or class. Adorno (2008), in turn, suggests that human activity:

(...) is characterized above all by the fact that the qualitatively new appears in it, that it is a movement that does not proceed in pure identity, in the pure reproduction of what has already existed; it is movement in which there is novelty and which acquires its true character through that novelty (...) (p. 251) .

In the context of performance, this means that fans do not simply always replicate their idols: frequently, they add personal interpretations when they ‘incarnate’ them and/or follow their paths in some way.

Such a perspective goes hand in hand with the concepts of replica and instability of the subject and, therefore, with the phenomena of drag and camp. Drag queens easily corroborate this premise since they replicate and ‘cite’ the divas they revere and represent an unstable subject whose gender is performative but inevitably, they also add a personal touch to their performances since the latter are the result of a previous evaluation of their object of adoration. The reason drag queens do so is because such divas do, themselves, use excess femininity often as a way of reproducing and simultaneously deconstructing gender and cultural stereotypes. By imitating them, they are also achieving the same effect. We will have the opportunity to study such cases throughout this dissertation.

In a review of Roland Barthes’ new edition of *Mythologies*, Marco Roth wrote in *The New Yorker* of April 18, 2012 how in “Myth Today” Barthes “(...) explains how the coverage of royal weddings, sensational crimes, (...) advertisement for cleaning products and food constituted a language with rules as codified as those of the classical French theatre he’d studied” (p. 19). He further argues that Barthes’ essay and on professional wrestling had a direct influence on Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp”, as well as pretty much every subsequent, serious exaltation of low or popular arts and culture, since it, “(...) makes us see the spectacle and its actors (...) - through style – and reminds us that the word ‘theory’ really just means a way of seeing things” (p. 19). In his essay, Barthes (1991) considers that professional wrestling is a staged spectacle acting out society’s basic concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, of “suffering, defeat and justice” (p. 19). The characters portray grossly exaggerated stereotypes of human weakness and the audience expects to watch them suffer and be punished for their own transgressions of wrestling’s rules in a

theatrical version of society's ideology of justice. In a similar vein, Susan Sontag, in her essay "Notes on Camp", defines 'camp' as a sensibility that expresses itself not in content but in artifice, stylization, theatricalization, irony, playfulness, and exaggeration. Some postmodernist critics, feminists, and queer theorists have explored the ways that camp, namely the drag show can trouble the belief that gender is 'natural'. Camp style, by focusing on the outward appearance of roles implies that they are superficial, a matter of style and that manners are social codes. Cross-dressing, in particular, heightens the fact that sex roles are only roles, not innate or instinctual personal features. Other representations used by postmodern performers with the same purpose are those labeled by Creed as 'the monstrous feminine': that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject, monstrous. Such representations bring about the encounter between the symbolic order and what threatens its stability. They include the above-mentioned figures of the female vampire and the witch, as well as that of 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) states there is "nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female (...)" (p.14), pointing to its constructiveness. For Haraway (1991), 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" (p.33), she claims. Haraway is criticizing Enlightenment ideas when she ponders how women have historically been set aside from the technological world. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (2009), talking about the postfeminist cyborg of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, consider that "(...) cyberspace becomes a location where the distinction between the subject and the object, the self and the other, dissolves" (p.147) and where the Cartesian dualism of the subject is therefore transcended. The politics of the cyborg claim there is no such thing as "one code that translates all meaning perfectly" (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'" (p. 150). The paradoxical and sometimes conflicting ideas of the cyborg are very similar to the characteristics of the postfeminist 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. The transformational shifts that performers embody tend to personify transformations that are ideologically crucial. The degree of alteration in a star's persona is subject to the longevity of the star's

career, therefore, the longer her career is the more socially influential is the legacy of that person's work and she is more likely to ascend to the status of 'myth'.

According to Marvin Carlson (2004), looking at the performance that was taking place in Los Angeles, a 1990 report pointed to the fact that most of the identity performance was being produced by "(...) a coalition of women, gay men, African-American, Hispanic and young Asian-American artists whose aesthetics and politics challenge both the art world's and the media's version of our socio-cultural reality" (p. 177). By then, a feminist performance was particularly interested in questioning, exposing, and dismantling the cultural and social pillars governing the traditional roles assigned to men and women, the way the body was displayed on stage, as well as the performance of gender: the emphasis is now on the "(...) social construction of the body, the body as a carrier of signs, and with it the social construction of the subject in performance" (Valie Export, 1992, p. 33). In the 1980s and early 1990s the woman artist becomes a subject with a voice as opposed to the traditional role of the woman as the 'Other', the object of the male gaze.

The emphasis on the instability of repetition is an important characteristic of the modern political performance of resistance, especially that of women and ethnic artists. Instead of avoiding representations with strong ethnic nuances, these artists have systematically tried to use such material and subject it to ironic connotations. When playing such roles, the artists reveal a subversive and parodic self-consciousness typical of the contemporary engaged performance. Elis Diamond (1989) suggested the term 'mimicry' to talk about such performance, meaning a mimic distortion of the conventional doctrine of 'mimesis'. The French theorist Luce Irigaray considered that when Plato condemned mimesis, he was trying to control the proliferation of alternatives to a stable, patriarchal, monolithic truth. As an alternative to mimesis Irigaray (1985) chooses the term 'mimicry' that nullifies the vindication of a patriarchal truth and suggests women should "play with mimesis" and "assume the feminine role deliberately, which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (p. 76). Other theorists consider that what is behind the disturbing power of the 'mimicry' is the excess and exaggeration, the path taken by masquerade. Mary Ann Doane (1991) argues that masquerade "makes visible" the artifice of femininity, that is, what is supposed to remain concealed, the gap between an impossible role, 'femininity' as such, and the women playing it. She defines it as "to designate a mode of being for the other (...) the sheer objectification of reification of representation" (p. 33). Ultimately, she suggests that a woman playing a character in film can subvert 'real' traditional roles and "flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity – foreground the masquerade" (p. 81). In turn, Mary Russo (1995), influenced by Bakhtin, postulates a carnivalesque body acting,

conscientiously “making a spectacle of itself” (p. 85) to call the attention to performance as a process and a construction.

In his 1965 book *America Learns to Play - a History of Popular Recreation 1607-1940*, culture historian Foster Rhea Dulles explores how the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 “leisure activities” (such as films and vaudeville)<sup>17</sup>. Mark Winokur (1986) considers that the culture historians who came after Dulles and up to the 1980s view the Anglo-puritan culture as the founding half of a binary system: in the other half lays all the other cultural influences. He asserts Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson, among others, studied the disparity between history and its representation (or lack of it) by hegemonic groups interested in keeping an ‘official’ history. George Lipsitz (1998) 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” (p. 99). Caught in such a context is the ethnic woman who is even more marginalized since she fits neither into the category of white nor male. Having ‘played’ intensely with a new image of women during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, by the beginning of the twentieth century artists had created the stereotype of the “femme fatale”. V. Allen (1983) concludes that all descriptions of these women lead to a definition. She is always “(...) a woman who lures men into danger, destruction, even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms” (p. vii).

By the time Barthes published “Myth Today”, France had recently been engaged in a long war and a territorial occupation and was trying to recapture the prestige it had before the Second World War and hold on to its colonies in the North Africa and Southeast Asia. The French empire was still keeping nationalism at high levels while embracing consumerism and the use of mass media. Barthes, an admirer of Bertold Brecht, was following in the footsteps of Brecht’s friend Walter Benjamin, who examined the ideology of the ‘culture industry’ and revealed how the interest of the dominant classes were furthered through Hollywood films. Such a trend dominated the classic Hollywood period (1917-1960). Fortunately,

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<sup>17</sup> 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.

from then onwards, as Diane Negra (2001) reminds us, "(...) ethnicity is a discourse spoken with increasing sophistication in the interests of cultivating ethnic nostalgia or as a means of evading more contentious social differences at a time when we openly identify our society as a 'multiculture'" (p. 17). She goes on to say, "By fictionally enlarging the parameters of ethnic difference, contemporary films establish a safe plane on which to enact crises of difference far less volatile than crises of race or class, in the end working to conceal them" (p. 17). There are performers who, rather than attempt to leave their ethnicity behind, they choose to amplify their ethnic identities. Negra (2001) considers that the 'ethnic female star personae' is able to 'work to alleviate tensions between the myth of American culture as all-incorporating and the reality of a fragmented, divided society' (p. 9). In many of the narrative forms in which she appears, the figure of the ethnic woman is located outside of dominant American cultural values. She is associated with disruption, unruliness, excess and also innovation, having the ability to work to familiarize and reduce the threatening ethnic 'Other' and catalyze spectatorial fantasies of resistance and agency. Female filmgoers may engage and identify with a figure privileged to defy the order of a white and patriarchal society. Thus, representations of ethnic femininity promote the evasion from cultural strictures that disempowered women. On ethnicity comments Ella Shohat, (1991) "The very word ethnic, then reflects a peripheralizing strategy premised on an implicit contrast of norm and other (...)" (p. 215).

The 'probationary white', as Jacobson (1998) puts it, is usually devalued as ethnic in American culture and, therefore, seldom put under scrutiny. In the existing literature on ethnic performers it has generally been explored the most devalued ethnicities, assuming that the others were on more stable and privileged ground, which is not necessarily the case since they are located at a delicate liminal space. That being said, they are also strong tools of empowerment.

On his turn, the anthropologist Victor Turner (1991) defines liminal individuals or entities as being "(...) neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (p. 95). According to him, the liminal stage embodies optimism, a 'storehouse of possibilities', and a gestation period that precedes new life. The entertainer (who stands at a liminal space) is particularly fit to represent liminality and thus be politically significant. While reaching out to fellow oppressed, she manages to somehow remain attractive to her oppressor. Since the political power of an entertainer is masked, she is less easily resisted and becomes highly effective, which makes the entertainer a subject very interesting to be looked at.

Acknowledging plurality, the postmodern performer plays with allusion, reference, tribute, *mise en abyme*<sup>18</sup>, pastiche, and intertextuality. In a metafictional manner, the artist may self-consciously and systematically draw attention to her status as an artifact in order to question what reality is. Considering that everything has been said before, she proclaims the devaluation of the Benjaminian 'aura' of the object. Her discourse echoes other discourses but ultimately rewrites them because the star persona fluctuates, evolves, and adapts in relation to social history and by doing so is a source of empowerment. She transcends patriarchal limits of identity recoding images behind a mask and subverting command and control. Apart from the body of work of an artist; fan magazine stories, publicity photos, poster art, interviews, and reviews are also very consequential modes of discourse with substantial historiographical usefulness. Despite their low cultural status, such textual material can be both complex and richly illuminating. These materials are significant because they are able to mediate the space between performances and the public and are thus crucial in the building up of celebrity myths. They will, therefore, be subject of attention through this thesis.

## 1.5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, to this already long introductory chapter on the meaning and construction of the celebrity myth, one could say that the myth of 'celebrity' (the product of fandom or, in other words, the product of assimilation) signals the possibility of change in a social system that essentially desires conformity. Such a possibility answers the question why certain stars linger significantly in the popular imagination long after the height of their success, even long after their deaths and turned into myths. All these reflections will be substantively put to use and will help contextualize and critically consider the case studies we want to focus in this dissertation in a variety of angles and through different angles of analysis.

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<sup>18</sup> *Mise en abyme* occurs within a text when there is a reduplication of images or concepts referring to the textual whole. It is a play of signifiers within a text, of sub-texts mirroring each other. This mirroring can get to the point where meaning may be rendered unstable and, in this respect, may be seen as part of the process of deconstruction. The film-within-a-film is an example of *mise en abyme*.

## **Chapter 2: 'Ethnicity and 'Unruliness' in Cherilyn Sarkisian's (Cher's) Performance'**

I will now concentrate on the central case-study of my dissertation and start by having a close look at Cher's socio-cultural background as well as at the role the newly arrived immigrants of early twentieth century U.S.A. played in the new forms of entertainment, such as vaudeville, extravaganza, and burlesque, and their impact in the culture of the United States. Such aspects are crucial to understand how Cher came to be an icon of unruliness.

### **2.1. Cher's Roots and Socio-cultural Background**

Cher was born Cherilyn Sarkisian on May 20 1946 in El Centro, California, U.S.A. to an Armenian - American truck driver addicted to gambling and drugs (eventually convicted) and an American mother with, English, Irish, German, and Cherokee Indian ancestry. Three months into her wedding, her mother was pregnant and considering abortion<sup>19</sup> (she had found out about her husband's addictions and was living in poverty). She eventually divorced him when Cher was ten months old but would remarry twice. She pursued a career in modeling and acting under the name of Georgia Holt while working as a waitress and raised Cher and her half-sister Georganne, for most of the time, on her own, often moving from place to place with little money. Cher frequently recalls her humble, unsettling origins during interviews, namely the fact that she used to go to school wearing rubber bands around her shoes to keep the soles from falling off, which Cher's biographer J. Randy Taraborrelli associated to her "deep feelings of inadequacy" (Taraborrelli, 1986, p. viii). Cher's memories of the times her mother was married to her father are not the happiest: there was a time he pawned her mother's jewelry and once he almost set their house on fire because he was intoxicated.

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<sup>19</sup> In her U.S. TV documentary *Dear Mom, Love Cher* Cher comments, "I heard the abortion story when I was a teenager. The orphanage story has been a touchy one for my mum her whole life, and she didn't want to talk about it. I said, 'Mum, why didn't you just march in and take me?' "She said, 'I didn't have the power. I didn't have any money or a job, and the church was so strong. I'd go see you every day and you'd be crying. You don't know what it was like.' It was harder for women then." Cher insists, though, she is not ashamed to speak about her troubled upbringing, "So I come from a poor white trash background. It doesn't make any difference", she says.

There were times, though, when she lived comfortably, namely when Georgia was married to Gilbert LaPiere, a wealthy bank manager and she attended elite schools and lived in Beverly Hills. One of such schools was Mother Cabrini's High School in the San Francisco Valley, a Catholic school she has no good memories of because she could not understand the discipline imposed by the nuns. Her mother's friends included people from the gay community and she interacted with gay men from an early age. Finding herself at a liminal space, she claims, "I used to tell my mother she was going straight to hell when she died because she didn't do any of the things we were supposed to do." (Taraborrelli, 1986, p. 27). Another school she attended was a private prep school in Van Nuys, California, where the teachers used to complain about Cher's long hair (she would refuse to cut it) and disciplined her for coaxing her classmates to go to school barefoot. The school dean eventually suspended Cher for wearing clothes that she considered inappropriate school attire such as slacks, t-shirts, and boots.

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. Cheryl Napsha and Connie Berman (2001) cite 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'" (p.22). Once Cher, her mother, and sister went to Mexico and officials at the border did not want to allow Cher back into the country because they thought she was Mexican and was being sneaked over the border. The complexity of Cher's ethnic and economic background placed her, from a very early age, at a liminal space within society.

During her adolescence, she realized her looks were usually associated with irreverence and started emulating the Hollywood exceptions (such as Tina Turner) she began identifying herself with. By the age of 16 she was "rebellious, smart-mouthed (...) She was also a shy, awkward child with deep feelings of inadequacy stemming from a childhood dotted with periods of poverty and an unsettled home life", describes Taraborrelli (1986: viii). She was, as Taraborrelli (1986) puts it, "(...) a girl from the wrong side of the tracks (...)" (p. xiii). By then, she 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. It was the year of 1962 and the start of Cher's career as a backup singer on many recordings, including The Ronettes' *Be My Baby* and The Righteous Brothers' *You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'*. Fifty-five years ago Cher belonged to a 'no man's land' and as such, she was the type of girl who was easily unsettling to the national imaginary, even among the 'melting pot' of the United States and



basically, from the start of her career, her persona began to thematize what Negra (2001) calls 'ethnic chameleonism' by "referencing assimilation imperatives that have historically impacted both ethnic immigrants and persons of color" (p. 166).

## 2.2. American Identity and the 'New' Immigrants of Early Twentieth Century U.S.A.

In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at times of apparent prosperity but, nevertheless, of a certain fear about the efficacy of American economic politics and the ability to maintain cultural independence, many actresses, originally from Southern and Eastern European countries, arrived at the Hollywood scene. Others would be given fictional biographies to suggest that they had roots in such locations. These actresses would come to personify a category of new immigrants who were coming mainly from these regions. They were mostly Poles, Italians, and Jews and were visibly different from the precedent white population and constituted a threat to American cultural consensus. Actresses such as Pola Negri, Theda Bara, Lya de Putti or Nita Naldi came to play the role of the vamp and reflected the cultural need to regulate woman's sexuality in an attempt at ideological management. As Negra (2001) states, "(...) the vamp is a particularly potent marker of the transition from women's sexuality as in need of regulation for its own sake to a deep cultural investment in that process of control and regulation to bolster patriarchal norms" (p. 61). As in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century female labor outside the home grew, so did the vamp's problematization of women's work, expressing concerns regarding their access to work and its rewards. The American morality was being threatened and the vamp had to be discredited in order for 'the good girl' to be valued.

In particular, the vampire myth represents vampires as liminal figures since they are in between an old and a new world but possess a destructive power that is linked to their strong connections with their homeland and origins (after all vampires sleep in coffins filled with their native soil, which implies they can never totally adjust to a new culture) and the fact that they are constantly trying to convert others. These were the qualities some Americans feared new immigrants to possess, therefore, having the potential to contaminate the American population. The image of the female vampire functions not only as a sexual and ethnic contaminant but also as an economic one. It is linked to working women because the vampire is represented as a self-absorbed individual connected to city life and, therefore, its image does not fit the paradigm of the close family unit.

Nevertheless, immigrant ethnic women would end up playing an important role in the mythology of American identity and in the promise of a multicultural U.S.A. due to their discursive power. Negra

(2001) reflects, "(...) immigrant women, given the freedoms afforded by their entrance into a new culture, might indeed prove to be ungovernable, even ambitious" (p. 63). Diane Negra (2001) considers that "White ethnicities have consistently emerged as representationally useful in defusing social tensions by activating assimilation myths" (p.3). The success of such actresses entails discourses on hard work and sacrifice that, as Negra (2001) mentions, "reinvigorate myths of meritocracy" (p.3). On her turn, Susan A. Glenn (2000) considers that women's performances on the popular stage (in vaudeville, the music hall and the burlesque) may have influenced and framed women's performances on the political stage.

While on the theatrical stage of the 1920s the women's movement was repressed by men when they re-presented women's bodies as commodities for mass consumption, women performers were learning how to negotiate theatricality and femininity and, at the same time, become producers of their own theatrical spectacles, building caricatures around modernized female images as a vehicle for having their own voice heard in male-dominated public spaces. They became a major contribution to the feminist movement in culture, in particular, and to the empowerment of minorities in general.

From the end of the 1920s on, though, sound film caused live theater to decline and lose its influence in public life and women found fewer opportunities to engage in self-styled theatrical irreverence and creative autonomy. With the Great Depression, talking pictures provided an affordable alternative to live entertainment and the cinema replaced the spontaneity and intimacy of the stage. The Hollywood studio gave women as performers less room to maneuver, experiment, innovate, and take risks and the free spirit was replaced by a more thematically conservative style. That female spirit of irreverence could still be found in sound comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s such as those of Mae West: the film script from *My Little Chickadee* (1940) closes with a reversal of male/female roles when the male character tells West's, "You must come out and see me sometime." and West answers, "I'll do that, my little chickadee." The scene articulates, as Glenn (2000) puts it, "(...) in humorous terms, the fear of gender inversion (...)" (p.218). These were, however, very rare exceptions. In the late 1930s and early 1940s the wisecracking, headstrong, worldly career women played by stars such as Katherine Hepburn existed only to be tamed and the domestic world ends up looking like a happier place for both sexes. In the 1960s, the second wave of feminists, unlike the suffragists, who tried to convince the public that the typical activist could be pretty and charming, made a spectacle of abandoning middle-class feminine beauty (high heels, makeup, high fashion) and popular culture turned into a force for their oppression, an enemy rather than a vehicle for liberation. Simultaneously, though, they also "(...) borrowed the notion of self-determination, adopted from anti-colonial struggles, and political ideas from American civil rights

and black power movements” (Bhavnani & Coulson, 2003, p. 74), from which the slogan ‘sisterhood is powerful’ emerged.

Women of color, though, began to challenge hierarchies of power within feminism and alternative women raised their voices, pointing to the specificities of their experiences that came from diverse positions, which combined woman with ethnicity, class, sexuality, dis/ability, age, and other variants. By the 1980s, a theoretical movement associated with deconstructive challenges to identity politics had emerged. As Ann Brooks (1997) explains, “Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks” (p. 4). For her, postfeminism gives voice to marginalized, colonized and indigenous women who question the possibility of a universal feminist ‘sisterhood’. In *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista*, Ana Gabriela Macedo and Ana Luísa Amaral (2007), argue that the concept of ‘postfeminism’ may reflect the fact that nowadays, there is a multitude of feminisms or a ‘plural’ feminism that recognizes difference (in terms of race, class, geopolitical location) as a refusal of a hegemonic type of feminism over another (p. 154).

Although only acknowledged as a cultural phenomenon and discursive system in the late twentieth century, its first reference appeared after the vote for women had been gained by the suffrage movement in a journal founded by a group of female literary radicals in 1919 in Greenwich Village, as Nancy Cott (1987) writes in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, “(...) ‘we’re interested in people now – not in men and women.’ They declared that moral, social, economic, and political standards ‘should not have anything to do with sex’, promised to be ‘pro-woman without being anti-man’, and called their stance ‘postfeminist’” (p. 292). Yet, this manifestation of postfeminism did not develop in a meaningful way, among other reasons, due to the First and Second World Wars.

I personally consider that Cher, being herself of mixed ancestry (and what Matthew Frye Jacobson would call a ‘probationary white’) has been paramount in questioning the meaning of ‘universal sisterhood’ and successfully produce debatable, irreverent, powerful representations (as those of the vaudevillians) on TV, in the cinema, and in music, basically since the start of her career. On twitter, she is known for calling her followers “Chickadees” and when a fan asked her what the expression meant, she replied, “My Little Chickadee”, was Mae West, W.C. Fields film. He kept calling her “My Little Chickadee” (Cher, 2015, April 5). The ethnically marked Cher rewrites the destiny of the vamp from tragic to glorifying (her sexuality is not reproachable, neither is her willingness to have a fulfilling career) and, by doing so, she subverts the message of the patriarchal representations. Since the

characters she embodies are both feminist and feminine, she is helping popular culture become a force of empowerment for women.

### 2.3. Ethnic Cultural Performances

In 1965, at Phil Spector's studios, Cher and Sonny recorded "I Got You Babe" and traveled to England to promote the single. There they became known for their outrageous outfits 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. Negra considers that Native American identity constitutes a form of 'off-white' ethnicity. Both with ethnic ancestry (Sonny's family was Italian), Sonny and Cher adopted a way of dressing that questioned the social role of the 'outsider' and the distinction between white and non-white.



Figure 1: Sonny and Cher ca. 1965

As referred by Negra (2001), Cher came out in the music world when the 'noble' American aimed at identifying herself with histories of oppression. White hippies, considering themselves victims of a capitalist society, looked for alternative identity paradigms in cultures of color since they read their histories of oppression as ennobling. David Savran (1998) notes, "(...) the genocidal history of North American conquest gives the surviving Native American possession of a secret knowledge and makes them the source of an imagined authenticity and psychic wholeness lacked by European or African Americans" (p. 119). During the 1960s, there was a rise in activism among Native American groups. The

establishment of the Red Power movement had a major impact at the national level, with Native Americans students from San Francisco State University occupying Alcatraz between 1969 and 1971.

In 1970, the film *Little Big Man* featured the white character of Dustin Hoffman appropriating Indianness and in 1973 Marlon Brando refused his Academy Award for *The Godfather* and was represented by Sasheen Little Feather at the ceremony. She stated, “He very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award and the reasons for this being the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry and on television and movie reruns and also recent happenings at Wounded Knee”<sup>20</sup>. On January 31 2016, Littlefeather gave Frank Morano an interview on AM 970 THE ANSWER in NYC. The recording starts with Cher’s song *Half-Breed* and Morano’s remark, “That, of course, is Cher, she was one of the many stars that in the early 1970s did what she could through popular music to bring attention to the plight of Native American Indians here in the United States”.



Figure 2: Cher singing *Half-Breed* in the 1970s

During this period, as Mitchell Morris (2013) put it, “ethnically marked whiteness played an important role in mediating between black musicians and white mainstream audiences (...) Incompletely assimilated ethnic white minorities could perform quasi-blackness without raising too many mainstream

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<sup>20</sup> One can say that the controversy over an all-white list of Oscar nominees in 2016 clearly reflects such a problem: it was the second straight year that the nominees in the acting categories were all white. Actor Danny DeVito has blamed this situation on racist America and Will Smith has said, “The nominations reflect the Academy, the Academy reflects the industry, and the industry reflects America” (<https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/oscar-boycott-call-drives-wedge-in-hollywood>).

fears about miscegenation” (p. 182). Sonny expressed a keen interest in R&B right from the start of his career at Specialty Records and had artists such as Harold Battiste help launch his and Cher’s careers.

In American popular culture Cher has used what I would call ‘excess Indianness’, an artifice that works in the same way as excess femininity or femininity as masquerade<sup>21</sup>, allowing genuine sentiments to emerge for consideration. Such seems to have also been the interpretation of Bruce McDonald, Don McKellar, and John Frizzell when they wrote the screenplay of *Dance Me Outside*, a 1994 Canadian film that tells the story of a young First Nations’ woman who has married a white man. Because he is infertile, she deceives him and becomes pregnant by an ex-boyfriend. Her brother keeps her husband busy for the night by holding an initiation ceremony with friends, but, in fact, they just make up rituals out of what they consider the white man will identify as authentic Indian. On the way home, at dawn, they begin singing Cher’s *Half-Breed*. Judging from the behavior of the Native American characters, they do not mind all the fakery, in fact, they embrace it.

The lyrics of *Half-Breed* (1973) focus on the problem of prejudice against people of mixed race. The song’s first person is the daughter of a white man and a Cherokee woman, whose people are ashamed of her because the girl is “white by law”. The white people, however, reject her as an “Indian squaw”. Cher recorded the official video of the song on horseback wearing an elaborate Indian outfit that reports the viewer to the history of Wild West Shows. Interestingly, most of the apparel is male, making it a kind of double drag.

Back in 1971, Cher recorded *Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves*. The story of the lyrics is told, once again by a 16-year-old female first-person narrator, this time, a Romani. Gypsies were deported from the United Kingdom and Germany to North America from the seventeenth century onwards, where they were faced with legal restrictions and persecutions. The largest migration, though, arrived after 1880. The girl was born into a nomadic family, part of a “travellin’ show”. They are outcasts traveling in the South of the United States (Mobile, Alabama, and Memphis, Tennessee are mentioned), locations that, as Morris (2013) refers, “signal class consciousness at work” (p. 153).

The father of the narrator preaches the gospel and sells “miraculous” drugs, while her mother is a stripper. In spite of having lost respectability, they are kind: they give a ride to a young man who seduces the 16-year old, impregnates her, and leaves her. Her daughter will be brought up in the same manner she has been. The hostility the family feels from mainstream society reflects the stereotypes that gypsies

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<sup>21</sup> Katherine Rowe 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. “Excessive Indianness” can work to teach us about misconceptions of ‘a pure race’.

face, such as superstition, fraud, music, rootlessness, and sexual license; nevertheless, the townspeople depend on the family for their pleasures. The account raises awareness in the listener, who will recognize her plight.

In 1974 Cher records *Dark Lady*<sup>22</sup>, another song pertaining to Gypsies, this time telling the tragic story of a palm reader. By 1973 Cher had already linked her image to two major ethnic groups, namely the Romani and the Native Americans. 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) talks about the ethnic woman in Hollywood as often having been represented as “excessive, hypersexual, primitive, animalistic or exotic” (p. 3). A good example of such ethnic exhibition (although highly different from Cher’s) is Carmen Miranda’s, whose performances allow for studies focused on what Sontag’s essay *Notes on Camp* (1964) identified as camp procedures in opposition to “prevailing tastes”.

Throughout the years Cher never stopped performing the hits *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves*<sup>23</sup> and *Half-Breed*, in particular during her tours. In the *Do you Believe?* tour (1999-2000) she identifies herself with the marginal and with hybrid identities when she alludes to such songs by saying:

Before we go any further, we have to raise the lights because I have to see something, Ok?  
Ok, so I see tramps there, lots of tramps there, lots of tramps here too, some gypsies over there and some half-breeds back there. Big tramps just stood up back there (...) you guys are just gypsies, tramps and thieves. I'm sorry, we just got a pocket here. I have to know these things because I know you guys can be difficult so I have to move the show right along, I don't want to piss any of you guys off. (...) When I did this show I kind of wanted it to be (...) like HBO marries Cher marries Cirque du Soleil, so it's kind of Cher du Soleil. So, this is the beginning of the Cher du Soleil extravaganza right now.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See appendix for lyrics.

<sup>23</sup> See appendix for full lyrics.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnkLHTgAQKg>.

When Cher asks for more light, she is shifting the focus from her to the audience and simultaneously identifying herself with her fans: they are all in some way marginal figures. Still during the same segment Cher mentions that she has many natural hair colors (wigs) and that she does not understand how she has a 35-year-old repertoire when she is not 35 years old yet (by the time she was 53). When she alludes to the number of natural hair colors that she has, she is addressing her ethnicity and hybridity and advocating that identities are constructed. As Loran Marsan (2010) points out, Cher is embracing what seems to be opposites (youth/old age; natural/artificial) and by doing so defying rules and showing labels shall not be used since opposites can go together (p. 54)<sup>25</sup>. During the *Dressed to Kill Tour* (2014), while performing the song *I Hope You Find It*, Cher wore a wig that was blonde at the front and black at the back, a Mother Mary like headpiece, and a goddess gown.

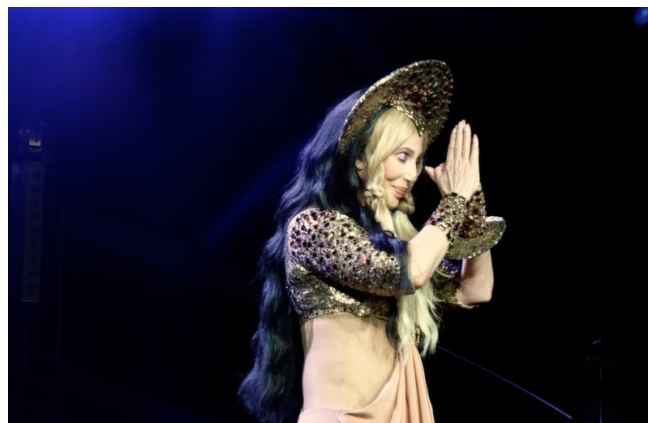


Figure 3: Cher during the *Dressed to Kill Tour*  
Performing *I Hope You Find It*

During the performance she is on a platform above the audience and amid sparkling lights that resemble a starry sky. She seems to be symbolically displaying herself as a hybrid 'divine entity' moving among her fans empowering them with a message and giving them strength to find whatever they are looking for in life. At the end of the performance, her hands assume a praying position in recognition of their devotion.

As we have previously mentioned in this chapter, in the beginning of the twentieth century, ethnically marked actresses played the role of the vamp to serve patriarchal objectives, namely, to control women's sexuality at an age when female labor outside the home was growing and, consequently, women's financial independence was perceived as a threat to the establishment and had to be tamed. After World War II the role of women at the work place could never be reversed in totality, despite the

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<sup>25</sup> <http://vcg.emitto.net/5vol/Marsan.pdf>.



attempts made during the late forties and fifties. As a consequence, the image of the workingwoman would have to be desensualized and associated with orderliness and restraint. In the late nineteen seventies interventionist artists such as Cher, would still feel the need to address such issues and expose the conditions of women at work.

On April 3 1978, *Cher... Special*, a one-off television special, was broadcast on ABC. As the show begins, there is a spotlight on the floor and the voice of Cher's mother is heard calling her young daughter: "Cher? Cher? Cher, is that you? I thought I asked you not to mess up my record albums". Cher steps into the spotlight, made up to look like a younger version of herself. The young Cher tells her mother that she is upset because she is not blonde and says that all the pretty girls have blonde hair and blue eyes, alluding to her ethnic background. Later, a segment of the show consists of Cher working by day in a boring secretarial job and dancing by night at the discos. At the office, five secretaries are sat at their desks. They are all dressed alike, with formal, plain clothes that look like uniforms. They are typewriting and answering phone calls in synchrony. On the background you can listen to the noise of the typewriters and the phones ringing and Cher's voice, "In response to yours of the third, I regret that we are unable to comply with your request." She then answers the phone and says, "Mr. Fisher's office (...) No, I'm sorry, he is not at his desk at the moment", and hangs up. She goes on to say, "He is out on Broadway eating live chickens". While going over a Rolodex, she reads several names starting by the letter "b" and ends with "Boredom" (capital "b", as she claims). She then opens a paper bag, lists the food inside, "carrot sticks, celery stocks, low-fat yogurt, non-fat milk" and comments, "Boring, Boring, Boring, capital "b"". She then stands up and says:

Somewhere between tedium and terror,

A little to the east of fear and

A little to the west of apathy,

There is a space called me,

And all the 9 to 5s,

The Mondays to Fridays,

The filling and the unfulfilling

Feeling of time smothers to me

Smothers it in a blanket of blah, beige blah.

And somewhere between a yawn and a scream,  
A little to the North of anxiety and a little to the South of resignation,  
Is a space called 'free',  
And in that space on Saturday night,  
When the phone stops and the typewriters shut down and the Rolodex stops rolling,  
The "me" and the "free" get together.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, Cher exits the office and as she is walking down the road, the camera focuses on her legs and feet and her clothes change: she is now wearing a beaded evening dress and high heels. In the next scene she is dancing to the sound of disco music with people from different ethnicities (*Disco Inferno*, *Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, and *My Boogie Shoes*). Between songs you can hear "She is not at her desk at the moment" and, at the end, once again, "In response to yours of the third, I regret that we are unable to comply with your request". Cher becomes a vamp when she exits the office and engages in nightlife.

Considering vamps, Camille Paglia (1994) writes that both vamps and tramps evoke:

(...) the missing sexual personae of contemporary feminism. Vamps are queens of the night, the primeval realm excluded and repressed by today's sedate middle-class professionals in their orderly, blazing bright offices (...) I want a revamped feminism. Putting the vamp back means the lady must be a tramp (p. 11).

Cher, with this performance from 1978 was precisely making such a point. Paglia goes on to point out how, white middle-class style:

(...) despite the Sixties rebellion, still tyrannizes us, because corporate business, with the streamline efficiency of the profit-based work ethic, was born in Protestant Northern Europe, before

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGewz9DCeEU>.

and after the Industrial Revolution. It has been puritanical and desensitized from the start (...) office manners grind down and homogenize all ethnic and racial differences. The world is going WASP” (p. 14).

Once again, it seems that Cher wanted to call the attention to this particular issue when she chose to have a black woman among the secretaries and have them all perform in synchrony.

Between 1971 and 1974, Sonny and Cher recorded *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour*, a variety show that ran on CBS and was a Top 20 hit in the ratings for its entire run<sup>27</sup>. On the variety show of the 1970s, Diane Negra (2001) remarks how well suited they were to “ (...) reflect and respond to social identities in flux and to stage social contestation in such a way as to re-orient difference as diversity” (p. 168), namely due to their fragmented style and emphasis on masquerade. In *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour*, Sonny and Cher would constantly address questions of the status and social role of the outsider. By, as Negra (2001) points out, “(...) filtering their alterity through mainstreaming its hippie hosts”, they attempted to “(...) discursively knit back together an increasingly polarized American culture (...)” (p. 169). As Negra (2001) claims, thanks to “the *fluidity* of roles in the variety show format, ‘hippiness’ could be seen as transient, un-serious and put on” (p. 169).

On every episode of the show, Sonny would exchange banter with Cher and she would put him down in a comic manner. Comedy skits would follow, mixed with musical numbers. Among these were *The Vamp Sketches*, a sequence featuring at least three mini-skits with Cher playing notorious women in history or fiction (e.g.: Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Marlene Dietrich, a Transylvanian vampire), indirectly making reference to popular memories of the vamp as a caricature of predatory ethnic femininity. Each one of them was preceded by Cher in a parlor lying atop an old-style upright piano with Sonny pretending to play it. She would sing one verse of a song between each mini-skit (the lyrics usually set up the next mini-skit), followed by the chorus, "She was a scamp, a camp and a bit of tramp, she was a V-A-M-P, vamp". At the end of the sketch she would sing, "Through wind and rain or sleet or hail, it takes a scheming demon woman to deliver her ... male!". In one of the sketches Cher is Calamity Jane (Martha Jane Cannary).

Born in 1852, Calamity Jane was an American frontierswoman and professional scout known for her habit of wearing man's attire. She fought against the Native Americans and was an acquaintance of Wild Bill Hickok. In the sketch, though, Wild Bill Hickok (Burton Reynolds) challenges Calamity Jane at a

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<sup>27</sup> *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* was weekly watched by over 30 million viewers during its three-year run.

saloon because he heard that she had been claiming to be his equal. “I am gonna show her there ain’t no woman that take hold no man”, says Hickok. When she arrives, he asks her if she thinks she is his equal, to which she replies, “Equal? Bill Hickok? You’re a mangy, lowdown skunk while I am a warm, wonderful frontier lady with a terrific charisma and a fantastic set of 45s”. She calls him spaghetti arms (because of his cowboy coat with fringes on the sleeves) and when he claims, “there is no woman that’s equal to no man” she shows him Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and tells him to read it because it is all in there, about the equality of the sexes. He argues, he can’t read or talk but that, on the other hand, he is physically superior and defies her to do arm wrestling with him. She agrees: “Indian wrestling it will be”, and with a whistle calls her Native American friends who defeat him in a matter of seconds. Hickok, still on the floor, feels sorry for his luck, “The first time I get to play a white guy in a Western, the Indians beat the daylight out of me”. Calamity Jane defies him, “You’ve got until sundown to get to my place, Mr. Hickok, cuz I’m just gonna find out how come they call you “Wild Bill”. And shaking her pistols, she proffers, “See that gun action?”. In the end, Hickok turns to the bartender (Sonny) and asks him what kind of Western that is. “The only kind you’ll ever see on this show buddy, an Italian one<sup>28</sup>”, he replies. “In that case, I’ll have a chianti and a pizza to go”, orders Hickok.

As mentioned, during the 1960s and 1970s, the history of the Native Americans was reread and rethought. These two decades also saw the birth and development of the second-wave feminism, a reaction against the renewed domesticity of women after World War II. Concomitantly, it is only natural that in the sketch, contrary to the historical facts, Calamity Jane becomes a friend of the Native Americans and Hickok’s enemy. She has read Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (Calamity Jane is said to have been illiterate), and Hickok is the one who can’t read.

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<sup>28</sup> In the vamp skits, Cher also played Cleopatra and in the introductory song to this skit she points out how “Antony and Cesar fell into her [Cleopatra’s] grasp”. Mark Antony calls her “Egyptian ruler” and she calls him “old Italian meatball”. In the end, she rewrites the story with a small touch of historiographic metafiction and a taste for the tramp of the group: between Mark Antony, Cesar and a lowly extra impersonator of Cesar she chooses the latter because “this is a variety show, isn’t it?”.



Figure 4: Calamity Jane



Figure 5: Cher as Calamity Jane

Second-wave feminism, though, developed an anti-media attitude. They made a point of being conceived themselves as 'outside' the dominant consumerist culture and as offering an alternative to stereotypical images perpetuated by the media. Says Genz and Brabon (2009), "(...) popular culture was criticized for its cultural representation and reproduction of gendered inequalities" (p. 20). As such, it was rejected, as argues John Storey (1997), as "a sort of ideological machine which more or less effortlessly reproduces the dominant ideology" (p. 12) and also because it was credited with the invention and circulation of what would become the icon of the movement, the 'bra-burner' figure that cemented into the public's mind the perception of feminism as anti-feminine, as an enemy of glamorous women.

By rewriting history, the sketch aims at emphasizing the plight of two minorities, the Native Americans and women. In fact, the parodic rewriting brings to television the changes the feminist movement and Native Americans were fighting for and, taking one step ahead, Cher is, using the media, alluding to the fact that you do not have to adopt the prototype of the 'bra-burner', on the contrary, you can choose to look feminine and simultaneously demand the right to be treated with respect and on equal terms by men. While Calamity Jane was known for dressing man's clothes, Cher, as Calamity Jane, wears feminine sexy clothes (high heels and a blouse showing her bellybutton) and does catwalk, which does not prevent her from being a fierce woman. As I will be able to discuss further on, Cher was one of the most "aggressive" pioneers in using parody in the media to present women as both feminine and empowered, a disrupting antinomy.

The show can also be considered historiographic metafiction ahead of its time since the term was only coined by Hutcheon in the late 1980s and is mostly associated with works of postmodern art. Past and present are intertwined when Calamity Jane (1852 – 1903) holds a copy of *The Female Eunuch*,

when Hickok directly reminds the viewer he is playing a white guy in a western and, indirectly, watching a show, and finally, when he asks the bartender what kind of show that is. When the latter claims it is an Italian western, he is claiming the show is set up from the perspective of a minority group that knows repression. On *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* minority groups are empowered. The fact that Burt Reynolds (as Hickok) claims he usually plays the role of an Indian in westerns emphasizes the fact that identities are fluid and condemns stereotypes (he can easily 'shift' from one identity to another) and by playing the role of a cowboy who dies in the hands of the Native Americans, it means that the show reverses the faith of two groups and empowers the second. Cher lends the same message in the above-mentioned *Cher ... Special*.

After she comments how ugly she feels, her mother tells her that she is beautiful and someday she will realize just how special she really is. Cher explains that she got into her mother's record albums so that she could learn the songs from the film *West Side Story* for school. When the mother asks her which part she is going to play, she replies, "all of them". She looks at the camera and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, for tonight's entertainment, I am proud to present *West Side Story*. I will be playing all the parts. Thank you". Cher starts the program by singing and dancing to a medley of songs from the musical, playing both male and female, white and Latino characters.



Figure 6: Cher as Anita; Cher as Maria; Cher as Bernardo; Cher as Tony from *West Side Story*

*West Side Story* is a stage musical inspired by William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. The story is set in the Upper West Side of New York City in the mid-1950s in an ethnic, blue-collar neighborhood and explores the rivalry between the Jets and the Sharks, two teenage street gangs of different ethnic backgrounds, respectively a white and a Puerto Rican one, and the 'impossible' love story between Tony (the ex-leader of the Jets) and Maria (sister of Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks). The original play, a 1957 Broadway production, was adapted into a musical romantic drama film by directors

Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins in 1961. The story condemns racial intolerance while utilizing popular racial and gender stereotypes and depicts lack of adult authority, suggesting that ultimately, it remains up to the young people to overcome prejudice in order to create a peaceful, tolerant society<sup>29</sup>. After three members of the group have died, the others realize the rivalry is pointless and feel ashamed of their attitudes. The story reflects upon the difference between the American dream and its reality.

By playing the different characters, Cher's star persona proves to be flexible in such a way that different identities can be called upon and simultaneously brings strength to minority groups. As Negra (2001) puts it, "Cher's star body in particular challenges conventions of whiteness in its high degree of self-awareness" (p. 164). The concept of ethnicity becomes more linked to the notion of what Negra (2001) labels as 'flexible consent' other than 'rigid descent' (p. 166). Choice prevails over destiny.

*Cher ... Special* concludes with her saying:

Momma, I'm still here. I've got the same hair, the same bumpy nose and vampire teeth. But you were right, I feel better about myself now (...) my children Chastity and Elijah both have blonde hair. I guess they don't have the advantages of having black hair, but nobody told them it was going to be easy.

Then she sings *When You Wish Upon a Star*. By then, she was already adopting a posture that resonates with one many are only recently learning to adopt. In 2000, Marilyn Halter (2000) would point out "more and more instances of what can be called 'blended ethnicity,' the amalgamation of two or more ethnic backgrounds, are showing up in the marketplace" (p. 186). The awareness of such a reality has been growing thanks to performances and stances such as Cher's. What is particularly interesting about Cher is that she "moves in cycles to undo moments of assimilation and integration, positioning her ambiguously and continuously as neither fully inside nor outside prevailing categories of identity" (Negra, 2001, p. 164). In 1986 the academy did not nominate Cher for her very acclaimed role in the film *Mask*. When presenting the Oscar for best supporting actor that year, she 'answered' the academy by wearing a very outrageous Mohawk outfit, contact lenses that made the pupil of her left eye brown and the pupil of her

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<sup>29</sup> By the 1950's, Mexican men were often depicted as either lazy workers or bandits while Mexican women were portrayed as sexy sirens who attempted to seduce white men. In the film, lieutenant Schrank sides with the white gang and reinforces racism, forcing the Sharks to leave public areas. In turn, officers Krupke and Doc (a drugstore owner and Tony's boss) are presented as helpless individuals.

right one green, and smiling, she announced, “As you can see, I did receive my academy booklet on “How to Dress Like a Serious Actress!”<sup>30</sup>. Some considered the remark a kind of ‘middle finger’ to the Academy. She displayed herself as a sort of a Native American ‘aberration’ in the eyes of the Hollywood ‘gods’. Cher systematically assumes a political postmodern identity rooted in difference, in ‘otherness’ and is constantly standing at a liminal space, at a threshold: while reaching out to minority groups she manages to, up to a certain extent, remain attractive to the normative society, which is politically paradoxical.



*Figure 7: Cher at the 1986 Academy Awards*

In fact, Cher’s whiteness seems to be securely linked to ‘white trash’, as Negra (2001) explains when she writes, “(...) Nor does her well-publicized wealth necessarily interrupt the narrative of her white trash identity” (p. 180). She is attached to unrestrained consumption, is the owner of an excessive and self-produced body, and her performance is most of the time highly camp, all elements that are typically linked to ‘white trash culture’. In fact, white trash icons also seem to frequently have an affiliation with Native Americans. Gael Sweeney notes in Matt Wray and Annalce Newitz (1997), “It is fascinating that many of the icons of White Trash, from Elvis to Bill Clinton to Loretta Lynn, have acknowledged an Indian heritage, linking themselves at least in spirit to these marginal mixed-race groups” (p. 253). And so does Cher.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/10641/when-bob-mackie-dressed-cher-as-a-showgirl-for-the-1986-oscars>.



### 2.3.1. 'Off-White' White Trash

Negra (2001) considers that “In keeping with the tendencies of ‘white trash’, and as part of a twentieth-century trend in which ‘divadom’, as Susan J. Leonard and Rebecca A. Pope (1996) state, “escaped its elite precincts and ‘descended’ to the realm of pop music and culture” (p. 22), Cher’s persona has the ability to unsettle a series of apparently fixed cultural boundaries. On May 22 1986 she was an invited guest on *David Letterman*. Their conversation began:

Letterman: “You smell terrific, you really smell great. Do you mind if I ask you (...) I mean, I knew you would smell nice (...) can you mention the scent or would you rather not?”

Cher: Well, it’s two together. One’s really cheap, called *Ritz* (it’s like *Taboo*, good girls don’t wear it) and the other is really expensive, called *Vanilla*.

Letterman: And you just mix them up?

Cher: Yeah.

Letterman: The end result is quite effective.<sup>31</sup>

Since very early in her career, Cher’s ‘trademark’ has always been nonconformity to what is viewed as socially appropriate and acceptable and, therefore, she has been mixing and mingling ever since. She does not consider herself a “good girl”, otherwise she would not wear “Ritz”, and neither is she a “bad girl”, or she would not wear “Vanilla”.

Later Cher admits to Letterman that the reason why she had refused his previous invitations to come on the show (a total of four) was because she thought he was an “asshole”. She subverts what is subversive through deconstruction. Twenty-nine years later, on May 6 2015 Cher is once again on *David Letterman*: He is about to retire and she asks him if he recalls the first time she was on the show and the name she called him. As Stephen Jay Gould (1985) mentioned, “Anyone who does not grasp the close juxtaposition of the vulgar and the scholarly has either too refined or too compartmentalized a view of life. Abstract and the visceral fascination are equally valid and not so far apart” (p. 65-66).

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcblpszrwAk>.

In 1995 Cher released a cover of Marc Cohen's *Walking in Memphis*, a song that celebrates Elvis and Memphis. In her video for the song, Cher dresses in male drag (as Elvis) and celebrates him as a hero, making her impersonation a tribute and embracement of white trash. When in *Cher's* episode of VH1's *Behind the Music* Cher and her mother discuss attending an Elvis concert when Cher was still a preteen, they describe jumping on their seats and screaming along with thousands of young women, a unified display of elation that defied the terror many parents felt around their daughter's exposure to Elvis. By doing so they were once again allying themselves with 'white trash' since they were embracing Elvis as an icon. As Gael Sweeney (1997) claims, "(...) white trash has heroes and is not afraid to iconize them" (p. 250).

By the time, Elvis was being responsible for building a bridge between the black and the white community. Sam Philips, who created the Sun Records label, talking about the resistance by [white] society of beautiful black music for the 1995 BBC documentary series on the history of rock and roll, recalls that at some point in his career he thought, "If I were to find a white Southern boy, we just might be able to do at least a few of the things I knew it would take a long time to do"<sup>32</sup>. When in the summer of 1953, 18-year-old Elvis Presley, by then a truck driver, showed up in his studios and paid \$3.98 to record *My Happiness*, he found the boy he was looking for. Mayne (1993), considers that one of the dimensions that constructs a star persona is race and mentions the case of Bette Davis who, she claims, was known for her anti-racist stances. Once a black magazine writer described her as far more appealing to black audiences than other white female stars, in part because of her 'underdog' status in her films. She is camp by virtue of her intense theatricality. Stylized touches that project an image of emotional authority, intelligence and 'masculine' self-sufficiency serve as ironic commentaries on the roles she was forced to play. In the style lies the message. In *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*, to give a counterpoint to her glamorous image, Cher and her writing staff created a recurring character for her to play in skits that would be a counterpoint to her glamorous image: Cher was Laverne, a trashy 'lady of the launderette' who was always chewing gum and 'men-hungry'. She was a little potbellied in the stomach and wore tiger-skin-patterned clothes, cats-eye-shaped glasses, and the bra strap dropping from her shoulder (but, unlike the second wave feminists, she did wear a bra).

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar4pghlpFPg>



Figure 8: Cher as Laverne taking a tour of guest Liberace's Hollywood Hills mansion at the *Cher* show

Laverne's mother was also a 'trashy' lady who, interestingly, was not prejudiced against the gay community. In one of the skits she says, "Your father and I are going to the drag races" and talking about her clothes, "This thing is made from genuine imitation acrylic mink. Imagine how many acrylics they had to kill to make this. Knock them dead at the drags"<sup>33</sup>. Aligning their campy tastes with that of the gay community, they are simultaneously questioning normativity. Are those who prefer good quality products made from the fur of animals that must die to fulfill their tastes morally better individuals? Nowadays, the costume of Laverne is still being emulated for Halloween.

By 1975 Cher was having her own show, *Cher*, on CBS. In one of the episodes, Cher and Bette Midler sing *Trashy Ladies Medley*. It starts:

It took a whole lot of women,  
A whole lot of time,  
To go just as far as they've come,  
Through their troubles and fears,  
They were brave pioneers,

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z164A2CS0zk>.

And we would like to sing about some.

(...)

They proceed to sing about Ramona, the character in Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona* (1884). It depicts the life of a mixed-race Scots-Native American orphan girl who suffers racial discrimination and hardship in Southern California after the Mexican-American War. Many claim the novel was named after a Coahuilla Indian woman, Ramona Lubo. When Cher announces they are going to sing about her, Bette Midler says, 'Ramona? She is no trash!', to which Cher replies, "I know, she was an Indian". They go on to sing about the singer Lou, a character in the narrative poem by Robert W. Service *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* (1907)<sup>34</sup> and in the fourth strophe they sing the song *Put The Blame on Mame*, which was sang by Rita Hayworth in the film *Gilda* (1946):

They once had a shootin' up in the Klondike

When they got Dan McGrew

Folks were putting the blame on

The lady known as Lou

That's the story that went around

But here's the real low-down

Put the blame on Mame, boys

Put the blame on Mame

Mame did a dance called the hoochy-coo

That's the thing that slew McGrew

So you can put the blame on Mame, boys

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<sup>34</sup> The tale takes place in a Yukon saloon during the Yukon Gold Rush of the late 1890s. It tells of Dan McGrew, a rough-neck prospector; McGrew's sweetheart Lou, an admirable pioneer woman; and a mysterious stranger who wanders into the saloon where the former are among a crowd of drinkers. The stranger buys drinks for the crowd, and then proceeds to the piano, where he plays a song that is both robust and sad. He appears to have had a past with both McGrew and Lou, and has come to settle a grudge. Gunshots break out, McGrew and the stranger kill each other, and Lou ends up with the stranger's gold.

## Put the blame on Mame



Figure 9: Cher and Bette Midler performing the *Trashy Ladies Medley* (1975)

The lyrics claim that rather than being shot and killed, Dan McGrew was slain by Mame's "hoochy-coo"<sup>35</sup> dance. She is an infamous woman who can be blamed for all the ills in the world. 'Mame' stands for the quintessential woman, like the biblical Eve. She is demonized for her sexuality in a patriarchal culture. In the film *Gilda*, Gilda's ex-lover thinks she is a femme fatale and decides she must convince him she really is one, thus her performance. At some point, an audience member tries to unzip her dress and angry Gilda almost refers to herself as a whore but is prevented from saying so when Johnny slaps her in the face. The physical abuse shows, as Elyce Rae Helford (2015) explains, "(...) the gendered double-bind: women are called whores but when they point this out by adopting the term themselves, they must be punished" (n/p)<sup>36</sup>.

Before this performance, Gilda had already sung an excerpt of the song and in that scene she makes a statement about self-destruction that, as Helford (2015) points out, "(...) echoes throughout the film, the noir genre, Hollywood norms of femininity, and Hayworth/ Cansino's own life: 'I hate you so much that I would destroy myself to take you down with me'"<sup>37</sup> (n/p). The film offers a happy ending: Johnny concludes that neither he nor Gilda has anything to apologize for because at last they're 'even' since both have hurt each other badly, which seems, in fact, an "unfair" conclusion due to the fact that he has used his power to do her far greater harm than she did to him. Both Lou and Gilda are ethnically marked females: Lou being a Native American and Gilda coming from a "foreign country" (Hayworth had

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<sup>35</sup> A term that describes sexually provocative belly dance-like dances from the mid-to late 1800's.

<sup>36</sup> <http://screenprism.com/insights/article/in-gilda-what-is-the-significance-of-the-put-the-blame-on-mame-number>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Spanish ancestry). In this performance Cher's parodic representation demystifies the classical representations of ethnic women by contradicting patriarchal readings and 'displaying' herself the way Gilda does but without any sense of guilt. The drama of the film noir is the subject of parody and ultimately becomes a tool of empowerment for women.

While Gilda is punished for trying to label herself 'whore', Cher adopts the word 'bitch' to address other women and send them an appeal to follow her. Barbara Walker (1983) reveals that 'bitch' was "one of the most sacred titles of the Goddess Artemis - Diana" (p. 109), who often appeared as a dog herself, or in the company of hounds. This ancient powerful bitch, points out Jane Caputi (2004), "(...) is the sacred archetype behind the contemporary profanity, reflecting fear of the 'bitch goddess' (as well as the sexually sovereign, creative, autonomous woman)" (p. 378).

In a feminist context, the word has been reappropriated to have a positive meaning in some contexts. For instance, it can indicate a strong or assertive woman. Feminist attorney Jo Freeman authored "The BITCH Manifesto" in 1968, where she wrote:

A Bitch takes shit from no one. You may not like her, but you cannot ignore her (...) [Bitches] have loud voices and often use them. (...) Bitches seek their identity strictly thru themselves and what they do. They are subjects, not objects. (...) Often they do dominate other people when roles are not available to them, which more creatively sublimate their energies and utilize their capabilities. More often they are accused of domineering when doing what would be considered natural by a man (Joreen, 1970, p. 5).

In a 2006 interview, "Pop Goes the Feminist", Bitch magazine co-founder Andi Zeisler explained the naming of the magazine by saying, "When we chose the name, we were thinking, well, it would be great to reclaim the word "bitch" for strong, outspoken women, much the same way that "queer" has been reclaimed by the gay community. That was very much on our minds, the positive power of language reclamation" (Deborah Solomon, 2006, p. 613).

In her 2002 - 2005 *Living Proof: The Farewell Tour*, Cher started the shows with a monologue in which she addressed younger singers and called them 'bitches'. Dressed as a tamer, she would say, "Ladies and gentlemen, and flamboyant gentlemen, boys and girls and children of all ages, welcome to

the Cher-est show on earth” and ending with “And all I have to say is, follow this, you bitches”<sup>38</sup>. The use of subversive language is recurrent in Cher’s performances as well as in public appearances and it cannot be separated from her personality and the image of irreverence associated to her. Such language, which has both been regulated and celebrated, has become a topic of interest to sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues, and literary critics, among others.

In his article entitled *From Cacemphaton to Cher: Foul Language and Evidence in Rhetorical Tradition* (2012), Jonathan Hunt<sup>39</sup> starts by pointing to the fact that many people have been paying attention to foul language (from moralists, to scholars to practitioners alike) since it is not only expressive but also persuasive and, therefore, rhetorical. Nevertheless, rhetoricians themselves have been disregarding its significance.

The author refers to the fact that “our pedagogical heritage” (Hunt, 2012, p. 2) unnecessarily limits the field of study since it views “*rhetoric as the study of speaking and writing well*”<sup>40</sup> (Hunt, 2012, p. 2) and when a text does not match established conventions it is put aside. Still according to the latter, “Both reviled and admired, a profanity has the power simultaneously to shock and win over an auditor (...) divide an audience like no other utterance” (p. 3). The Federal Communications Commission enforcement of prohibitions against foul language distinguishes between swearing with or without “rhetorical intent” in order to enforce a penalty. Hunt (2012) further points out:

Scholars in nearly every field of human inquiry have investigated swearing, foul language, obscene and profane speech (...) they have discovered it to be a rich and varied practice that is not only expressive, but involves persuasive intent and persuasive impact. They have examined swearing in politics, in courts of law, and in ceremonial discourse. In short, they have demonstrated to us that swearing is rhetorical (p. 2).

The latter considers scholars must discard moralism to be able to “discover rich new fields of study, ‘outlaw’ rhetorics that can’t be evaluated with the yardstick of our own sense of decorum” (Hunt, 2012, p. 13).

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blikloNcPVQ>.

<sup>39</sup> Associate Director of the Program in Writing & Rhetoric at Sanford University.

<sup>40</sup> Hunt quotes David Fleming in “Rhetoric as a Course of Study”. *College English* 61.2 (Nov. 1998): 169-191 (Italics in original).

While Cher was giving her acceptance speech at the 2001 Artist's Achievement Award ceremony, she commented:

I have also had critics for the last forty years saying that I was on my way out every year, right, so fuck them (...) I still have a job and they don't (...) I was watching Martin Lawrence the other day and he said something about life and he said, "You got to ride it until the wheels fall off" and I think that's about the most important thing I have heard lately (...)<sup>41</sup>.

The ceremony was broadcast on the Fox network and Cher's expletive labelled a "broadcast indecency" but eventually characterized as "fleeting" (not calculated or planned) and lawyers for the Fox network argued that it would be impossible to prevent celebrities from swearing during live broadcasts. We consider that it is hard to believe that the acceptance speech was not planned, in particular, the use of the expletive; Cher was simply intelligent in the way she simultaneously was able to send the message she wanted to both her fans and her, so to speak, "enemies" (namely the conservative party and her supporters who systematically try to demean her). Fox network was in trouble with the law, yet no repercussions were inflicted on her. Furthermore, to defend itself, the network had to indirectly defend Cher and claim her reaction was spontaneous and her language fleeting. Corroborating such a conclusion is the fact that Justice Scalia, who wrote the 2009 opinion for the US Supreme Court, concluded that "(...) even unpremeditated 'fleeting indecency' occurs according to subcultural rhetorical conventions (those of a cultural elite) and does not differ in a substantial way from un-fleeting indecencies" (Hunt, 2012, p. 4). As Hunt refers, Tony McEnergy<sup>42</sup> mentions how the cycle of concern about swearing fits very nicely with sociologist Stanley Cohen's theory of 'moral panic'. A moral panic involves certain characters, including a scapegoat and what Hunt calls 'the moral entrepreneur' (in this case the Bush Administration's FCC). Hunt concludes that rhetorical analysis "(...) tends to be light on evidence about the most important aspect of rhetoric: its actual impact on audiences" (p.11). He considers that the moralism that says that foul language shows lack of judgment must be discarded so that new fields of study can be discovered, "(...) 'outlaw' rhetorics that can't be evaluated with the yardstick of our own sense of decorum" (p. 12-13). Implicitly, he is saying that rhetoric must 'give a fuck' to foul language. I

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLyHvHhc-Ac>.

<sup>42</sup> A linguist and author of *Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity, and Power from 1586 to Present*.



would like to add one should 'give a fuck to Cher' since when she is put aside it is simply because she does not match preconceived conventions.

The screenwriter Chris Carter also linked Cher's image to that of white trash in the episode of the *The X-Files*<sup>43</sup> *The Postmodern Prometheus*<sup>44</sup> placing Cher as a "(...) presiding deity over a working-class, white trash community" (Negra, 2001, p. 179). Throughout the episode elements of popular culture abound: one of the characters in the story is writing a comic book, his mother likes watching *The Jerry Springer Show*, and circus tents are thrown on top of houses when the main character of the episode invades such dwellings to the sound of Cher's music.

## 2.4. Conclusion

Cultural discomfort, as well as fascination with identity ambiguity, remains part of the public imaginary and Cher's artistic career has been giving a significant contribution to the topic in mainstream culture since her work has been helping multiracial identification become more accepting. From a position which combines ethnicity, gender, class, (dis)ability, and age, Cher insists on the particularity of minorities' experiences and aspirations. As Grenz and Brabon (2009) argue, "(...) queer analyses puts forward the idea of multiple oppressed subjectivities rather than privileging any one site of oppression (...) the feminism of the 1970s is problematized (...)" (p. 28).

The combination of radical opposites is inherent to the rhetoric of show biz and the representation of the vamp in the context of a postmodern point of view. In such paradigms, one can find women who are both feminine and subversive and one can find the 'half-breed', who is usually despised by black and white people alike. Cher's body of work is a particularly interesting case study, since by the 1970s she was, ahead of her time, already engaging in a postfeminist, postmodern stance.

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<sup>43</sup> Chris Carter's *The X-Files* was nominated for 7 awards at the Emmys of 1998 and due to its popularity, it became a major aspect of popular culture having attained a certain degree of historical importance. Several props from the series and other items are now at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

<sup>44</sup> It aired on the television network Fox on November 30 1997.

## Chapter 3: 'Femininity and Feminism in Cher's Performance. The role of religion'

### 3.1. Framed Women. Damsels in Distress

When looking at representations of women, one is faced with the way such representations were conditioned by the prevailing mentality of a particular age, that is to say, how they were 'framed' by it. In this chapter we will apply the notion of frame to representations of gender in popular culture and study how, in spite of having had frames imposed on them in a constraining way, women have successfully resisted and reworked them, shockingly displacing traditional iconography to a new sphere, namely popular icons and their fans.

A 'damsel in distress' is, definitely, a framed woman. She has been, throughout history, a common archetype in myth. Always helpless, she is in need of being rescued by a male figure; an idea that must have done wonders to the egos of male writers and readers alike.

One of the earliest portrayals of a damsel in distress is presented in the Greek myth of Andromeda. Princess Andromeda's mother claimed that she was more beautiful than all the water nymphs in the sea. Angered, the nymphs sent a giant sea serpent to terrorize the coast of the queen's country. When the king and queen asked the gods for advice on how to appease the nymphs, the gods said that they had to sacrifice their daughter. Rembrandt's *Andromeda Chained to the Rocks* depicts a nude Andromeda waiting for the sea serpent to eat her. Perseus (a human man, whom the gods had given wings) offers to save her as long as she marries him.

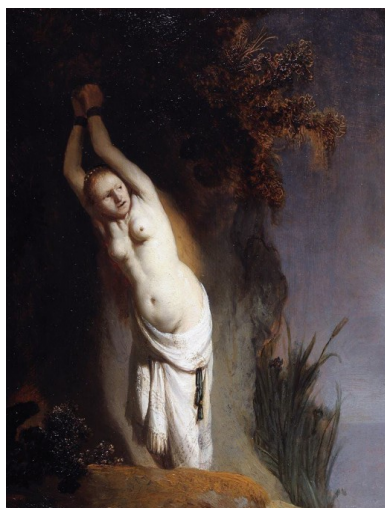


Figure 10: Rembrandt's *Andromeda Chained to the Rocks* (c. 1630)  
Oil on panel, 34 x 25, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands

Thousands of years later, the film *King Kong* (1933) told, yet again, the story of a beautiful woman and a scary monster, the beauty and the beast. Even though the two stories were written centuries apart, after comparing Rembrandt's *Andromeda* and the scene from *King Kong* where Ann Darrow is also tied and terrified as King Kong approaches her, one cannot but notice the similarities.



Figure 11: Ann Darrow in *King Kong* (1933)

Both women are representations of beauty in their time and are in a state of extreme danger because they were offered in sacrifice to monsters. In the case of Darrow, she has just arrived at Skull Island to shoot a film and is taken hostage by the natives who prepare her as a sacrifice to the ape Kong, the ruler of their jungle. She is, eventually, rescued by Jack Driscoll, the explorer that Carl Denham (the filmmaker) had taken with the crew to help them get to know the island.

In classical fairytales, prince charming is a character that comes to the rescue of a damsel-in-distress, usually a beautiful and innocent young woman who is facing a dangerous situation and is, therefore, in need of a male hero to engage in a quest to free her from either a villain, a monster, or an alien. Once the rescue is successful, the hero often obtains her hand in marriage. She is to be found in classic fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, stories in which the heroine is not in a position to do anything when her rescuer arrives other than stay in a comatose state. Postmodern and second wave feminist writers view the classic tales as editor Jack Zipes (1993) states, as “a male creation and projection” (Zipes, 1993, p. 80) that “reflects men's fear of women's sexuality – and of their own as well” (Ibid, p. 81).

In fairytales, one of the figures that can put a damsel in distress is that of the wolf. In literature and culture, it traditionally represents danger and destruction and is, thus, associated with the devil<sup>45</sup>. In many cultures, the identification of the warrior with the wolf led to the notion of ‘lycanthropy’, the mythic

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<sup>45</sup> Yet, they are predators, and, therefore, have also become the symbol of warriors.

identification of man and wolf. The Bible contains thirteen references to wolves and presents them as metaphors of ambition and destruction that personify Satan. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (2007) states that, according to the *Book of Leviticus*<sup>46</sup> (p. 26) and the *Book of Deuteronomy*<sup>47</sup> (p.32), the wolves are either agents of God sent to punish the sinners or agents of the Devil sent with the blessings of God to harass the believers and test their faith. In the Christian Western literature, the wolf represents the 'Devil' or the 'Demon' that runs after the 'sheep', that is, the believer. In Milton's *Lycidas* (1983), for instance, the metaphor is obvious, "The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed / But swol'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw / Rot inwardly and foul contagion spread: Besides what the grim Woolf with privy paw / Daily devours apace" (p. 11). In canto I of Dante's *Inferno* (2009), the pilgrim finds a she-wolf blocking the path that leads to a hill full of light (p.2). This female wolf represents the sin of concupiscence and incontinence and is prophesized by the shadow of Vigil to eventually be sent to Hell. In European tales of witch hunts from the beginning of the Early Modern Period, the witches are compared to wolves since, such as the latter, they wander in the woods. In present day folklore, as well as in popular literature and culture, the image of the wolf is significantly influenced by the stereotype of the "bad wolf" with origins in Aesop's, Perrault's and Grimm's fables.

Charles Perrault (1628-1703) is frequently labeled the founder of the modern fairytale since he was the first to have them published in book. Nevertheless, his work was influenced by previous fairytales, namely those of Marie-Catherine Le Jurnal de Barneville, Baroness d'Aulnoy. In 1690 she was already writing tales and was the first to call them 'fairytales'. As Marina Warner (1995) put it, Perrault has, in fact, adapted a folk tale in which a young lady finds a wolf on her way to her grandmother's house. The wolf tries to convince her to eat a piece of the grandmother and drink her blood; yet, she manages to escape when she claims she has to go out to urinate. He ties her to a rope and lets her out of the cabin. She manages to set herself loose and escapes. Perrault's version, in turn, ends with the grandmother and the granddaughter eaten by the wolf. The happy end of the original story is subverted because this girl is not smart enough. Perrault has explained the moral of the story as follows:

Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say 'wolf', but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet,

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<sup>46</sup> The third book of Torah and of the Christian Old Testament.

<sup>47</sup> The fifth book of Torah and of the Christian Old Testament.

who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all (Warner, 1995, p. 181).

More than a century later, the brothers Grimm write two versions of *The Little Red Riding Hood*. The first is a version of Perrault's where the erotic details are omitted and the end is less dramatic since a hunter saves the young girl and her grandmother. In the second one, a sequel, the girl follows the path to the grandmother's house, the grandmother locks the door so that the wolf cannot enter and when he attempts to do so by going down the chimney, he falls into a pot of boiling water that the young girl uses as a trap.

In the 1970s, research done in Germany by critics and experts in the Grimm's collection started exposing the misogynist ideology behind the symbolism of the tales and denouncing how they helped spread repressive values advocated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie. The redeeming endings matched the mentality of the Enlightenment, which was detached from the religious way of thinking and advocated that one can learn from experience.

In their book *Framing Women: Changing Frames of Representation from the Enlightenment to Postmodernism*, editors Sandra Carrol, Birgit Pretzsch, and Peter Wagner (2004) draw attention to the confining roles used to frame women in contemporary Western society and contrast two periods, the Enlightenment and Postmodernism. The first places a coherent frame of meaning on issues, while the latter accepts and embraces contradictory frames and, therefore, a multitude of truths. By doing so, Postmodernism points to the fact that Enlightenment assumptions about women are still present in contemporary society.

Ana Gabriela Macedo (2017) considers that the concept of 'frame' is key to the understanding and discussion of identity politics and of 're-presentation', which, according to the latter, were always intrinsic to the critical debate of Feminism. Macedo argues that the strategies of postmodern denaturalization linked to the politicization of desire that Feminism claims as its own is a critical and ideologically assumed revisitation of memory that significantly contributed to a parodic subversion from the center, as pointed out by Linda Hutcheon (1989). Especially since the 1980s, a theoretical body of work was developed, which contributed to 'save' the memory in the feminine, that is, to present history through the eyes of women. Such resulted in a more equitable mapping of the art, as well as in the inscription of difference and the feminine heteroglossia, in the canons of art. As Macedo (2017) states, contemporary feminist art can be understood as an aesthetics of critical appropriation and one that questions the tradition that

exhibits the dialogical tension between “registering”, “reframing”, and “resisting”. As Macedo (2015) argues, “(...) the dialogue between framing and unframing (...) rejects standardization and critiques the cultural representation of women” (p. 83), the critic underlines the fact that both literary and visual narratives “(...) can provide a similar challenge to fixed codes of representation while transgressively ‘unframing’ women and thus ‘reframing’ the silences of history” (Ibid.).

### 3.2. Unframing the Damsels

As Kate Bernheimer (2009), in her preface to *Fairy Tales Reimagined – Essays on New Retellings* argues, “Scholars (...) provide transfixing narratives about the Marxist, postmodern, psychological, feminist, and aesthetic magnets in fairy tales, which rivet audiences worldwide in music, film television, literature, and fine art versions and inspire new versions to be produced at an immeasurable rate” (Bernheimer, 2009, p. 2).

According to Donald Haase (2004), Zipes’ anthology *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* encourages and clarifies comparisons between versions and the historical analysis of the development of tales. Haase considers that Zipes’ conclusions, as well as the organization and methodology of his work (which reveal the vital importance of comparing oral and literary versions in socio-historical contexts to understand the relationship between the tale and gender and socialization), significantly contributed to feminist studies of the fairy tale. The introductory study of the history of the tale confirmed that it reflects the civilizational process of western societies and that it had a main role in such process by reinforcing the ideology of the middle class. More specifically, Zipes showed that many adaptations are linked with cultural stances pertaining to the roles of males and females in society. He further refers how Perrault and the Grimm Brothers have produced versions of the *Little Red Riding Hood* that drastically changed the oral tale and erased the positive references to sexuality and feminine power. Such rereadings gave rise to rewritings of the tale. As Christa Mastrangelo Joyce puts it:

Contemporary women poets (...) explore and recreate the fairy tales. These poets entered a literary genre long dominated by men and claimed it as their own (...) They have stretched the original boundaries of the tales (...) reversing or highlighting many of the perverse misogynistic views with which the source texts were imbued (Joyce, 2009, p. 31).

Angela Carter's tale "The Company of Wolves", published in the collection of short fiction *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), is an example of such rewritings, as we will be able to further explore in 3.2.2. of this chapter. Carter deviates from the moralistic warnings of the Grimm Brother's and Perrault's tales and portrays a feminist protagonist who is no 'damsel in distress' about to become an easy prey. Instead, she is an independent subject, in control of her sexuality and in charge of her fate. The canonical values are, therefore, subverted and the young woman is no longer 'framed' but empowered.

Within the context of performance, one can say that, up to a certain extent, the fandom phenomenon is the product of interpreting certain performances as deconstructive of 'framed' representations. Examples of such performances can certainly be found in Cher's TV variety shows of the 1970s and one can speculate up to what extent they were triggered by what was going on in her personal life or if, in fact, the opposite happened, that is to say, her self-confidence was boosted by the roles she played.

In 1974 Sonny filed for a separation from Cher citing "irreconcilable differences" (Napsha and Berman, 2001, p. 35) and Cher countered with a divorce suit and charged him with "involuntary servitude" (Napsha and Berman, 2001, p. 35) claiming that he had withheld money from her and deprived her of her rightful share of their earnings. They battled in court over finances and the custody of their child (which was granted to Cher) and the divorce was finalized in 1975 but problems had started as early as 1972, one year after *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* had begun. Cher had been 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" (Taraborrelli, 1986, p.148). According to Negra (2001) Cher's body was, by the time, presented in the show 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 1970s is often best remembered today for the sharp and unruly public put downs she regularly delivered to her husband" (p. 169). I would argue that in spite of talking much less than Sonny throughout the shows, 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 and witty) and, therefore, resisting and rewriting the traditional role of women in the household. Upon Sonny Bono's death, Ginia Bellafante (1998) wrote about the *Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* in an article for the *Time* magazine entitled *Appreciation: The Sonny Side of Life*. She refers to it as " (...) the CBS variety show that brought a jokey, mass-market, safe feminism to TV as Sonny played emasculated buffoon to Cher's smart aleck". In her personal life Cher was struggling with a controlling husband and during the television shows she was,

subtly, empowering herself, as well as other women and minorities in general. When talking about 'safe feminism', Bellafante is referring to the masked power of the entertainer. In 1975 Cher had her own TV series entitled *Cher*, in which she kept deconstructing 'framed' representations, and between 1976 and 1977, during a troubled marriage with Gregg Allman, she professionally reunited with her ex-husband in *The Sonny and Cher Show*, yet again embracing an array of empowering performances.

### 3.2.1. The 'Damsel' and King Kong According to Cher

The October 31<sup>st</sup> 1976 *The Sonny and Cher Show* includes a sketch called *Beauty and the Beast*, which features Cher as King Kong's sweetheart. The first image is that of a poster from the 1933 film *King Kong*, in which King is grabbing a defenseless Darrow but, in contrast, Cher soon appears comfortably lying on top of King's body. She is making a phone call and doing her nails.



Figure 12: Cher & King Kong (The Sonny and Cher Show – 1977)

She is calling the doctor because King has got chills, a cough, it hurts when he swallows, and he has been complaining about dizziness. She is asked to check his pulse, which is a bit rapid, as well as his testicles (one is for sure clammy) and, therefore, he is supposed to take 200 aspirins and call the doctor in the morning. When he sneezes, she gets worried and blames it on the fact that he is not wearing the slippers she has bought him. She offers him a nice cup of tea, fresh fruit juice or bananas but he refuses; instead he wants chicken soup, which she does not know how to make and will, therefore, have to buy.



He gets upset because his Jewish mother had advised him not to get mixed up with a shisha.<sup>48</sup> The sketch alludes to the fact that religion links the woman who is a non-believer to one who is also a 'poor' housewife. Domesticity and religion go hand in hand and those who do embrace them are censored.

She rebels against his attitude, but, nevertheless, offers to buy him the soup as well as a thermometer since the doctor also said he should have his temperature checked. King gets very worried fearing to have the thermometer put on his testicles and Darrow is the one who calms him down and tells him not to be silly because they only do that when you are a child.

In Cher's sketch King Kong is a 'man in distress' because he has a cold. His woman lies on his body, relaxed, in control, 'on top'. She has to take care of him. King is not only harmless but a baby in the shape of a monster, yet she loves him. On the other hand, in the film, Darrow does not fall in love with the beast in spite of him being protective of her and doing her no harm. She has to be rescued and has to fall in love with a white male. In the end, Darrow is both a 'damsel in distress' and a 'femme fatale': Carl Denham's last words in response to the police lieutenant's "Well, Denham, the airplanes got him" were "Oh no, it wasn't the airplanes. It was Beauty killed the Beast". The woman of the 1933 film is a siren, who, with her beauty, is able to destroy a very strong 'monster' that is, in fact, harmless. Cher's character, in turn, understands his nature and the fact that he needs to be taken care of. In this rewriting of the traditional fairytale, Beauty saves the Beast.

### 3.2.2. The 'Damsel' and the Wolf According to Cher

To be moonstruck is to acknowledge the wolf within, to give its place; to grant that howling at the moon is the foundation of social institutions.

– Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995)

The damsel-in-distress, as an example of differential treatment of genders in literature, works of art, and film, which perpetrates regressive and patronizing myths about women, has particularly become a stock figure of melodrama. In 1987, Norman Jewison directed the post classical romantic comedy *Moonstruck* based on the screenplay by John Patrick Shanley, an intersemiotic and intertextual product with traces of both *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood* as well as of Puccini's opera *La Bohème*.

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<sup>48</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, "shiksa" is an often-disparaging term for a non-Jewish woman or girl and, among Orthodox Jews, the term is used to describe one who fails to follow Orthodox religious precepts. The etymology of the word is partly derived from the Hebrew term "sheqes", meaning 'abomination', 'blemish'.

In *Moonstruck*, Cher plays the character of Loretta Castorini alongside Nicolas Cage and Olympia Dukakis. The plot revolves around the lives of Rose Castorini (Dukakis) and her 37-year-old daughter Loretta who is a widow (Cher). They are both at turning points in their relationships with men: Cosmo, Rose's husband and Loretta's father, suffers from depression and has engaged in an extramarital relationship. Loretta has accepted the marriage proposal of Johnny, a childish, insecure man, yet, soon after, she meets and falls in love with his brother, a baker with a tempestuous character who goes by the name of Ronny (Cage). She tries to avoid engaging in a relationship but ultimately accepts Ronny's invitation to go to the opera with him. After watching Puccini's *La Bohème*, they bond even more. The story ends with Ronny asking Loretta to marry him. She accepts and the family celebrates.

Making use of parodic laughter, the film ridicules the faith of the damsel in fairytales and, up to a certain extent, in the melodrama, by subverting the messages of the original stories to 'unframe' and empower the women characters. There is an inversion of gender hierarchy as the heroin wakes up to her latent sexuality. Such awakening is symbolically linked to the image of the wolf, a subject of distress since it is a predator feared by the female characters in the classic tales. In the film, just as in Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves", the wolf is presented as scary but also as an object of attraction and, ultimately, of happiness. There is a different way of approaching sexuality and the male and female roles in society. The female protagonist becomes a confident and self-possessed woman brought about by a transformation.

*Moonstruck* moves, as Rowe (1995) puts it, between the pathos of the melodrama, essentially represented by the story inside the story that is the opera *La Bohème*, and the irony and humor of the postclassical romantic comedy (p. 192). Thematic tensions are alternatively established between night-day, life-death. The soundtrack reinforces such tension. The film starts and finishes with the song *That's Amore* by Dean Martin and, in between, one can listen to Puccini's melodies. Nevertheless, the gender that ultimately wins over is the comedy and it is the reason why Dean Martin can be heard both in the beginning and in the end of the film. As we will see, the comedy ends up transforming the melodramatic themes and motives of *La Bohème* and gives emphasis to the female characters, as the most positive elements of melodrama are withdrawn.

The whole film, right from the first scenes, emphasizes how people can be 'dead' while alive. The first scene shows the entrance of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* at night where posters are being displayed announcing *La Bohème*. The next morning Loretta is on her way to work (a funeral home) when a truck reading 'Metropolitan Opera – Scenic Shop' passes by. Intuitively, the spectator infers that

Puccini's opera will be linked to the character's story. About this scene Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell write:

Before you know her problem, you instinctively know Loretta's problem. She's detached from the life swirling around her. Loretta is on a search for a state of mind that will bring her harmony. (...) Loretta (...) doesn't see life, and literally, doesn't see herself (Ford and Mitchell, 2004, p. 182-3).

The idea that the character is in a lethargic stage of mind is reinforced by the fact that she works at a funeral house. Evoking the grotesque, the undertaker proudly tells Loretta that he makes the dead look better than they had in real life while the old ladies mourning in the wake room say that he is a genius. The florist delivers roses to the dead man and Loretta comments how the person who bought them has just spent money on something that is going to end up in the trash. Nevertheless, she admits that she likes flowers and when he offers her a rose her eyes brighten up, letting her romantic facet surface and hinting at the fact that something is about to change. Later, during a full moon, Loretta takes Johnny to the airport. As Ford and Mitchell (2004) say, the moon usually stands for "a portent of change" (p. 183). In one of the next scenes Loretta is at a wine store where the owners, an elderly couple, are having an argument: she is accusing him of looking at another woman as a wolf but, the problem is quickly trivialized when he says he sees in her the woman he married. She blushes, as she tells him she sees a wolf in everyone. The spectator can only conclude that there is nothing wrong about 'having a wolf' inside each and every one of us.

When Loretta meets Ronny for the first time, he expresses his anger for having a wooden hand. He tells the story about how he chopped his own hand when his brother distracted him from his work. As a consequence, his bride left him. He feels highly frustrated because now his brother has a bride (Loretta) and he does not. Loretta reverts Ronny's logic and considers he wanted to escape his bride and, therefore, self-inflicted such pain, an interpretation similar to that of Zipes when he reads the narratives of fairy tales as a result of men's and women's fears concerning their sexuality. In the same line, William Day (2003) considers that such a hand symbolizes castration (p.20).

When Ronny invites Loretta to his apartment, she makes him eat a medium-rare stake in spite of his claim that he prefers them well done. She replies, "You'll eat this bloody to feed your blood" and after trying it he really loves it, which shows that by then she already knows his inner self better than he does. Loretta concludes that he is trying to hide the fact that he is a wolf (to her and to himself). The scene

shows the viewer how well they know each other in spite of having just met. Later, before going to the opera with him, Loretta goes to the Cinderella Beauty Shop for a makeover. After telling the hairdresser she wants to dye her hair, in an intertextual reference to *Cinderella*, the script reads, “Transformational music starts here and continues through the following scenes. This music should convey that Loretta is turning from a frumpy pumpkin into a sleek and beautiful coach” (John Patrick Shanley, 1988, p. 61). In the film the music can be heard while Loretta exits the hairdresser and is on her way to the boutique, as well as from the time she leaves the boutique until she arrives home. She undergoes her ‘transformation’, as Cinderella does, to go to the ball.



Figure 13: Loretta before and after the ‘transformation’

As she exits the boutique, she bumps into two nuns who tell her “Be careful”: Loretta is on her way to ‘sin’. Nevertheless, the scene is lightly presented and is humorous. Laughter breaks hierarchies and a new order is about to be established. As Ford and Mitchell (2004) claim, “Unlike all the near-sighted princes who only recognize Cinderella when the slipper fit, Ronny recognizes Loretta’s true self before her transformation” (John Patrick Shanley, 1988, p. 183) since they ‘wake up to life’ when they recognize they had been ‘dead’.

While telling his story to her, Ronny says, “I have no life. My brother took my life” and later on, when in bed, he exclaims, “I was dead”, to which Loretta replies, “I was dead, too”. After having attended the opera and before going to Ronny’s apartment for a second time, Ronny tells Loretta “You run to the wolf in me, that don’t make you no lamb” and in the film script one can read, “They kiss. When they part

there is a drop of blood on Loretta's lips" (John Patrick Shanley, 1988, p. 41). Such a reference to the animalesque and to the loss of virginity invites for intertextual readings between the *Little Red Riding Wood* and *The Company of Wolves*. The following dialogue<sup>49</sup> reinforces the link:

RONNY

Your blood.

LORETTA

All my life I have never reached a man.

I knew that I would reach my husband,

but I took my time and he was dead.

RONNY

Loretta.

LORETTA

I want to cut you open and crawl inside

of you. I want you to swallow me.

RONNY

I've got you.

LORETTA

Get all of me. Take everything.

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<sup>49</sup> The dialogue up to "Get all of me. Take everything" (inclusive), can be read in the script but was not used in the film. It, nevertheless, says something about the author's intentions and it helps understand the themes of the film, confirming what certain scenes hint at.

RONNY

What about Johnny?

LORETTA

You're mad at him, take it out on me,  
take your revenge on me! Take everything,  
leave nothing for him to marry! Hollow me out  
so there's nothing left but the skin over my bones.  
Suck me dry!

RONNY

Alright. Alright. There will be nothing left.

“Their eyes are boiling with fierce animal tears. They have opened their souls to each other and they are coming together” (p. 42).

The above dialogue rewrites the story of the *Little Red Riding Hood* in the manner Carter did with her story “The Company of Wolves”. Carter’s narrator says, “(...) her red shawl (...) has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow (...). She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; (...) she does not know how to shiver” (Carter, 1979, p. 3). Loretta also dresses in red in a cold winter night to meet her ‘wolf’ and, up to a certain extent, was a virgin until she met Ronny since she had not fully lived until then (thus the blood on her lips).

Just as the girl in Carter’s tale expresses her sexual desire for the ‘wolf’ and invites him to possess her by saying “What shall I do with my shawl? (...) What shall I do with my blouse?” (p. 138), Loretta also expresses her desire for Ronny. While Grimm’s little girl is saved because the hunter cuts the wolf’s belly, Loretta is the one who wants to cut Ronny, crawl inside him, and asks him to ‘swallow’ her (at this point

she is in the position of saving him). She is not the fragile, unprotected character that is caught in a trap in the traditional fairy tale. In fact, the next day, she fears she might have committed a mistake and when Ronny claims he is in love with her, her answer is “Snap out of it!” followed by a slap on his face.

Carter’s character is described as a “(...) strong minded child (...) quite sure the wild beasts cannot harm her (...)” (Carter, 1979, p. 2-3) who meets with the hunter and “Soon they were laughing and joking like old friends” (Carter, 1979, p. 3). About the heroin in “The Company of Wolves”, says Catherine Orenstein (2004), “The heroine claims a libido equal to that of her lascivious stalker and becomes a wolf herself” (n/p)<sup>50</sup>. In *Moonstruck*, the dialogue in the scene where Ronny is trying to convince Loretta to enter his apartment is shorter than in the script. It reads, “Don't try to live your life out to somebody else's idea of sweet happiness. Don't try to live on milk and cookies when what you want is meat! Red meat just like me! It's wolves run with wolves and nothing else!” (Shanley, 1987, p. 81). When these women meet the ‘wolf’, they meet their soul mate and a transformation takes place.

In *Moonstruck*, as in Carter, the beast (werewolf) is initially an icon of fear but also of undeniable attraction: the Little Red Riding Hood of Carter deliberately arrives last at her grandmother’s house to lose the bet and allow the hunter to kiss her, while Loretta, in spite of showing some regret for having slept with Ronny (“You've got those bad eyes like a gypsy! Why didn't I see it yesterday!” (p. 53)), follows him to his apartment after the opera, instead of heading home as they were supposed to do, “This is your place (...). This is where we're going!” (p. 85). Loretta had to know she was not on her way home; she simply ignored it since she, as the Little Red Riding Hood, wanted something she did not dare to utter.

Jessica Tiffin (2009) claims that the wolves are trapped in the folktale that defines them, as strongly as these women are and, such as the latter, they are both feared and attacked by their prey, that is to say, they are both perceived as monsters in the light of a dominant ideology which reflects a certain concept and are a threat to the patriarchal power (p.65). Both Loretta and Carter’s Little Red Riding Hood challenge convention and gender stereotypes and are, therefore, considered transgressors and marginal by the dominant ideology. By inverting the traditional male and female roles, such stories represent stories of female empowerment, and thus, ‘reframe’ women.

Loretta<sup>51</sup> is responsible for ‘disorder’ and ‘assaults’ to male authority in comic scenes in which the way the male characters think is ridiculed, alluding to the social and literary traditions of the carnivalesque. Throughout the film, the viewer is constantly reminded that death is crucial for a new order to be born

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.msmagazine.com/summer2004/danceswithwolves.asp>.

<sup>51</sup> The name Loretta means ‘little victory’.

and that Loretta, presented as the unruly woman, is suspending 'normal' rules of society (not in terms of social strata as in the case of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival but in terms of gender). Gender inversion is observed when Johnny and Loretta listen to Perry, a middle-aged professor, being humiliated by one of his female students who is having dinner with him at an Italian restaurant. Johnny laughs at the situation and tells Loretta that a man who does not control his woman is funny. In turn, Loretta ridicules his remark when she replies that their argument has to do with their age difference. In the same scene Loretta chooses what Johnny is going to eat because he wants to make a poor decision and eat something that is going to make him feel sick during the flight he is about to catch. Before leaving, Johnny proposes but without having a ring to offer Loretta and she asks him to give her his pinky ring, which makes him feel sad. On the way to the airport she, once again, reinforces her dominance over him when she makes him agree on scheduling the wedding date, despite his insecurity and against his will. Johnny expresses his willingness to get married after his mother passes away, which seems to imply that he is thinking about getting married to have a wife play the role of his mother. Later, on the phone from Palermo, he comments his mother is dying but Loretta does not believe him because, as she tells her mother, "She's dying. But I could still hear her big mouth". She feels the need to talk to him as if she were talking to a child; therefore, she reminds him, "And don't stand directly under the sun. You've got your hat, use your hat".

When Ronny is eating the stake she cooked, she asks him, "You got any whiskey? How 'bout giving me a glass of whiskey?" The description reads, "Loretta picks up her glass and swallows a healthy dose" (p. 40). Later on, "Loretta pours herself another shot" (p. 40) and finally, "(she pours them both another drink)" (p. 40). Loretta's family is Italian-American; from an ethnic group in the margins of the American society, she is used to drinking generous quantities of alcohol, which is typical of an 'unruly' woman. Her unruliness is also expressed in scenes such as the one in which she slaps Ronny in the face and says, "Snap out of it!" when she is trying to make him forget her. Yet, as Janhavi Mittal (2013) argues, "The label of monstrosity is contingent on an implicit recognition of monstrosity by its corresponding society" (p. 105) and what might be perceived as monstrous by the American society might not be equally perceived by the Italian culture.

Finally, as Kathleen Rowe (1995) rightly claims, Cher's character is "a paradigmatic woman on top, enhanced by the strong unruly off-screen presence Cher brings to the part" (p. 204).



### 3.3. Deconstructing the Witch

A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster.

- Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978)

The carnival, not as a license to be free, but rather now as a free license to become.

- Ted Hiebert, *Becoming Carnival: Performing a Postmodern Identity* (2014)

Cher gave yet another contribution to the deconstruction of hegemonic femininities (and masculinities) in the film *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) namely to the deconstruction of the stereotype of the 'macho man' and of the witch of the fairy tales. The film is an adaptation of John Updike's novel by the same name (1985) by Michael Cristofer (who wrote the script) and John Miller (who directed it). One can argue that Updike's novel is representative of a particular powerful regime of truth that emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the Enlightenment: the glorification of science with its domination of the rational (male) mind over (usually female) matter, a way of thinking that encapsulates much of what is understood as 'modernism' and is also fundamental to 'humanism'. In turn, the film adopts a postmodernist point of view. Postmodern and poststructuralist discourses show the discursively constructed nature of much that was taken in these discourses to be the fundamental unquestionable base on which argument could be built and 'truth' established. By deconstructing those binaries, the human body becomes capable of manifesting itself in various ways. We will be looking at the way the film rewrites the novel by rewriting the myth of the 'unruly' witch.

In an interview, Updike has described his novel as an attempt to "make things right with my, what shall we call them, feminist detractors" (Rothstein, 1988, p. C21), meaning it was meant to be a reply to those who would argue that his women characters were systematically spouses, housewives, and sexual objects. He further explained that his objective was to link the liberated woman to the symbol of the witch, yet, on the reasons why he had chosen such a topic, he claimed, "I would not have begun this novel if I had not known, in my life, witchy women, and in my experience felt something of the sinister old myths to resonate with the modern female experiences of liberation and raised consciousness" (Updike, 2012b, p. 855). Ultimately, using the symbolism of the witch, he represented women both as wicked and as the 'second sex'.

On the back cover of the first Ballantine Books edition of John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick* (1985a) one can read:

Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane, who consider themselves a coven, meet each Thursday for food, drink, gossip and magic. At the opening meeting of the novel, the witches gossip about the new man in town, Darryl Van Horne. Soon this man becomes central to the witches' lives, and the coven meetings are transformed into tennis and hot tub baths at Darryl's house. The relationship between Darryl and the witches quickly becomes sexual, and the Thursday afternoon meetings become orgies. Later, Jenny, a much younger woman, joins the group, and Darryl marries her. The three witches, jealous of Darryl's affection, cast a spell on Jenny and, eventually, she dies. At this point, the coven disintegrates, and each witch remarries and loses her powers.

This plot summary reveals the end of the story and how Updike chose to emphasize the wickedness and weakness of the witches by having them commit murder and lose their powers.

Many reviews were not in favor of Updike's portrayal of the witches. Critic Peter S. Prescott (1984) found them, "unsympathetic (...) empty, vulgar, uninteresting, forlorn, and nasty" (p. 92). Margaret Atwood (1984) commented, "Updike provides no blameless way of being female" (p. 1) and, in turn, Katha Pollitt (1984) calls the book, "patronizing", "mean-spirited", "sexist" (p. 773). Finally, Paul Gray (1984) considers it to be Updike's answer to the women's movement since he seems to think that women who renounce domesticity will turn to evil and, after all, "What every liberated woman wants most of all is another husband" (p.113).

Updike reflects what David Glover and Cora Kaplan (1992) labeled "sixties-within-the-eighties" (p. 222). They refer how the eighties in the United States underwent a national conservatism and right-wing backlash against what was, by then, perceived as an excessive liberalism. They write:

Today the fate of the sixties-within-the-eighties is a notoriously important issue in the struggle for cultural and political meaning, an instance of the way the conflicting forces in every conjuncture attempt to write uncontested histories for themselves. The hegemony of the New Right has involved a sustained critical attempt to monopolize the complex terrain of the popular, and in particular to drastically overhaul the social significance of the sixties. (p. 222).

While Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) examined and debunked the myth of feminine evil, Updike remythologized it in *The Witches of Eastwick*.

Updike chooses to set the plot in Rhode Island of the sixties when, “Female yearning was in all the papers and magazines (...) the sexual equation had become reversed as girls of good family flung themselves toward brutish rock stars (...) dark suns turning these children of sheltered upbringing into suicidal orgiasts” (Updike, 1984b, p.11). Where once a puritan family blossomed, the Lenox’s, “By the time of Alexandra’s arrival in Eastwick there was not a Lenox left in South County save one old widow, Abigail, in the stagnant quaint village of Old Wick (...)” (Updike, 1984b, p. 9). By calling this last descendent of the Lenox family ‘Abigail’ and having her inhabit Old Wick, he is definitely alluding to the historical figure of Abigail Williams, who was one of the initial accusers in the Salem Witch trials.

Having the Puritan family associated with witchcraft is ironic and depreciating for Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane. Updike depicts the atmosphere of the 1960s as pathetic and dangerous and compares it to the negative repercussions of the ‘witchy woman’. The Puritan inheritance slides into further despair with the arrival of Darryl van Horn who buys the abandoned Lenox mansion. He alludes to songs as “Satisfaction” and “I Got You Babe”<sup>52</sup> as being from an “era of many proclaimed rights, and blatant public music (...) [when] the spirit of Woodstock was proclaimed” (Updike, 1984b, p. 21). The witches are presented as pathetic second wave feminists who avoid a feminine look to feel empowered, although they despise their appearance. About Alexandra, he writes, “One of the liberations of becoming a witch had been that she had ceased constantly weighing herself” (Updike, 1984b, p. 17). Alexandra is fat and her hair is a “muddy pallor now further dirtied by gray” (Updike, 1984b, p. 12).

In the beginning of the novel, Alexandra, Jane, and Sukie are divorcees who have relationships with married men, and the reader learns that they had previously been unfaithful to their husbands, namely, by engaging in affairs with each other’s husbands. They are unscrupulous to the point of betraying their own friends.

When explaining the betrayals, Updike puts the blame on the women in every situation. They are *allegedly* unfaithful to provide comfort to men who are in relationships with controlling women but, in the process, they are destructive because they make their husbands lose power as they attain some independence, “The gift of sculpture had descended with her other powers, in the period when Ozzie turned into colored dust” (p. 19):

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<sup>52</sup> In fact, the song was Sonny and Cher’s first big hit, and, therefore, he is indirectly criticizing the singer who will later play in the film adaptation the role of the character he created (Alexandra).

As Alexandra accepted first one and then several lovers, her cuckolded husband shrank to the dimensions and dryness of a doll, lying beside her in her great wide receptive bed at night like a painted log picked up at a roadside stand, or a stuffed baby alligator (...) By the time of their actual divorce her former lord and master had become mere dirt-matter in the wrong place, as her mother had briskly defined it long ago—some polychrome dust she swept up and kept in a jar as a souvenir (pp. 5-6).

The fears about women that psychoanalysis suggests men suffer, such as that of castration, surface in witchcraft mythology where their sexuality represents death for the men who are seduced by them<sup>53</sup>. On the subject, Silvia Bovenschen (1978) comments:

(...) the word 'witch' experienced the same transformation as the word 'queer' or 'proletarian': it was adopted by the person affected and used against the enemy who had introduced it (...) to the extent that women have appropriated the frightening apparition and collectively taken over the myth, the individual is freed from it (p. 86).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> As a vamp in *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour*, Cher played Eve in the Garden of Eden, while Sonny was Adam. The song that introduces the sketch says, "Adam had a witch named Eve, Eden's first daughter of sin. Beneath her lovely golden tresses, she really had a set of skin. She took a little nipple of the famous fruit and probably got evicted in a birthday suit" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_4l-0U2l0qg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4l-0U2l0qg)). Cher does not present Eve as being an innocent woman who was tricked by the snake. She is labeled "witch" and she and the snake seem to be buddies (he says he is her neighbor) and he suggests that she tempts Adam, which she does. Adam, in turn, is presented as a joke *because* he is a man who does not even know what having sex means (he has to ask her and she clarifies). One of the first ways that sexual humor entered into 1970s television was through the variety shows, namely through *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour*.

<sup>54</sup> Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement depict the witch in *La jeune nee* (1975) and Cixous unruly laughing Medusa is also a witch. About her, Rowe (1995) wrote, "A more courageous meeting of her gaze would allow Perseus to apprehend not petrifying monstrosity but beauty (...) As long as men avert their eyes from her, fearing the sight of her and her gaze, "woman" can be only a phantasm of castration for them, deadly and grotesque" (p. 10) and compares her to Mikhail Bakhtin's "grinning pregnant hags (...) with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival" (p. 10). The female gaze became associated with witchlike female monstrosity and female power starting in the 1970s when feminists took Medusa and madwomen in general as heroines whose gazes and non-linear language transgress the symbolic order. The witch has

Only during the second wave of Feminism did the witch become a central empowering figure, namely among the female gothic tradition. Beginning in 1968 with the WITCH<sup>55</sup> movement feminists have claimed solidarity and identity with the persecuted witches of the modern period, expressing interest in the Goddess and questioning the possible existence of a pre-Christian matriarchal witch, who would have been a priestess in that pre-Christian culture<sup>56</sup>. Cynthia Eller (1993) claims:

The most significant aspect of WITCH was its choice of central symbol: the witch. By choosing this symbol, feminists were identifying themselves with everything women were taught not to be: ugly, aggressive, independent, and malicious. Feminists took this symbol and molded it - not into the fairy tale "good witch," but into a symbol of female power, knowledge, independence, and martyrdom (p. 55).

Contrary to the novel, the plot of the film is set in the 1980s and can be divided in three main parts. First, the three witches are depicted as postmodern 'damsels in distress' in search of an equally postmodern 'prince charming', a 'Mr. Right'. In a second part, they are involved with the, so to speak, 'prince charming' and enjoying the relationship. Finally, in the third part they find out about Darryl's 'dark side' and decide to eradicate him from their lives. The film depicts the cynicism of men who proclaim Puritan principles and convictions but do not put them into practice and women who encounter men who introduced themselves as feminists just to earn their favors. These witches are able to stick together and not allow jealousy to ruin their friendship. They are still good, carrying mothers incapable of purposefully committing atrocities and harm others. Furthermore, they are feminine and behave as third wave feminists; they are ahead of their time.

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become the outspoken pro-woman, 'the bitch'. Says editor of *Ms. Magazine* Marcia Gillespie in the editor's page of the 1999 issue, "I want to affirm the witch in me".

<sup>55</sup> Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell.

<sup>56</sup> Linda Badley (2003) claims how the power of the witch is "inherited matrilineally and the craft is handed down from mother to daughter or aunt to niece" (p. 5) and how the "bastion of misogyny" (p. 7) is religion. It is of interest how domesticity (recipes, cooking, gardening, and sewing) and things a patriarchal society labels as "frivolous" (clothes, beauty, and makeup) are presented as powerful by witches.

The first scenes of the film show a Puritan, patriotic, New England town where married, religious men are unfaithful to their wives, a behavior the witches condemn. At the elementary school where Jane is a teacher, the principal suggests he will increase her salary in return for sexual favors and pats her on the behind in front of the students. The children are learning under a traditional, boring educational system, where, at the opening ceremony of the new school year *America, the Beautiful* is sung and the principal's speech exalts the "good old days" and the Lenox family that founded the town and subdued the Indians. He laments the present disintegration of values and "lost mores" and thanks Jane for her contributions, commenting, "I can see we all have our work cut out for us" (as he blinks at her). Jane seems bored, exhausted, annoyed and later Sukie comments that he had made a pass at her a week before with the wife "ten feet away". The viewer learns that her husband has left her because they had "too many" children, that Jane's has left her because she could not bear any, and that Alexandra is a widow.

When, in one of their gatherings, they express their wish to find a smart man they could talk with, "somebody you could be yourself with", they envision him as "Foreign. A tall dark European, (...) a foreign prince riding a great black horse". This would be the perfect postmodern (and mockvictorian) 'Prince Charming' to these 'Damsels in Distress'. Darryl arrives in town as a result of their wishes. They had the power to bring him into their lives only to learn the lesson of how cautions they needed to be. Nevertheless, they were oblivious of such potential since women are usually not unaware of how powerful they are.

Updike, in turn, characterizes these witches as less smart and with fewer powers than Darryl. Towards the beginning of the novel, they try to recall his name but are unable to do so, "The three witches fell silent, realizing that, tongue-tied, they were themselves under a spell, of a greater" (Updike 1984b, p. 37). Darryl is an inventor, working on the interface between solar and electrical energy, which they do not know anything about, and Alexandra does not even assume her lack of knowledge on the subject. He talks about the concept of "Big Interface" and Sukie was not ashamed to ask about it but Alexandra "(...) would just have nodded as if she knew; she had a lot still to learn about overcoming acculturated female recessiveness" (p. 50). When discussing a painting, Sukie calls it "electrifying" (p. 51) and Van Horn calls the comment a "flirtatious featherheaded thing" (p. 51) and regrets having wasted his time talking about it to her. They are also prejudiced against other races. Alexandra, "(...) had brought with her from the West a regrettable trace of the regional prejudice against Indians and Chicanos, and to her eyes Darryl Van Horn didn't look washed. You could almost see little specks of black in his skin, as if he were a halftone reproduction" (Updike, 1984b, p. 39). They are also prejudiced against homosexuals: when they hear the news that Darryl has arrived, they proceed to comment, "'No wife and family, evidently' (...) 'Oh,

one of those'. Hearing Jane's northern voice bring her this rumor of a homosexual come up from Manhattan to invade them, Alexandra (...)" (Updike, 1984b, p. 1). Yet, they are sexually attracted to each other. Lesbian sexuality is, though, "forbidden" and they "weep" at "(...) the curse of heterosexuality that held them apart (...)" (Updike, 1984b, p. 185). Updike found depictions of homosexuality not to his taste, which transpires in most of his work.

Towards the end of the novel, he proceeds to describe Jane's "new" husband by writing, "He had heavy-lidded protruding eyes the pale questioning blue of a Siamese cat's; he did not drop by so briefly as to fail to notice - he who had never married and who had been written off by those he might have courted as hopelessly prissy, too sexless even to be called gay" (Updike, 1984b, p. 340). Gay writers, among them Tony Kushner, frequently expressed their annoyance with his remarks.

Updike's women even reach the point of committing atrocities such as causing a woman to fall and break a leg (in the film the responsible for such an act is Darryl) and a puppy to die simply because it is barking. Children are also a burden to them. "God, don't children get in the way? I keep having the most terrible fights with mine. They say I'm never home and I try to explain to the little shits that I'm earning a living" (Updike, 1984b, p. 71) says Sukie to Alexandra. According to Updike women can either be good wives and mothers or think about themselves and their happiness, but not both. In the film, Jane, Alexandra, and Sukie are carrying, tender mothers in spite of not being housewives. In fact, Jane even expresses her discomfort with the traditional educational system and eventually decides to subvert the norms and adopt an unconventional approach to teaching.

Cristofer seems to have chosen to transfer his reading of Updike's view of women to the character of Darryl. When he first approaches Alexandra, he pretends to be a feminist to win her heart:

DARYL

(...)

Women are the source, the only power.

Nature. Birth. Re-birth. Cliche,

cliche. Sure. But true.

ALEX

Why are you telling me all this?

DARYL

Because you're an honest woman.

And I'm being honest with you. I

like women. I respect them. If

you want me to talk to you like

you're a dumb twit, I will. But

what's the point? You have brains,

Alex. More than brains. You have

power. And you don't even know

it, do you? Well, most women

don't.

ALEX

Were you ever married?

DARYL

Good question. You see? Brains.

The answer is no. Don't believe in

it. Good for the man. Lousy for

the woman. She suffocates. She

dies. I've seen it. And then the

husband runs around complaining

that he's fucking a dead person.

And he's the one that killed her.

Where's your husband?

ALEX



Dead.

DARYL

Well, sorry, but you're one of  
the lucky ones. When a woman  
unloads a husband – or when a  
husband unloads a woman – however  
it happens – death, desertion,  
divorce – the three 'd's' –  
when it happens, a woman blossoms.  
(...) That's the woman for me.  
(Cristofer, 1986, p. 31)

Later he uses the same technique with Jane and Sukie. They all end up having sex with him and subsequently undergo a radical change in their appearance. This corresponds to the second part of the film, when the three women are under Darryl's spell.

From then on, they all have amazing pre-Raphaelite curls and become aggressively feminine, as a parody of stereotyped femininity, and, at the same time, masquerading as the 'postmodern diva'.



*Figure 14:* Jane, Sukie, and Alexandra saying goodbye to Daryl as he leaves to buy ice cream.

While doing this, they defy the concept of immutable identities while adopting the carnivalesque body as a masquerade and by using excessive femininity they are appropriating instruments culture offers

and using them to work in an opposite manner. Since they have crossed borders, the local community perceives them as 'monsters'. In a scene when Jane goes to the supermarket, all the women at the store look at her with disdain. Says Creed (2007), "(...) that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (p. 11) and displays inversion that can be compared to the carnivalesque.

In one of their grotesque gatherings, they inadvertently help Darryl perform tricks that lead to Felicia's death (the death that takes place in the novel is solely caused by the witches). When they realize what has happened, they decide to stop seeing him. He gets extremely upset and decides to punish them by making them undergo the situations they once told him they feared the most. Sukie undergoes excruciating pain that puts her life in danger. Fearing for her life, Alexandra goes to Darryl's mansion and convinces him that she is willing to get back on friendly terms with him. At this point, the viewer is hinted at the fact that the women are going to win this fight and that the initial hierarchy that placed Darryl ahead of them has been reversed, that they will 'uncrown' him as they undergo a process of rebirth. Sukie recovers and they eventually start playing tricks on him. During the scene, he enters the local church and addresses the congregation, inquiring if women are a mistake from God:

DARYL

(...)

Ungrateful little bitches

(...)

Let me ask you – do you think God

knew what he was doing when he

created women? (...)

or do you think it was another

of his little mistakes? Like

earthquakes, and floods.

(...)

So what do you

think? Women. A mistake? Or did  
he do it to us on purpose? I'd  
like to know. Because if it's  
a mistake, maybe we could do  
something about it. Find a cure.  
  
(...)  
  
and you'll never be afflicted  
with women again.  
  
(Cristofer, 1986, p. 116)

Upon his return home, the fight continues and Jane falls from the top of the stairs. Alexandra and Sukie ask her to laugh and she starts levitating (the force of gravity does not apply to them if they don't want to), that is, 'normal' rules are suspended. The women are being responsible for an 'assault' to the masculine authority. One could say that the film metonymically extends Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the social and literary traditions of the carnivalesque in Medieval and Renaissance societies which he discussed in *Rabelais and his World* (1984) to gender and the inversion of gender roles. Eventually, Darryl's powers weaken as the women keep fighting him and he literally vanishes into thin air. Nine months later, each one of them gives birth to a baby boy, Darryl's children. One day, he shows up on their television screens and tries to manipulate them by winning their affection but Sukie turns the TV off. The male stereotype can no longer 'talk like a man'. It is the final laughter of the witches as they are left to raise a new generation at the mansion that once belonged to Darryl in the company of his former servant Fidel.



Figure 15: Sukie 'switching Daryl off'.

In the end of Updike's story, the witches remarry with pathetic men and pursue mediocre careers, rarely talking to each other and never meeting as a group again. Having a lot about him of the upper-class WASP, Updike's novel warns women away from feminism and urges them to adopt safely traditional roles. In parallel, Updike denounces homosexual conduct. Nevertheless, gay love is worth a better ending than lesbian love since Darryl leaves town with his brother-in-law and with Fidel. The witches look forward to a relationship together but give up pursuing the idea.

The film is a counter representation of the book and shows that representations, since they point beyond themselves, are made up of signs that combined tell a story. By doing so, it also shows how hegemony works and teases out the way a 'conservative message' can even speak against itself. When reviewing Updike's novel, Margaret Atwood (1984) wrote, "What a culture has to say about witchcraft, whether in jest or in earnest, has a lot to do with its views of sexuality and power, and especially with the apportioning of powers between the sexes" (p. 1).

### 3.4. Cher on Wheels: Hitting the Road and Deconstructing "The Angel in the House"

Camille Paglia (1994) considers that in the nineteen sixties, the "room of one's own" that Virginia Woolf had once claimed an imperative for women's independence, could be replaced by "a *car* of one's own" as equalizer and symbol of America's Amazonism. She claims that women had never been so mobile before, capable of getting out of the house and "(...) keep running on the open highway, battling stormy nature and dodging mammoth eighteen-wheelers (...) capable of the archetypal journey of the heroic

quest, a traditionally masculine myth” (p. 19-20). Before the now classic feminist film *Thelma and Louise*<sup>57</sup> was released in 1991, Cher was already claiming the road with the song *Hell on Wheels* and its video clip<sup>58</sup> (1979).



Figure 16: Still from the video clip from *Hell on Wheels*

In it, Cher roller-skates down steep, mountainous roads and is followed by truck drivers. When she crosses a barrier, they use the maximum speed of the truck to break it and catch up with her. At some point, she finds other people on the road and persuades them to also take a ride. Among these people are bikers, policemen, cowboys, and men in drag. Cher is presented as a rule breaker and a leader that ‘takes the road’ and follows her will.

In the 1990 comedy-drama *Mermaids*, Cher also ‘hits the road’ and simultaneously deconstructs the myth of the threatening mermaid and the “angel in the house”. She is Rachel<sup>59</sup>, a mother of two (15-year old Charlotte and 9-year old Kate) and in the official trailer one can listen, “Charlotte’s mother is many things, normal isn’t one of them”<sup>60</sup>. The subjective concept of “normality” is introduced only to be deconstructed. The three of them are, symbolically, the mermaids of the film; the only direct reference to this figure is through the costume Cher’s character wears at a New Year’s Eve party.

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<sup>57</sup> The character of Susan Sarandon, Louise, refuses to go from Oklahoma to Mexico through Dallas, Texas, since it is known for its conservative laws.

<sup>58</sup> “Hell on Wheels” is one of the 1970s pioneer music videos to be produced in the MTV style before MTV existed. It is considered to be one of the first modern music videos.

<sup>59</sup> Her daughter Charlotte calls her Mrs. Flax, in spite of her being single.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUSPGXmZQbM>.



Figure 17: Bob Hoskins, Christina Ricci and Winona Ryder as in *Mermaids*

The girls have different fathers: Charlotte is the product of a teenage romance and a marriage that lasted about a year, while Kate of an affair with an athlete. The narration begins in the early fall of 1963 in Oklahoma as Rachel is about to end her affair with a married man and relocate yet again. The viewer learns that every time she ends a relationship she takes the road in her own car. This time, she opens a map and, with eyes closed, chooses her new destination in a random fashion by pointing to it since “(...) the whole point of moving is so everything can be different”.

They move to the small town of Eastport Massachusetts (driving at 70mph on the interstate) to a house near a convent, where Rachel gets a job as a secretary because, as she tells her children, “Death is dwelling on the past or staying in one place too long”. In the new town, she decides to teach her daughter how to drive because, “Driving happens to be one of the most important skills a woman can have”. Charlotte has an obsession with Catholicism, strengthened by her mother’s disapproval. Kate loves swimming. In Eastport, Charlotte becomes interested in the caretaker of the convent and local school bus driver (Joe) and Rachel in a local shop owner (Lou). One day they go fishing together and in preparation for the event Charlotte prepares, as she describes, “real sandwiches, big ones that men can sink their teeth into!”. Yet, Rachel’s concept of cooking is very different. Says Charlotte, “A word about Mrs. Flax and food: the word is ‘hors d’oeuvres’. “Fun finger foods” is her main source book and its all the woman cooks, anything more, she says, it too big a commitment.”, therefore, when she sees the sandwiches on the counter, she thinks they are not ready yet, and, to Charlotte’s disappointment, cuts them in the shape of stars. After the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Charlotte and Joe find themselves consoling each other over the event and they begin to kiss but Charlotte is overwhelmed with guilt when she looks at the religious figures that decorate the ceiling of the tower (they seem to be judging her) and

eventually flees. Feeling she has sinned; she begins fasting in order to purge her sinful thoughts. Eventually, she faints from hunger and fears Immaculate Conception. Unable to talk to her mother about the issue, she runs away in her mother's car and ends up at the house of what she labels as the "perfect nuclear family" in New Haven, Connecticut. Later she is picked up by Lou and taken home where she receives a harsh scolding from Rachel who had been worried about her. Rachel admits she is not an expert in parenting but, nevertheless, she is willing to compromise and do her best. The next day, Charlotte sees an obstetrician under the name of Joan Arc and is told she is a virgin and, therefore, cannot be pregnant. She has just learned that a kiss cannot get a woman pregnant and feels relieved<sup>61</sup>. At a New Year's Eve costume party Lou asks Rachel (dressed in a mermaid costume) to move in with him but she declines, reminding him that in spite of his wife having left him, he has never divorced her. She is not willing to break up with him but does not let their relationship progress either. She also feels reluctant about letting him develop a close friendship with her daughters fearing losing the first place in their hearts. At the end of the party, Rachel's car does not start and she gets a lift from Joe. As they arrive at Rachel's house, she kisses him and wishes him a Happy New Year. Charlotte watches the scene and becomes enraged. The next night, she dresses up in Rachel's clothes to become just as appealing as her mother. She and Kate get drunk and when Charlotte hears the bells of the church ringing, they decide to go to the convent. Charlotte leaves Kate alone and goes up to the bell tower where she has sex with Joe. In the meantime, Kate falls into a river and almost drowns due to her inebriation. She is saved by the nuns and taken to the hospital. Outraged, Rachel has an argument with Charlotte, which, eventually leads to a reconciliation and Charlotte convinces her mother to stay in Eastport for at least one more year. Rachel's relationship with Lou continues and Joe moves to California, keeping in touch with Charlotte via postcards. In turn, she has gained a reputation in high school due to her sexual encounter and replaces her Catholicism obsession with Greek mythology and a less conservative outlook. While in the beginning of the film Rachel would tell her daughter that they were Jews now she reminds her they are not Greek. The film ends with the children acknowledging that their mother will never ever cook a full meal.

Traditionally, in folklore tales, mermaids<sup>62</sup> appear as unlucky omens that foretell and provoke disaster. In 1837 Hans Christian Andersen writes *The Little Mermaid*, a tale of sacrifice about what the life of a woman is supposed to be. Ariel, the little mermaid, is an innocent girl, who, on her quest to attain legs for the man she loves, meets with the sea witch who helps her become human. At this point, she experiences a symbolic sexual awakening as she is exposed to a multitude of phallic symbols. Andersen

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<sup>61</sup> Catholicism and its principles are presented as the source of Charlotte's ignorance on the subject.

<sup>62</sup> The legendary aquatic creatures with the upper body of a female human and the tail of a fish.

(2001) writes, “all the trees and flowers were polypi, half animals and half plants; they looked like serpents with a hundred heads (...). The branches were long slimy arms, with fingers like flexible worms” (p. 21). But, unlike the sea witch who lets the snakes “crawl all over her bosom” (p. 21), the little mermaid is terrified of these phallic symbols. Andersen instills terror of sexuality in his little mermaid while the evil sea witch is seen as accepting of her sexual desires. She represses her budding sexuality in order to attain the feminine ideal: she must lose her tongue (voice) in exchange for a potion that will give her legs, creating a stereotype that subordinates women since they are supposed to be mere objects for the pleasure of men but are not allowed to speak their minds. Regina Bendix (1993) writes about Andersen’s tale, “Nowhere else in classic children’s literature is there so terrified a vision of sex, as seen through the eyes of innocence” (p. 282). In turn, Robert W. Meyers (2001) describes Ariel’s losses as “the relinquishment of her right to be heard, the loss of her creativity and the wound of castration” (p. 153) and Hélène Cixous’ following words in *The Laugh of the Medusa* could very well be applied to the little mermaid:

Who surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a (...) divine composure), hasn’t accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her ((...) to bring out something new), hasn’t thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she is trouble (Cixous, 1976, p. 876).

The Disney version (1989) reflects tensions between not touching fixed definitions of masculine and feminine gender identity and considering the refiguring of gender that will “read” women as speaking subjects. The film *Mermaids* definitely rewrites, through parody, the myth of the mermaid as a dangerous creature, presenting her as a beautiful, harmless, fascinating, empowered, and empowering being.





Figure 18: Mrs. Flax reading *Peyton Place* by Grace Metalious

While relaxing in the bathtub, Rachel reads *Peyton Place* (1956) by Grace Metalious, a story of murder, incest, female desire, and social injustice that was avidly consumed when first published and simultaneously condemned by critics and the clergy. Its characters, incidents, and settings were based on real-life places and events and is, nowadays, still a code for a community harboring a sordid secret. As Ardis Cameron (2015) describes, it became a cultural phenomenon. She argues that, with its frank discussions of poverty, sexuality, class, ethnic discrimination, and small-town hypocrisy, the novel is part of a postwar struggle over belonging and recognition and pushes to the surface the rebellion of a generation no longer willing to ignore the disparities and domestic constraints of Cold War America. The female central characters come to terms with their identity as women and sexual beings, anticipating second-wave feminism. In 1963, Rachel is reading *Metalious*, possibly because she knew she was living in a society that still shared many, if not all, characteristics of *Peyton Place*, and she was representative of a minority in the communities she lived in, thus her frequent moves. By setting the plot of *Mermaids* in the sixties, the film shows the importance women such as Rachel had in their time, as well as when the film was produced (early nineties). And one wonders, aren't they still relevant today?

### 3.5. When the Public and the Publicly Personal Collide: directing and acting in *If These Walls Could Talk*

In the 1996 made for television film *If These Walls Could Talk* Cher gave her contribution to its third segment both as an actress and as a director.

The film is divided in three segments, each of them telling the story of a woman who has to cope with an unplanned pregnancy. All the stories take place in the same house twenty years apart (1952, 1974, and 1996 respectively), and expose the mainstream views of society on the issue in each of the given decades.

The 1952 story deals with a widowed nurse who becomes pregnant by her brother-in-law and decides to undergo abortion to avoid hurting her late husband's family. At the time, abortion was illegal. She does not have the money to pay for a safe procedure and dies shortly after resorting to a man who is simply interested in earning money. The story emphasizes how the problem of having a child places the burden on the woman: she is the one who feels the discomfort of having to deal with the situation, not the father of the child, since shame is a woman's issue.

The cult of domesticity and true womanhood of the 1950s portrayed women as pure, holy, and spiritual. Men were supposed to dwell in the world of work, while women work at home. In fact, many of the qualities of a perfect woman under the cult of domesticity and true womanhood are reflected in the archetype of a damsel in distress. They are both supposed to be pure, righteous, innocent, and delicate. In the Bible, there are references to Jesus being the savior of young and helpless women, for instance, when Jesus saves Mary Magdalene from being stoned by the townspeople. Although Jesus is not portrayed as Prince Charming, he is portrayed as a savior, and his character in the Biblical story can only be labeled as a hero.

In 1974, Barbara Barrows is a middle-aged married woman with four children who has recently gone back to college. She becomes pregnant and considers abortion but, ultimately, chooses to keep the child. She has to decide whether to raise one more child or have a career since the husband does not come forward with the decision of being the one to compromise.

The third story, which Cher directed, is about a college student who gets pregnant by a married professor. She chooses abortion when he breaks up with her and offers her money to have an abortion. The procedure takes place during a violent protest outside the clinic. At some point, an anti-abortion protester walks in on the operation room and shoots the gynecologist.

The story of this last segment opens with the house where the women of the three stories live and "1996" on screen. Action starts after a fade out to a black screen: the first scene emerges out of the shape of a cross on this black background. The mood is subtly set to issues pertaining to religion: A 'mailwoman' is delivering mail (a message). The messiah is now a woman, not a man. The camera moves from that house to that of the neighbor's, where there is a panel with a religious image hanging from a

balcony. A male voice asks someone to turn down the music by the artist formerly known as Prince. *We March* is playing:

Uno para todos y todos para uno.

If we want a change, then come on get in line

Next time we march.

If this is the same sister that you cannot stop calling a bitch

It will be the same one that will leave your broke ass in a ditch

If you can't find a better reason to call this woman otherwise

Then don't cry, you made the bed in which you lie.

The lyrics appeals to solidarity among different ethnic groups: women, the Hispanic, and the African American communities, and Prince is telling minorities to get involved in social and political activities in the struggle for change. The song also addresses those men who do not treat women with respect and warns them they will pay the price since women have the power to seek justice.

By using Prince's song, Cher seems to be referring to the *Million Man March* (1995) which had taken place one year prior to the release of the film. Feminists had issues with the lack of female participation in the march, which was labeled an 'all male' event. One of the organizers, Nation of Islam Leader Louis Farrakhan, told women to stay home with their families and considered he was celebrating the return of, " (...) the Black male as the head of the household, positive role model and builder of our community" (Ronald H. Bayor, 2004, p. 934). bell hooks has pointed out that a march for blacks that deliberately excludes women is not really a march for black people, but rather a march for something like rejuvenated black patriarchy (Reid-Pharr, 1996, pp. 38-39).

After the death of Prince, Farrakhan claimed Prince sent *We March* to the organizers of the event for the song to be used during the gathering and that at some point he donated \$50,000 to the cause. It seems he has used Prince's image to attract followers since the song does not seem to have been played and the singer has never spoken about such matters.

In *If These Walls Could Talk* Cher chose to expose the frequent anti-abortion protests that were occurring outside abortion clinics in the USA. Unfortunately, two decades later they still do, both in the U.S.A. and in many other countries.



Figure 19: Present day photo of an anti-abortion protest outside an abortion clinic in the U.S.A.



Figure 20: Present day photo of a clinic escort outside an abortion clinic in the U.S.A.

Large swaths of American society embrace conservative ideals and claim that they are following the Bible. Therefore, still in present day United States of America abortion clinics need to have employees at the door to escort the patients inside since the latter frequently have to face groups of religious organizations who try to persuade them to give up abortion by making them feel they are about to commit a sinful act. Jesus is often pictured by such groups as a hero who can rescue damsels in distress. An example of such behavior can be found on the website of Sisters of Life (2020), a group of Catholic religious Sisters. They claim:

Abortion can leave many women and men suffering from deep guilt, shame, pain, anxiety, depression, fear, and feelings of isolation from God and others, sometimes for many years (...) We offer a safe, confidential, and non-judgmental environment that can allow you to enter into Jesus' healing embrace. Nothing – absolutely nothing – is beyond the love and mercy of Jesus Christ. No sin is too big for Him, no darkness too great<sup>63</sup> (n/p).

The film also suggests the intolerance of Christian groups towards other beliefs: a protester shouts to a Jewish employee of the clinic, “Have you ever asked if this is a Christian way to make a living?” and a scene inside the clinic emphasizes it is harder for a black woman to decide to give a child for adoption since it is much more difficult for a black child to be adopted.

In 2000, the creators and cast of *If These Walls Could Talk* won the Lucy Award for Innovation in Television, which recognizes work that has enhanced the perception of women through the medium of

<sup>63</sup> <https://sistersoflife.org/who-we-are/who-we-are/>.

television<sup>64</sup>. It is significant the fact that the film was made for television since, as David Crary (1996, September 18) put it, it tackled “(...) a topic no Hollywood studio is even ready to touch (...)” (p. 26B). HBO vice-president said; “I don’t believe there’s a studio in the world that would finance this picture” (Crary, 1996, September 18, p. 26B). He praised Demi Moore (who was executive producer) and Cher for having the courage to use their celebrity to address the issue of abortion. Moore spent seven years trying to get the film made. Having the project accepted by a television network, these women managed to have their message passed along to the large-scale audience of HBO.

In 2014, to celebrate International Women’s day, the Cork Women’s Right to Choose and the Crawford Film Society teamed up and screened *If These Walls Could Talk* in the Crawford College of Art and Design in Dublin.



Figure 21: Advertisement of an international Women’s Day film event in Dublin in 2014

Of anti-abortion activists who want to impose a ban Moore said, “(...) that’s what they’re asking us to go back to (...) the shame and degradation these women faced – that’s really what is criminal”<sup>65</sup> (n/p). Cher considers “It has to be the individual’s choice. How could you possibly legislate it?”<sup>66</sup> (n/p). Still today, the film arises heated debates on the topic.

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<sup>64</sup> It was nominated for a total of 18 awards (including three Golden Globes), having won three of them. Cher herself was nominated for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Series, Miniseries or Motion Picture Made for Television, for the OFTA Television Award for Best Director of a Motion Picture or Miniseries, and for the Golden Satellite Award for the Best Actress in a Supporting Role in a Series, Miniseries or Motion Picture Made for Television. *If These Walls Could Talk* also became the highest-rated movie in HBO history.

<sup>65</sup> <https://apnews.com/805beb391893d7ecc759d20812629d8c>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

During the 2012 Presidential Election, Cher made a political advertisement in which she urged voters not to allow Presidential nominee Mitt Romney to turn back time on Women's Rights and on January 21 2017 many were the female icons that protested at the *Women's March on Washington*, reacting to the election of Donald Trump for president. Cher and Madonna were among them. "Stand and be counted or sit and be nothing", said Cher, addressing the audience while being interviewed for CNN. Women's rights, and the topic of abortion is just an example of many of Cher's representations.

The film *If These Walls Could Talk*, advocates the viewpoint expressed by activist Patricia Valoy in one of her campaigns aiming to promote the success of people of color in the U.S.A. and dismantle oppressive regimes worldwide. She claimed, "We all firmly believe that our bodies are primarily ours and we should be able to do with them as we desire" (Valoy, 2015, "How Do We Promote the Success," para. 4). Decades earlier, more specifically in 1978, Cherilyn Sarkisian La Piere Bono Allman was already thinking the same way when she legally changed her name to Cher, going without her father's, her stepfather's, and her first and her second's husband last names from then on.



Figure 22: Cher at the Women's March on Washington: "If you don't have a vote you don't have a voice"

## Chapter 4: “Monstrosity’ and ‘Gender Trouble”

After all, a mutt is stronger and healthier than a pure breed.

- Orquidea Cadilhe (2020)

After having looked at the way certain performances have been providing audiences with alternative representations of ethnic minorities as well as rewriting classical portrayals of ‘damsels in distress’, namely those of the iconic Cher, the core of chapter four lies in the analysis of the work of popular icons that consubstantiate the premise that there are no pure, unique, stable identities in what concerns the representation of gender. Besides, it presents a discussion of Cher’s impact as a performer within the LGBTQIA community. We will start by looking at the socio-cultural background of the U.S.A. after the end of WWII, which provides the reader with insights about what triggered drastic changes in the mentality of women and the younger generation in this respect.

### 4.1. Socio-cultural Background. Repercussions of Post-World War II in the U.S.A.

During the Second World War, what were considered to be the prerequisites to social stability by the patriarchal society of the U.S.A. were at stake. The father was away overseas and the mother had to work in factories and offices and was learning how to make ends meet without a man by her side. When the war ended, it was decided that things should return to their ‘proper places’, the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the family caregiver, yet, not without reminders: if the man worked too hard, the son would have little chance to observe the father and he would not be a role model. In turn, if the mother overindulged the son, he would become effeminate, weak, and consequently a ‘pervert’ (DeAngelis, 2001, p. 27-28). Deviation from narrowly defined roles was, thus, scrutinized and there was a backlash against working women. Some legislators argued that unmarried women were abnormal and not fit to become schoolteachers, “(...) for they would pollute the minds of the nation’s children” (Springer, 2007, p. 21). Others would hold that married women should be barred from teaching jobs solely on the grounds that they belonged at home. The medical profession, as Springer (2007) further adds, “(...) routinely sedated women with tranquilizers (...) and told them that they were mentally ill if they were not satisfied as wives and mothers” (p. 21). It had long been a practice of more conservative politicians to refer to progressive reforms, such as women’s suffrage, as ‘communist’ acts.

Under such a repressive social climate of the postwar society of the 1950s U.S.A. characterized, as Claudia Springer (2007) mentions by “homophobia, racism, misogyny, and anti-Semitism” (p. 20),

young people started to reject their parents' authority and values in large numbers and their attitudes and behavior gave rise to a cultural crisis, provoking stern government and media attention. As Springer (2007) points out, in 1947, the United States Congress was already launching the anti-Communist witch-hunts, which continued during the 1950s when the Senate started its own hearings, leaving people imprisoned, made unemployed and blacklisted.

During the McCarthy era, labor union activists, professors, teachers, actors, folksingers, and any who advocated progressive social changes were particularly vulnerable. As a byproduct of such a political and cultural climate, gay men had very few opportunities to speak about their desires in written discourses and their investment in rebel star figures and practices of identification with such figures grew exponentially. A relative recent invention, the rebel icon, had strong roots in making of the image of James Dean, who, for that matter, deserves close attention.

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—•—

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So REMEMBER — If you patronize a Film made by RED Producers, Writers, Stars and STUDIOS you are aiding and abetting COMMUNISM . . . every time you permit REDS to come into your Living Room VIA YOUR TV SET you are helping MOSCOW and the INTERNATIONALISTS to destroy America !!!

Figure 23: Advertisement from the mid-1950s describing the dangers of supporting members of the communist party who work in the entertainment industry.



#### 4.1.1. James Dean as Gay Icon

The stars are a reflection in which the public studies and adjusts its own image of itself  
(...) The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars.

- Raymond Durnat, *Films and Feelings* (1967)

Having had a brief career (it started in 1950 and ended in 1955 with his death), the few characters Dean portrayed on screen were strong individuals who, nevertheless, were able to openly showcase their emotions. Because of such powerful performances, he was capable of redefining masculinity and give it a new meaning, which was in synchrony with what the 'outcasts' of the post war era were yearning for. He became the personification of the 'rebel *with a cause*'.

American teenagers of the mid-1950s started identifying with James Dean and the characters he played, namely with the fact that the latter experienced a sense of alienation and lack of understanding by everyone around him. Dean also exhibited a moody personality, which was read by a large segment of the American population as a symbol of their dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. The years that followed World War II, marked by the disintegration of traditional assumptions about identity, turned out to be in perfect synchrony with the splintered persona Dean exhibited: he was both tough and sensitive, projecting an aura of androgyny that both men and women found sexy and endearing.

Anna J. Varadi (2014), referring to Clark Gable and James Dean, comments how "the gender of the gaze of these stars deviates from what Laura Mulvey (1975) describes as normative" (p. 1). In the case of Gable, a female gaze is allowed to penetrate the normative alignment, turning a male into a 'sex object'. On his turn, Dean was able to "accommodate (...) gay, straight, male, and female subjects[s]" (DeAngelis, 2001, p. 16), diverting his persona from the active/passive heterosexual division between spectator and figure on screen, which helped him gain universal appeal amongst the 1950s' nonconformist youth culture. His vulnerability in *Rebel Without a Cause*, as Varadi evokes Mulvey's "passive/female" object of the gaze (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11).

Varadi uses Mulvey's association of Lacan's 'Mirror Stage'<sup>67</sup> with processes of identification to discuss the relationship of movie spectators to James Dean. Dean appears like the infant in the Mirror Stage, as Lacan puts it, "trapped in his (...) nursling dependence" (Lacan, 1966, p. 1164) when he lies

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<sup>67</sup> 'Mirror Stage' is, according to Lacan, the moment when an infant recognizes herself in a mirror. Since the infant is always divided from the mirror-image by the physical presence of the mirror, a division between the self (the infant) and an Ideal-I (mirror-image which the self tries to become) can never totally vanish.

down next to a toy monkey in the fetal position and reaffirms his childlike lack of a fixed identity and creates a sense of proximity between him and the spectator. Some critics, such as Steve Neale (1983) consider that Mulvey's remarks can "(...) apply to images of men" (p. 4). Varadi, following the same path, discusses the relationship of movie spectators to Gable and Dean.

Varadi argues that Dean had a very strong impact in a whole generation as a result of his gender-ambiguous persona. She considers that Dean personifies an alternative masculinity, one that is opposed to that of the romantic and idealized 'masculinity' of Clark Gable.<sup>68</sup> While Gable is the "Ideal-I separated from the self by the Mirror – analogous to the movie screen" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 10) - and spectators can never become like him, in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), when the spectator first looks at Dean, she constructs his image as the self before identification *in front of the mirror*. He lies down on the ground and plays with a toy monkey, remaining silent for a 73-second shot. He seems unable to talk or walk, which suggests he is trapped in his own impotence, in the way Lacan's child is in front of the mirror and in the situation the spectator finds herself, trapped in her/his seat in front of the movie screen, which functions as a mirror. The audience has not yet been introduced to the character and is aware of looking at Dean the actor. There is a breaking down of the mirror between spectator and star, that is to say, the spectator identifies himself with the star in the same way an infant, at some point, identifies herself with the image she sees in the mirror.



Figure 24: James Dean ('Rebel without Gender') in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)

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<sup>68</sup> Timothy Connelly (2004) speaks of the "reassurance of hegemonic masculinity" during the Great Depression in times when many unemployed men felt emasculated since they could not provide for their families (p. 34). Dyer (1998), mentioning how such stars were particularly separated from the audiences and inaccessible to them, claims that they were "(...) gods (...) embodiments of [the] *ideal*" (p. 22).

With the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, 'coming out' had begun to be considered an act of personal affirmation as well as one of political responsibility. Meanwhile, James Dean's figure emerged at the scene. Michael DeAngelis (2001) comments that, "[in] the star texts of the 1970s, Dean begins to qualify as a historical figure for the gay liberation movement, one who might attain 'heroic' status (...)" (p. 108). Between 1974 and 1975, four extensive biographies of Dean were published, along with articles commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. What distinguishes these biographies from previous ones is the fact that they are centered on the matter of how to determine the 'truth' about his sexuality: did evidence of his homosexual acts necessarily constitute a homosexual identity? As DeAngelis (2001) explains:

The emergence of the 'homosexual Dean' (...) coincided historically with the public emergence of a subculture that had become eminently more visible and vocal by the mid-1970s (...) a set of shifting power relations in the public discourse of homosexuality during this span of more than twenty years (...) In this set of relations, the ways that audiences receive, interpret, and appropriate the sexuality of a star image - in narrative and non-narrative forms - involves the ways in which various agencies authorize the representation of sexuality (p. 20).

Actually, by that time, Dean's ambiguous and rebellious figure as the dissatisfied youth, rejecting authority and the norm, had been transformed into a gay icon. DeAngelis (2001) asserts that "By dramatizing the possibility of bridging the distance between the self and other, Dean is consistently placed in scenarios in which he is moving towards or away from designated fixed points" (p. 11) and thus building an identity resistant to definitions imposed by agents of control. When embracing the status of outsider, the rebel Dean is not internalizing his alienation as a psychological illness and his attitude is, thus, empowering.

For instance, the homosexual was considered unfit for government service due to lack of emotional stability and weakness of character and also dangerously associated to communist ideologies. Homosexuality was consensually read as pathological and prone to contamination, posing a threat to the integrity of the nuclear family and to the nation as a whole. DeAngelis (2001) refers how the domestic environment was considered both the origin and the cure for 'the problem' (p. 26); a strict division of gender roles and heteronormativity was, by the time, considered the solution.

#### 4.1.2. From Terrifying Dystopias to Sweet Utopias and to Empowering Heterotopias. James Dean Revisited

In 1976, Ed Graczyk's wrote a play to which he gave the name *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* and Robert Altman directed both a Broadway and a screen version of it. I will be looking at the film version.

The story deals with the gathering of members of a fan club called *The Disciples* of James Dean inside a Woolworth's five-and-dime in McCarthy, Texas, to keep a promise they had made 20 years before, by the time of James Dean's death. The store is 62 miles away from Marfa, where Dean filmed *Giant* in 1955 and the day is September 30, 1975. The members of the club are all women, except Joe, who is also the only male character to appear (in flashback), and is sympathetically presented both as a James Dean lookalike and as effeminate.



Figure 25: The character Joe in a film still from *Come Back to the Five & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*

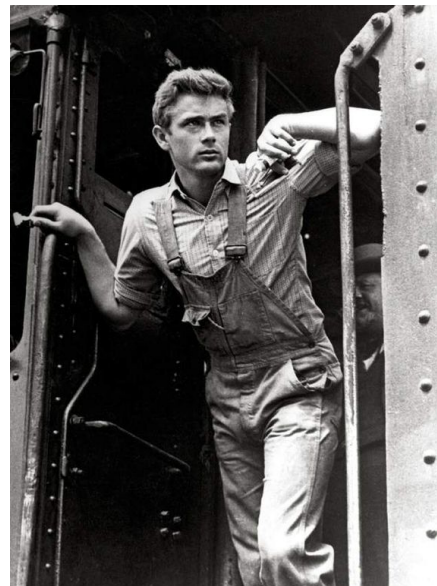


Figure 26: James Dean

They share memories, nostalgia, self-analysis, accusations, revelations, and anger and their memories trigger flashbacks to the time, twenty years earlier, when the proximity of Dean served as a catalyst in their lives.

The story depicts the struggle and the sense of non-physical homelessness faced by both women and the gay community between the 1950s and the 1970s in the religious and patriarchal society of rural Texas and deconstructs classical representations of gender and advocates the latter is mere

performativity<sup>69</sup>. Furthermore, it exemplifies how the ‘unruly’ celebrity who stands at a liminal space is at the right location to embody what it means to thrive and survive in an oppressive society, emotionally reach out to fellow oppressed and provide them with a sense of hope.

In the first scene of *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, it is 1975 and the walls of the five and dime store are decorated with both pictures of Christ and of James Dean.



Figure 27: Paraphernalia inside the Five & Dime store

Juanita, the owner, turns on the radio to listen to *Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone*:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,  
And all the world go free?  
No, there's a cross for everyone,  
And there's a cross for me.  
The consecrated cross I'll bear  
Till death shall set me free;  
And then go home my crown to wear,  
For there's a crown for me.

When Sissy (Cher), a member of the club, arrives, she changes the station and starts listening to, “I cannot tell you/What’s really on my mind/We play this game/For such a long, long time/You think you

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<sup>69</sup> The way Judith Butler would, in 1999, put it in *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

win me/But you don't know the score". The club of James Dean's fans is called *The Disciples* but they are not disciples of Juanita's god. While her god asks his disciples for submission and sacrifice, theirs appeals to rebellion and the breaking of rules.

The action of the film is suggestively set in McCarthy, Texas, more specifically at a 'nickel and dime' store belonging to the H.L. Kressmont Company. The screenplay describes the company as one that is "struggling for survival in small out-of-touch towns throughout Texas" (Graczyk, 1982, p.7) and the store itself as "virtually ignored by time, and change" (Graczyk, 1982, p.7) with "large crowded windows of sun-bleached merchandise, through which can barely be seen the outside world" (Graczyk, 1982, p.7), suggesting a setting adverse to new ideas and to change. Inside the store, Juanita "shields her eyes from the sun as she searches the street" (Graczyk, 1982, p.9), symbolically suggesting that she is struggling to 'see' ahead of her. Mona, another club member, arrives from Marfa, the town where *Giant* was recorded 20 years before. She goes there every year since she was an extra in the film (she claims). Upon arrival, she is carrying a copy of *Gone with the Wind* and comments with Juanita that an acquaintance told her she stands to Reata (the ranch in *Giant*) as Scarlett O'Hara stands to Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, placing herself at the position of a strong, empowered woman.

*Giant* is sharply critical of the Texan society, in particular of the racism of Anglo-Europeans against Mexican Americans and of its patriarchal community. The character of Elizabeth Taylor, Leslie, is sympathetic with the Mexican Americans and strives for women's equal rights, asserting herself when men talk and protesting against being expected to suppress her beliefs in deference to her husband's. The character of Dean, Jett, is that of an outsider in the typical Texas ranch of Reata, where he works. Off set, during the recording of the film, Dean is said to have embodied the character completely, barely speaking to anyone. The young women at the 1955 McCarthy feel like outsiders in the Texas 'world' and simultaneously identify with Dean and Dean's character. As Richard Dyer would put it, Dean was able to collide his image on and off screen. In *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (2004), he asserts:

(...) if you like Cooper or Day, then precisely what you value about them is that they are always 'themselves' – no matter how different their roles, they bear witness to the continuousness of their own selves. This coherent continuousness within becomes what the star 'really is'" (p. 53).

Moreover, one cannot disregard the importance of those performers who, as Duffet (2017) claims, "(...) carry the aura of their on-screen presence into their off-screen lives" (p. 212). The popularity of many gay

icons is precisely due to the fact that they are always, and very intensely, themselves. For instance, Judy Garland took on roles that were very close to her real-life situation and personality, which creates in the viewers a sense of integrity associated with her image. The same applies to Cher, as we often pointed out in this dissertation. Daniel Hertz (2008), on his turn, calls this transference a “mysterious transition” (p. 63).

In the context of the film, the character Mona considers secular icons to take the place of religious iconography and she considers them a source of literacy for the less privileged, those who did not have the opportunity to engage in a formal education:

Bein' deprived of a formal college education the way I was (...) because of an affliction of which I had no control (...) I have been forced to investigate on my own the mysteries of the universe or become totally ignorant of life like everybody else in this town (...) I have managed to save my life from becomin' merely an existence with an aid of the novel-of-the-month club and the motion picture industry, of which I am totally indebted (Graczyk, 1982, p.15).

Juanita answers, “Church goin' an' Bible readin' would have done you a whole lot better good” (Graczyk, 1982, p.15). Mona seems to be talking as the ‘outcast’, the ‘monster’ in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, who had to learn about the universe on his own.

Twenty years earlier Sidney, Juanita’s husband, had fired Joe because he was gay. Juanita claims he was a sick boy and should be treated before becoming a communist (under the grounds that the Bible does not accept such people). The character is obviously embodying the ideologies of the McCarthy years and alluding to the persecution the gay community endured. Contrary to Juanita, Mona believes he is someone worth fighting for and engages in an argument with her, which culminates in Mona’s remark, “If God doesn’t accept him, then ... then I can’t accept God, then” (Graczyk, 1982, p.20). Dean takes the place of God in Mona’s life.

During their 20-year reunion, the ‘disciples’ of Dean have violent, psychotic-like eruptions in the dense and hot air of Texas that symbolically ‘suffocates’ them. Mona literally suffers from breathing problems: at several points in the story she can’t catch her breath and before the other members of the club arrive at the store she comments, “It will be so embarrassin’ to have the Disciples return to see how this town has dried-up so (...) Seems hard to believe how it has all changed so quickly” (Graczyk, 1982, p. 19). She comments how James Dean “(...) put McCarthy, Texas on the roadmap for a brief, but glorious

period of time” (Graczyk, 1982, p. 41) when he was nearby during the recording of *Giant*. Stella, another member of the club, asserts, “I’ve seen dead dogs layin’ out ‘long the side of the road with more life than this town’s got” (Graczyk, 1982, p. 45).

Two events, in particular, enraged Sydney and made him fire Joe: the fact that he dressed in drag to sing *Sincerely*<sup>70</sup> (along with Mona and Sissy, pretending they were the McGuire Sisters) and to play a trick on Lester T. Callahan (Sissy’s future husband), who actually believed that he was a woman. Mona, though, comments with Sissy that Joe “(...) really does make a very pretty girl (...)”, to which she replies, “Lester T. sure thought so, didn’t he? (...) thought he was the cutest thing he’d ever seen” (Graczyk, 1982, p. 25). The scene confirms what Judith Butler would later call gender performativity when she argues gender is nothing but “(...) a stylized reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalized and consolidated” (Butler, 1999, p. 125), and consequently, “(...) all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (Butler, 1993a, p. 313). Butler aims at disrupting the acts of citation that the performativity of gender consists of and considers drag acts as a subversive practice that challenges gender identity since “(...) in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler, 1999, p. 175). Drag proves repeating is possible and, therefore, that performativity can simultaneously be theorized in terms of subversion that empowers the subject. In this line of thought, femininity is, as Butler puts it, “(...) the forcible citation of a norm” (Butler, 1993, p. 232).

Such as Joe, the women in the club face problems of identity and they take a step backwards under the shame of exposing their ‘miserable’ conditions. Mona, for instance, had a son with Joe, yet she denies the fact and claims he is James Dean’s son. She considers Jimmy Dean (her son) to be mentally retarded (he is the son of an outcast), placing her, at this time of the story, in the position of a Victor Frankenstein, who feels he has created a monster in the eyes of society. Her friend Sissy does not agree and explains, “The only thing wrong with his mind is that he couldn’t make it up soon enough to get the hell outta here (...)”. Sissy is described as having “gigantic breasts (...) large to the point of being abnormal (...) awesome” (Graczyk, 1982, p. 21). Interestingly enough, abnormality is associated with awesomeness. Sissy disrupts normality in different ways: her discourse is that of an ‘unruly’ woman, she wears extravagant clothes and jewelry, she drinks alcohol, and is daring enough to try to become a member of the “Ice Capades”, a skating team, when she is already in her late thirties. When she expresses her willingness to do so, Juanita comments, “You’d just be makin’ a fool of yourself, an’you know it”, to which Sissy replies, “Well, it’s my life to fool aroun’ with, ain’t it?”, expressing indifference

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<sup>70</sup> The choice of a song with such a title alludes to the fact that in those moments Joe felt comfortable expressing his sexuality, which he was compelled to hide from the Texan society.



towards the comments others may eventually make<sup>71</sup>. “Ice Capades” is a suggestive name taking into account the heat wave Texas is experiencing at the time and the need people feel to escape the ‘suffocating’ atmosphere. The ‘world’ of Texas is dominated by a patriarchal, oppressive society; it is ‘hell’ for them.<sup>72</sup> Sissy also tries to hide a painful truth, namely the fact that her husband never really loved her and left her after she underwent a mastectomy. Juanita, in turn, cannot face the fact that her supposedly religious husband was an alcoholic. She denies it and criticizes Sissy for drinking beer (because there is no water).

During *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, Altman plays with mirrors to connect between the present and the past. Reflections in mirrors are part of many of the film’s compositions. They become a window into 1955, enabling the characters to gaze into the past and helping them to eventually identify themselves in the reflection, which is the message Michel Foucault (1986), wants to convey when he discusses the role of the mirror:

I believe that between utopias and (...) heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space (...) But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward

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<sup>71</sup> Cher is known to express the same views in her publicly personal life: a famous sentence of hers being, “If I want to put my tits on my back, that’s nobody’s business but my own”, which makes her image on and off screen coincide.

<sup>72</sup> In 1979, Cher released an album called *Prisoner*, which includes the song called *Hell on Wheels* (mentioned in chapter 3). ‘Hell’ can be appropriated in different ways and be given either a pejorative connotation or one of positive irreverence. Various religions regard it as a spiritual realm of evil and suffering where wicked people are punished after death but the term can be used to fight secular oppression. Subjects who are considered ‘evil’ may, in turn, use the term to rewrite their stories and empower themselves. In her song, Cher is precisely doing that: she is “hell on wheels” but she is also a guiding star, having the role of a secular icon such as James Dean. The audience of the film knows Cher in her multiple facets but she displays a continuity that transcends any individual role and makes different images of herself collide, in what Dyer calls one of the main characteristics of any icon.

myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am  
(p. 4).

The character of Joanna (transgender Joe) is representative of the truth since she has already undergone this experience of looking herself in the mirror and being able to 'come out of the closet'. When she enters the store, the mirror of deception and repression slowly starts melting away and the other characters also begin to reconstitute themselves. She claims, "(...) unlike all of you (...) I've undergone a change (...) I don't have to pretend any more". Standing for James Dean, she arrives in a sports car, making a noise that makes Juanita think she heard thunder. The stormy weather in the 50s, when Dean was alive, contrasts with the draught that has been haunting the area since then. She tells a story to Sissy that makes her face reality and accept herself. She narrates the occasion when she met Sissy's husband and he tried to have an affair with her, not realizing she was a transgender. During the encounter, Joanna started laughing because, while laying down looking at the ceiling, its cracks seemed to her the road map she had travelled (the inner trip she had undertaken). Ironically, Lester T. had left Sissy because she had lost her breasts to cancer but then he is misled by a transgender. Feeling empowered, Joanna and Sissy laugh at the situation. Then Joanna tells Sissy the story Lester T. told her, of the wife he left behind because she had lost her breasts. Right after, the latter opens the door of the store and screams to the outside that her boobs are not real since from that moment on, she no longer accepts delusion. Joanna is also the way to freedom for Mona's son, who 'runs away' in her sports car, in the manner his father and Dean did 20 years earlier. Eventually, every character reaches a space of 'otherness', a heterotopia, an empowered stage.

*Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* is, in part, an attempt to explore the way women are forced to suppress their emotions and personalities in order to be accepted by the male society around them and explores a connection between the oppression of women and patriarchy's dread of sexual deviation and gender ambiguity to the fullest. Altman depicts the misogynist and prejudiced society of rural Texas by presenting the terrifying dystopias that these minorities encountered in every corner by means of a group of James Dean's fans and the adversities they were subject to by the locals of McCarty, Texas. Dean was the figure that united them and made them build a utopic world represented by the fan club, a world where they could be sincere, symbolized by the song with the same name that they used to sing.



Figure 28: Mona, Sissy, and Joe singing *Sincerely* (*Come Back to the Five & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*)

Another song they sing is *The Eyes of James Dean are Upon Us*, instead of singing *The Eyes of Texas are Upon Us* (one of the soundtracks of *Giant*). They need to be intervenient to honor the myth that helped them free themselves.

Religious and secular iconography clash in the film but the latter ultimately wins over. The disciples of James Dean symbolize all of those who look at a Hollywood myth in the refusal to exist in a world that is swollen with banality and misogyny because to establish one's place in the world, it becomes necessary to recognize oneself in others as well. The process of identification with others is what ultimately allows the individual to constitute herself as a coherent being. For that purpose, the celebrity myth has plenty to tell. It is the product of assimilation and signals the possibility of change in a social system that essentially desires conformity. Such a possibility answers the question why certain stars (such as James Dean, Elvis Presley, David Bowie, or Cher) linger significantly in the popular imagination long after the height of their success, even long after their deaths.

Cher, who was nominated for best supporting actress in a motion picture for her role in the film, plays a particularly strong character. At this time of her career she was starting to build a legacy of work that systematically aims at standing by the side of the outcast. Unlike James Dean, who died young and because of that his image is open for appropriation, Cher is idolized because of her seemingly capacity to resist the test of time thanks to her never-ending 'reinventions'. For example, when she plays a character that undergoes a mastectomy and has the breasts replaced by prostheses, she is starting to trace the path of a career of, as Garber (1992) puts it, "relentless self-construction" (p. 117) and to create a secular icon.

## 4.2. Playing with Make Believe

Got to go back & polish my Cher impersonation.

- Cher

What is it about gay men and divas? The first are particularly mystified by the latter, while divas seem to build strong, long-lasting friendships with members of the gay community. While growing up, they have somehow undergone similar experiences.

Both gay men and divas share stories of oppression and insecurity, which brings them close. 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, such as by winning the Oscar for best actress in the film *Moonstruck*, she overcomes stigmatized origins and her diva worship is reinforced.

In 1997 she was a guest at *The RuPaul Show*<sup>73</sup>. While interviewing her, RuPaul proffered he loves the fact that 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"<sup>74</sup>. Cher laughs. He asks her how the world would be like if it were a woman's world (because of her album *It's a Man's World*) and she basically claims that there would be more love. They talk about how she has been doing well in this 'man's world' and she adds,



Figure 29: Cher on The RuPaul Show (1997)

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<sup>73</sup> RuPaul is an American actor, drag queen, model, author, and recording artist.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EJTF0phPKQ>.

I am really glad I am a woman because I can wear pants and a dress, so can you. It's not my way to be 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.<sup>75</sup>

RuPaul replies, "I think that's why a lot of your fans, especially 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. With her heavily beaded gowns and overly glittering eye shadow she is almost as hyperfeminine as a drag queen.

Both in her performance of the song *Perfection* filmed during her two Heart of Stone Tour specials at the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas in 1990 and in the video of the song *Walking in Memphis*, she embraces the concept of 'replica' as Walter Benjamin put it in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, meaning the 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 former starts with a female impersonator on stage, making the viewers believe for a while that they are in her presence. Then, the two perform together<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EJTF0phPKQ>.

<sup>76</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GoT\\_4V2ACg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GoT_4V2ACg).



Figure 30: Cher performing *Perfection* (1992)

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 be perfect, especially 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 and 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 Diane Negra (2001) 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” (p. 175). In an interview on the *Early Show* (2003) 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)<sup>77</sup>.

Another of her performances that consubstantiates such a stance is that of her cameo in the 7<sup>th</sup> episode of the 3<sup>rd</sup> season of the television series *Will and Grace*, which originally aired on NBC in the U.S.A. on November 16, 2000. One of the aspects of the episode, entitled Gypsies, Tramps, and Weed<sup>78</sup>, focuses on the character of Jack carrying a Cher doll, as a result of his adoration for the artist. One day,

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npTys0H2IfA>.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ki1g8cy3rbQ&list=RD4PVXYZQTcuE&index=3>.

Cher meets him, yet, he does not recognize her; he thinks he is in front of a drag queen even when Cher sings the famous verse of the song with the same name, “If I could turn back time”. As a consequence, she slaps him the way her character does to the character of Nicolas Cage in the film *Moonstruck*. At this point, he realizes he is talking to Cher, which implies that she is aware that her fictional characters identify her better than her ‘true’ persona and, simultaneously, that identities are performative constructions. Two years later, Cher is again on the show, this time on episode 25 of the 4<sup>th</sup> season (May 16, 2002): *A.I.: Artificial Insemination*. This time Jack meets Cher in a dream. He is in heaven and Cher appears as God surrounded by ‘dancing fairies’<sup>79</sup> and sings *This is a Different Kind of Love Song*<sup>80</sup>. She persuades him to stay in the show business in spite of the fact that he has been rejected several times by telling her own story: she had “gone in flames” countless times before winning the Oscar for *Moonstruck*. She tells him “follow your bliss”, and he grabs one of the fairies as the others exit.<sup>81</sup> The sitcom has been credited with improving public opinion of the LGBT community, with former U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden commenting that the show “(...) probably did more to educate the American public (on LGBT issues) than almost anything anybody has ever done so far” (David Eldridge, 2012).

In Cher’s *Do you Believe?* (1999) tour, when introducing the song *Walking in Memphis*<sup>82</sup>, 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 drag queen RuPaul ‘considers himself to be Cher’, she also has no problem in ‘considering herself to be Elvis’, or impersonating him to the full.

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 1950s: a flashback, since right after that one sees Cher singing on the steps of a bus in modern day clothes.

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<sup>79</sup> Gay men in slips and with wings on their back.

<sup>80</sup> *A Different Kind of Love Song* was released in 2001 as part of the album *Living Proof*. The lyrics can easily be interpreted as an allusion to same-sex love and thus incite the possibility of gender rebellion.

<sup>81</sup> <https://vimeo.com/8434630>.

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnkLHTgAQKg>.



Figure 31: Cher dressed as Elvis in the video clip of *Walking in Memphis*



Figure 32: Cher as herself in the video clip of *Walking in Memphis*

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*<sup>83</sup> can be" with "but I'm as blue as a *girl*<sup>84</sup> can be", 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 a Christian child?/And I said/Man I am tonight!!"<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> See appendix for full lyrics.



Marjorie Garber in her seminal study *Vested Interests. Crossdressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992) claims how Elvis's performances used to cause a double scandal: his music was considered too black and his image was effeminate. Wearing eye shadow, 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 cross-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, talking about the politics of transvestism asserts that clothes not only construct but also deconstruct gender and gender differences and claims, in a cross-reference to Susan Gubar, that for her "the 'third-sex' turns out to be largely a way of securing power for modernist women" (Garber, 1992, p. 10). 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' due to her capability of reinventing herself and 'writing' on her body during the last five decades and, therefore, being the perfect example of the subject permanently 'under construction'.

In a sketch from *The Sonny and Cher Show* (1977), the Mannequin Scene, Cher and Farrah Fawcett are two mannequins whose bodies are positioned and adjusted by chauvinistic male workers who treat women as objects<sup>86</sup>. The lines of the male characters are presented as ridiculous throughout the dialogues, while those of these mannequins are coherent and rational and depict a narrative of their own.

The scene, by deliberately using 'excess femininity', or 'femininity as masquerade', a concept used by Mary Ann Doane (1991)<sup>87</sup>, ridicules the 'use' of women as objects of the 'male gaze'<sup>88</sup>. By recognizing themselves as such, the women in the sketch end up using, in disruptive and challenging ways, the

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<sup>86</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_Hgw12VS3k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_Hgw12VS3k).

<sup>87</sup> Mary Ann Doane 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). Nevertheless, says Rowe (1995), "she hesitates to evoke laughter, seeing it structured, like spectatorship, at women's expense"(p. 6).

<sup>88</sup> Barbie dolls may as well be interpreted in the same way. That is the case when Jack venerates a Cher Barbie in the previously mentioned series *Will and Grace*.

spectacle invested in them as objects of the masculine gaze. And through that parodic strategy, they come out before the public's eyes as strong, empowered women.

The dialogue starts with Farrah Fawcett claiming she can stand 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 a 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, such as that of the LGBT community, who have to be strong in order to survive. As John Docker (1994) states, television displays a kind of inversion that can be compared to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnavalesque'. The point of view that these female mannequins present is perceived as legitimate by the spectators and the way of thinking of the male humans is ridiculed. Just as in carnival, the outcasts speak up and break down conventions. In this case, the non-humans have feelings, while the humans (represented by men) are heartless and stupid. A new, alternative perspective is displayed, which deconstructs the dominant way of looking at humans versus machines and women versus men, allowing, just as in carnival, for a deconstruction of the dominant ideology and for a new order of things. Television, just as carnival, creates a zone in which new birth becomes possible. Social roles are inverted in a mood of laughter. When using excess femininity Cher is, as Butler (1999) would claim, appropriating the instruments normative culture offers and using them to work in the opposite direction.

The anthropologist Esther Newton refers, in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), how:

"(...) all of life is role and theatre – appearance (...) all acting is impersonation (...) By focusing on the outward appearance of role, drag implies that sex role and, by extension, role in general is something superficial, which can be manipulated, put on and off again at will" (p. 108-9).

Butler (1999), on her turn, 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" (p. 174). She adds, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (p.175). That said, excess femininity does not reinforce a strong division of the sexes but precisely

the opposite. Drag is, therefore, perceived as a strategy of gender parody in relation to of the notion of an original and as such it has a strong political significance. Identities perceived as fluid suggest, thus, as Butler affirms, “an openness to resignification and recontextualization” (p. 176).

In this scene, the image of Farrah Fawcett as a helps the message come across since, as Chadwick Roberts (2003) points out, her body is linked to ideals of female independence. He considers Fawcett a fantastic icon and cites Mary Rodger’s opinion of them, in her book *Barbie Culture* (1998): Rodger claims they “exaggerate what is actual, possible or conceivable” and says “Fantastic icons are capable of realizing people’s imagination and requirements” (apud, 2003, p. 174). As one of Charlie’s Angels in the series with the same name that is just what Fawcett embodies, Roberts 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” (p. 86). Her image has been recoded in camp and drag.

Madonna is yet another popular icon and diva who has a significant gay following, and similarities can be found between the reasons pertaining to that, namely the play with make believe. In June of 2019, she gave an interview to NBC’s Harry Smith about creating her fourteenth studio album *Madame X* (2019). When asked who Madame X is, she explains, “(...) a spy, a secret agent, she travels the world, she changes (...) she actually has been wounded, so she is covering up (...) music is influenced by so many parts of the world” (TODAY, 2019). Just like Cher, Madonna embodies different personas throughout her performances and calls herself a chameleon. In the case of Madame X, she claims she can be a dancer, a professor, an equestrian, a housekeeper, a prisoner, a teacher, a saint, a whore, a spy, etc., and that she brings life to dark places, meaning she can empower those who have gone through hardship. Smith comments, “You are in a kind of high wire of (...) you are fierce and simultaneously vulnerable”, to which she comments, “I have days when I feel like a warrior, invincible and I have my days when I feel like an open wound, but that’s human, that’s the journey of an artist because if you don’t make yourself vulnerable, you cannot channel creativity (...) also my strength needs to come through in my work because I want to empower other people” (TODAY, 2019). She says she thinks about people who are suffering and have no voice and feels a sense of responsibility for those people. When Smith refers to her fans, she replies she thinks performers can influence people and make them take a different course of life, a different path. Referring to God, she claims, “The God I believe in is not a God to fear but one to question, to talk back, to challenge his, or her, or their or Madame X’s authority” (TODAY, 2019)<sup>89</sup>. By replacing “God” with her she is implying God can be a woman, by replacing with “their” she means

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<sup>89</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sxc8xOTeIdA>.

God can be gay, and finally, by replacing God by “Madame X” she is positioning herself in the place of a deity, and saying that anyone who is venerated has undergone extreme hardship, has felt lost and abandoned, an outsider, and has eventually been venerated and acquired a large number of followers who understand what to be rejected or laughed about means.

#### 4.3. Of Vampires, Typhoid Mary and the Trojan Horse in Cher’s *Dressed to Kill Tour*

The warriors possess the open mouths and the powerful song of the sirens.

- Catherine Burke (2010)

In the *Dressed to Kill Tour* (2014)<sup>90</sup>, several of the songs Cher performs are from her 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 throne 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.



Figure 33: *Dressed to Kill* being performed during the

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfiUwj79Kzo&t=1s>.

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'. According to Seats (2001), vampirism has recently "(...) been seen and used as a vehicle for the expression of homosexual desire and gay culture" (p. 108) and Dyer (1988) claims that 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 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 then 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" (n/p)<sup>91</sup> 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 male warriors.



Figure 34: Cher performing *Take it Like a Man* during the *Dressed to Kill Tour*.

In her essay with the same name ("The Trojan Horse"), Monique Wittig (1984), 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. She

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<sup>91</sup> <https://calgaryherald.com/entertainment/cher-shows-the-divas-that-followed-her-how-its-done>.

considers that the primary value of a new work consists in its capability to demolish power. That is precisely what Cher does with her performances.

As in *Dressed to Kill*, she 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. And as Wittig (1984) says, “Any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions (...) Eventually, it is adopted, and even if slowly (...) it will sap and blast out the ground where it was planted” (p. 45).

With a successful career that spans five decades, she is a successful warrior that has been able to battle strategically, penetrate enemy lines, and cross borders. In the meantime, the controversial Conchita Wurst, winner of the Eurovision Festival 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’.

#### 4.4. Cher and the Cyborg

Posthumanism, being critical of the Humanist philosophy, argues that there is no such thing as the existence of a universal human nature since evolution and genetics suggest that there is not much difference between human beings and other animals and technological advances, namely those pertaining to artificial organs, are breaking down differences we always assumed existed between humans and machines. They consider that we should embrace difference and diversity and play with it and that true equality comes not from assuming everyone is the same but from recognizing and accepting diversity. Like postmodernists, post humanists tend to see identity as something fluid and ever-changing, a game that we play instead of a universal constant, which results in the breakdown of Humanistic binaries such as human/machine, human/animal or male/female, among others. 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*<sup>92</sup> are about the personal empowerment and self-sufficiency of a girl after a painful break-up. The video<sup>93</sup> 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<sup>94</sup>, 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. Sven E. Carlsson (1999) points out; a spiritual journey seems to start<sup>95</sup>.



Figure 35: Stills from the beginning of the video clip of *Believe*.

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 quiet: then she 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

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<sup>92</sup> See appendix for full lyrics.

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZXRv4MezEw>.

<sup>94</sup> Just as in *Will and Grace*, Cher is here presented as an entity with supernatural powers.

<sup>95</sup> [http://filmsound.org/what\\_is\\_music\\_video](http://filmsound.org/what_is_music_video).

'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" (n/p.)<sup>96</sup>



Figure 36: Stills from the end of the video clip of *Believe*

Cher's visual representation is reinforced by the audio processor auto-tune, which alters her 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, Kay Dickinson (2001) calls it 'vocoder'<sup>97</sup>, 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?" (p. 334-335). Cher, with a campy performance, is engaging in gender parody and raising questions of authenticity. Dickinson (2001) considers the body to be "a fluctuating cultural factor" (p. 336) 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

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<sup>96</sup> [http://filmsound.org/ what\\_is\\_music\\_video](http://filmsound.org/what_is_music_video).

<sup>97</sup> 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.



seems, you can look for in a diva (to give you the strength to overcome adversity). Says Darcey Steinke, author of *Sister Golden Hair* (2014), 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 (n/p)<sup>98</sup>.

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 assumptions<sup>99</sup>. Cher seems 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*<sup>100</sup> 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. Outside, a building is struck by lightning and Cher's face appears on it. Inside, she also appears on the young man's monitor and it seems as if she has simultaneously enlightened and 'saved' him when she 'becomes' his screensaver. The campy images of the people transfixed by her appearance on the screen report to Cher's capabilities to empower minorities in general.

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<sup>98</sup> <https://www.bustle.com/articles/47517-darcey-steinke-talks-sister-golden-hair-cher-and-the-70s>.

<sup>99</sup> 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.

<sup>100</sup> See appendix for full lyrics.



Figure 37: Stills from the video clip of *Strong Enough*

Light is constantly mentioned in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1992), namely in Victor Frankenstein's epiphanies. When he discovers the secret to creating life, he describes his feelings as if "a sudden light broke in upon me" (p. 51) and he envisions pouring a "torrent of light into our dark world" (p. 52) through the creation of a new species. Yet, he reaches the conclusion that he should not have pursued such a goal, that he was unsuccessful in his enterprise, that he has created a 'monster' in his quest for enlightenment. Consequently, he rejects and abandons his creation.

Cher is also associated to light but in a positive way. She is a 'cyborg monster' that fascinates millions of 'monster' fans. Such is the message the director of *The X-Files* Chris Carter wanted to convey in the episode entitled *The Postmodern Prometheus* (1997).

#### 4.5. Cher or *The Postmodern Prometheus*

Oh, brave monster! Lead the way.

- Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

In *The Postmodern Prometheus*, the series creator rewrites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* and, by establishing a parallel between Cher's public image and the myth of Prometheus, shows how her subversive performance empathizes with the marginal and helps build a collective experience that culminates in an impressive number of followers.

Many dramatizations of Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* took place before *The Postmodern Prometheus* aired on television network Fox on November 30, 1997 but, interestingly, by

then scientists at the National Institute of Health were raising questions and concerns similar to those raised by Shelley's contemporaries: Dolly the sheep had been cloned the year before and newspaper and magazine articles talked about the dangers of transplanting animal organs, of 'playing god' as Prometheus did.

The episode of The X-Files *The Postmodern Prometheus* begins when a comic book, *The Great Mutato*, is opened. Eighteen-year-old Izzy, Shaineh Berkowitz's son, goes on a trip and she stays at home alone. While she is watching *The Jerry Springer Show* (a mother with a very hairy baby is being interviewed) a circus tent covers her house. She starts listening to *The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore*<sup>101</sup> (Cher's cover of The Walker Brother's version) as the room is filled with smoke. Then she sees a disfigured form approaching and becomes unconscious. FBI special agent Fox Mulder receives a letter from Shaineh, who has heard about him from *The Jerry Springer Show*. She describes the event to him and claims she is now pregnant as a result of the attack. The same had happened when she got pregnant 18 years ago. Mulder and his partner, Dana Scully, travel to rural Albion, Indiana. After talking to Shaineh and Izzy they learn that the creature that attacked her looks like one of the characters from Izzy's comic book, *The Great Mutato*, who, in turn, is inspired by a mysterious creature who has been seen by the locals. Izzy takes Mulder and Scully to a wooded area where they see The Great Mutato<sup>102</sup> from a distance and talk to an old man who tells them there are no monsters there and advises them to see his son (Dr. Pollidori, a genetic scientist) if they are looking for a monster. Pollidori shows them his experiments and Mulder starts suspecting Pollidori created The Great Mutato. In the meantime, Elizabeth, Dr. Pollidori's wife, is attacked in her house in the same manner as Shaineh had been. As Mulder and Scully are passing by the house, they see it covered by a circus tent and hear *Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves*, another song by Cher. Inside, they find Elizabeth unconscious and soon after they also fall unconscious. Dr. Pollidori's father steps from the smoke with a gas mask covering his face. When Mulder and Scully regain consciousness they find a chemical residue from an agricultural agent used to anesthetize animals and they grow suspicious of Dr. Pollidori's father, a farmer. At the old man's house, while The Great Mutato is watching the film, *Mask*, the old man affectionately calls him son and advises him not to stay up until late. In the scene from *Mask* Cher's character is also displaying her affection for her deformed son. Dr. Pollidori comes to his father's house and kills him. The Great Mutato finds the body and buries it in a

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<sup>101</sup> Its lyrics speaks about the loneliness one feels when one lacks love, which is what this 'monster' experiences, and probably, up to a certain extent, this single mother, who likes to watch The Jerry Springer Show.

<sup>102</sup> The Great Mutato is a big Cher fan who has established a parallel between his life and that of Rocky, the character from the 1985 film *Mask* (based on the life of Roy L. "Rocky" Dennis, a boy who suffered from craniofacial dysplasia).

barn alongside pictures of him with the old man. Mulder and Scully come to the house and find the grave. They decide to protect The Great Mutato from an angry mob of townspeople who Dr. Pollidori has, in the meantime, lead. He explains to all he was created 25 years before, the result of a genetic experiment gone wrong by Dr. Pollidori, and that Pollidori Sr. rescued and raised him. To provide a friend and mate for him, he tried to create hybrids from his farm animals. The townspeople realize The Great Mutato is not a monster and Dr. Pollidori is arrested for the murder of his father. Mulder demands to see the writer of the story because he thinks Dr. Frankenstein (Dr. Pollidori) should pay for his evil ambitions and The Great Mutato should escape and search for his bride. Mulder and Scully take The Great Mutato, along with the townspeople, to a Cher's concert. Shaineh and Elizabeth go to *The Jerry Springer Show* with their newborn babies (The Great Mutato lookalikes) and are asked if it is hard to love those babies: Shaineh replies, "What's not to love?" The story ends with Cher<sup>103</sup> calling The Great Mutato on stage and Mulder and Scully dancing to the song *Walking in Memphis*<sup>104</sup>. It is the end of *The Postmodern Prometheus* as well as the end of the comic book. It is understood the story of the episode is the story of the comic book.

A metafictional story self-consciously alludes to the artificiality and/or literariness of a work<sup>105</sup> by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions and traditional narrative techniques and, by doing so, it poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. By having a rewriting of Shelley's novel start with the front cover of a comic book (*The Great Mutato*), Chris Carter deliberately calls the attention of the public to the fact that they are in the presence of fiction since the spectator is immediately face with the fact that the story is not a real life even. Simultaneously, he also 'ignores' the classical barrier between 'high' and 'low' culture.<sup>106</sup> He offers the viewer a metafictional piece in which the writer of this comic book, Izzy, (also a character in his own story) is writing it as the story unfolds. Being so, as the viewers are watching the episode, the end is still open and Mulder can influence the writer to choose an end different from the expected one (a type of replica of Shelley's novel). Mulder also reminds the viewers they are watching fiction since the story he is 'living' is Izzy's story. At the end of the *Postmodern Prometheus*, Mulder wonders if he should arrest The Great Mutato, "This is all wrong, Scully. This is not

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<sup>103</sup> An impersonator played the character of Cher.

<sup>104</sup> See appendix for full lyrics.

<sup>105</sup> In this case we are clearly presented with a rewriting of Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

<sup>106</sup> Fiction and reality are once again intertwined when the story lays claim to an historical personage (Cher) and The Great Mutato does not differentiate her from the character she plays in the film *Mask*. He says, "Cher loved that boy", referring to how her character, Florence (Rusty) Dennis, loved her son Rocky.

how the story's supposed to end. (...) Dr. Frankenstein pays for his evil ambitions, yes, but the monster's supposed to escape to go search for his bride." Scully replies, "There's not gonna be any bride, Mulder. Not in this story." But Mulder insists, "Well, where's the writer. I want to talk to the writer." The Great Mutato does 'escape': he is not arrested and is even given the opportunity to attend a Cher's concert, implicitly finding his bride in the person of Cher.<sup>107</sup> Form fits content.

Carter intentionally rewrote and subverted the end of *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* to give the marginal a voice, presenting Cher as a source of empowerment. In the beginning of the story, the popular memory of the 'Other' is presented in its original form when the circus tents are used to cover Shaineh's and Elizabeth's houses to the sound of Cher's songs. In the first case, the song *The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore* is used. Once again, as the viewer listens to this song, we are in the presence of a lonely, marginalized woman, since her husband totally disregards her emotional needs. In the scene where Elizabeth's house is invaded, the song *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves* is also symbolic because the title mentions three categories of marginals. It is during these 'invasions' that The Great Mutato tries to conceive beings close to him in appearance and, therefore, those are glorious moments for him. In spite of having impregnated the women without their consent, the action does not seem to involve violence because these women are lonely, somewhat marginal beings. What seems to have happened is not a case of rape but artificial insemination with animal DNA, which helps them defy marriage as a social institution and claim they do not need to live according to conventions to conceive and be happy. When Elizabeth hears Mulder say she may have been impregnated she looks up in delight.

Later Scully tells Mulder:

Psychologists often speak of the denial of an unthinkable evil or a misplacement of shared fears. Anxieties taking the form of a hideous monster for whom the most horrific human attributes can be ascribed. What we can't possibly imagine ourselves capable of we can blame on the ogre, on the hunchback, on the lowly half-breed.

When Pollidori murders his father, the community easily believes The Great Mutato was the murderer and gathers efforts to kill him. When he is able to tell his story, the community realizes he is not a monster.

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<sup>107</sup> The Great Mutato, as was the case with teenager Cher, feels he does not conform to the parameters labeled as normal by society and wishes to find someone who looks like him.

At this point the camera keeps moving from focusing on animals in the barn to townspeople, alluding to resemblances between them, a parallel similar to that made by Cher when the lights shift from the stage to the public during her *Do you Believe?* tour.

When Jerry Springer asks Shaineh and Elizabeth “Is it hard to love these babies?” and Shaineh replies, “What’s it not to love?” Carter is making an intertextual reference to the film *Mask* in which Cher’s character says to Rocky, “What is not to love baby?” after he has mentioned he met a girl who loves him. Since her role in *Mask*, Cher became interested in helping the families of children with Rocky’s disease and is presently the national spokesperson for the Children’s Craniofacial Association in the United States. She has also been supporting her transgender child Chaz Bono, who struggles with matters of identity. Shaineh, Elizabeth, Cher’s character in *Mask*, as well as Cher herself are advocating Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg presented in her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, originally published in 1985, since they accept a world in which “people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory stand points” (Haraway, 1991, p. 8), a ‘manifesto’ which allows and even encourages self-transformation. Haraway calls for a reconstruction of identity: individuals can construct a “post-modernist identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity” (Haraway, 1991, p. 9) and ‘rebel’ against Western traditions of wholeness. In turn, Homi Bhabha speaks about the way “subjects are formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the ‘part’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

*The Postmodern Prometheus* is, therefore, a metafictional work that both says there is no such thing as an original story, a ‘true’ story, as there is no such thing as ‘the’ perfect being. Such is precisely the message Cher persistently conveys with her work. By the end of the episode, The Great Mutato and ‘Cher’ dance at her concert – two marginal figures ‘on top’.

Diane Negra interprets the appropriation of Cher’s image by Carter as a metaphor for “the possibility of self-transformation” (Negra, 2001, p. 177) because she considers that Cher’s body represents an invented constructed body, such as The Great Mutato’s. Cher is particularly known for her long career of ups and downs and for overcoming criticism and rejection but, as the Promethean liver, she persists in rebuilding herself. She is known for being a mother of reinvention: with the use of extravagant costumes and wigs, and her history of tattoos and plastic surgery, she defies the aging process and looks younger than she is. She has been attracting an impressive number of fans from the gay community and is considered a gay icon. The reverence The Great Mutato pays to Cher symbolizes the way her fan base behaves in relation to her, proving she is capable of working as an agent that empowers minorities.

Back in November 1987 Cher had also expressed her empathy with the outcast in two television commercials that launched her first perfume called *Uninhibited*. In them she mentions her inhibitions, “Beauty didn’t encompass me when I was growing up. There was no place for me to fit in at all and so, instead of having to fit in, I had to expand. (...) So, what I did was to make it work for me, instead of walking away from it. I just turned it around”<sup>108</sup>. (...) you can do whatever is that you want to do, that’s the only thing that is important. There is just lots of people inside me”<sup>109</sup>. In the following year, when talking about its name in an interview, she explains, “I have many inhibitions and I think that’s why it is a good name because all women can use it and then be who they are”. One can infer from these comments that she is reclaiming her hybrid persona as a multitude of identities.

In the film *Stuck on You* (2003) Cher, yet again, is linked to the outcast. The plot is about two conjoined twins who venture to go to Hollywood and eventually meet Cher (she plays a cameo). Since she is recording a film and the contract she has signed says she has the right to choose her own co-star, when she finds out the film is not what she expected it to be, yet she cannot simply quite, she chooses, the ‘creepy’, the ‘monstrous ones’ to be her, as she utters, “leading man, men”, hoping the director would make her redundant. That does not happen because she is ‘Cher’, she is, as her cameo claims, “(...) a fucking Oscar winner”. The film is a success and she is ‘responsible’ for catapulting the two young misfit actors, who happen to be her fans, to fame.

During *The Believe Tour* (1999) Cher performed her song *The Power*<sup>110</sup> while one of her dancers was dressed as a troll in stilts. Once again, she aligned herself with the outcast.

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<sup>108</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGHiAutm\\_80](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGHiAutm_80).

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eziZ4z7sV5A>.

<sup>110</sup> The song talks about a king and a queen and how he is sad for having lost her. The supposedly “mighty strong” is missing the “mighty weak” and, therefore, the power, that everybody seeks, is questioned and presented as a sword with a double blade. The song ends with the verses, “I believe and you believe/And we believe that everybody’s gonna be alright/Alright in just my mind”, implying that actually no one is ever totally all right and nothing is ever totally fair.



Figure 38: Cher performing *The Power* during The Believe Tour (1999)

Trolls, a class of beings in Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore, can do things humans do and are said to dwell in isolated rocks, mountains, or caves and the Nordic folkloristic beliefs say that some trolls are human-like yet different, therefore, attributing a human/non-human dichotomy to the troll, which is also supposed to have black hair and brown skin.

By 1976, the cover of the June issue of *Ms. Magazine* was representative of the impact Cher already had in popular culture when she is chosen to illustrate the main article: “Brace yourself for your genetic future (...) cloning: the new virgin birth?”. In fact, it displays ‘three Chers’, an adult, a teenager, and a baby one. The adult Cher seems to be the mother of the other two. The teenager seems to be venerating the adult Cher, since she is looking at the latter with her hands in a praying position and staring at her with a smile on her face. Interestingly, the ‘young Chers’ have disproportionate arms, legs, and hands and one can only think of ‘mother Cher’ as an entity that ‘gives birth’ to a powerful combination of strong, yet beautifully feminine ‘offsprings’. Throughout her career, Cher has given birth to many ‘monster fans’.





Figure 39: The cover of the June 1976 issue of *Ms. Magazine*

Talking about Frankenstein, Mulder says:

When Victor Frankenstein asks himself ‘Whence did the principle of life proceed?’ then as a gratifying summit to his toils creates a hideous phantasm of a man he prefigures the Postmodern Prometheus. The genetic engineer whose power to reanimate matter – genes into life – us – is only as limited as his imagination is.

Here Mulder labels the genetic engineer the Postmodern Prometheus but Cher’s extravagant body, associated with non-conformism to rules, as Negra says, reinforces the power of the will to transcend disempowerment and works, therefore, in a promethean way. In a postmodern approach, one can argue that The X-Files episode *The Postmodern Prometheus* empowers the marginal voice of ‘the creature’ by establishing a parallel with the artist Cher. The myth of Frankenstein has been used for over a century to represent in various media ‘the monster’ in the moral sense of the word. This story passes on the message that there is not such a thing as the perfect body; that every body is subject to construction and therefore one cannot talk about identity based on a pre-established corporeality.

This is, in our view, the leitmotif of Cher’s transgressiveness and empowering career.

## Chapter 5: 'Why does it Matter to Talk about Popular Icons?'

The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated.

- Bourdieu, *The Aristocracy of Culture* (1984)

### 5.1. The Fan

The role that the popular icons play across many aspects of the cultural field has exponentially expanded since the 1950s. They are now everywhere in the media: in films, on television series, TV shows, in comics, in video clips, and in video games, among other. They call the attention of a wide range of people from a variety of social backgrounds and different age groups and are a source of inspiration. Graeme Turner (2013) refers to them as “the familiar stranger” (p. 3) and they are glorified as heroes by their fans.

The word ‘fan’, as Henry Jenkins (2013) states, is in fact an abbreviation of ‘fanatic’, from the Latin ‘fanaticus’, and, in its most literal sense means “Of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” (p. 12). Eventually, it assumed negative connotations such as “Of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy” (ibid.), evolving from a reference to certain excessive forms of religious belief and worship to any “excessive and mistaken enthusiasm” (ibid.) and madness, “such as might result from possession by a deity or demon” (ibid.). News reports often describe fans as people who can easily engage in violent acts or even psychopaths. In the same line of thought, journalist Julie Burchill (1986) uses the expression, “the fan in the attic” (p. 143) in a parodic intertextual reference to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s, celebrated and pioneering volume, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), in which the authors examine Victorian literature from a feminist perspective, drawing their title from Charlotte Brönte’s novel *Jane Eyre*, more specifically, Mr. Rochester’s wife (Bertha Mason), who is kept secretly locked in an attic by her husband. According to Gilbert and Gubar, women writers of the nineteenth century would often make their female characters either embody the ‘angel’ or the ‘monster’, depicting the tendency of male writers to categorize female characters as either pure, or rebelliously mad but hiding a feminist subtext within an apparently conventional narrative. Gilbert and Gubar stress the importance of killing off both figures since neither accurately represents women and are both reductionist patriarchal views of their role in society. In the same manner, the reports that describe fans as subjects

who are frequently violent and, in some way, mentally disturbed, should also be subject to criticism. Burchill is, thus, referring to someone who is considered emotionally immature because she/he is given to fantasies inspired by the media and not able to have a respectful place in society.

As Henry Jenkins (2013) explains, the fan is “a stock figure in suspense films, (...) one of the ‘usual suspects’ for the commission of crimes and a source of almost instantaneous threat” (p. 14), and remarks that such a:

(...) stereotypical conception of the fan (...) amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies (...) the fan’s transgression of bourgeois taste (...) ensures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these standards (p. 17).

Fan culture threatens to break boundaries between popular texts and canonical ones. Fans “(...) reject the aesthetic distance” considered to be “(...) a cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics (...) and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience (...) [which] seemingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 18). As a consequence, the fan is often represented as ‘other’ and is marginalized. Not usually conforming to the establishment and being sometimes activists trying to dethrone normativity, fans are frequently considered lunatics. But what they are actually doing is mostly likely moving society in a different direction since they build communities around their object of affection and help spread a certain ideology with their discourse. And ‘discourse’ is, according to Foucault, a “(...) system of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lara Lessa, 2006, p. 283-298). Moreover, and ‘truth’ is simply, still according to Foucault, linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and a ‘regime of truth’, which implies that signs are mediated by the hierarchies and ideologies we are surrounded by.

As Gilbert Rodman (1996) states:

[S]tardom is not a purely mercantile phenomenon imposed ‘from above’ by profit-hungry media conglomerates as much as it is a socially based phenomenon generated ‘from below’ at the level of real people who make affective investments in particular media figures (...) [T]he cultural

circulation of Elvis as an icon has moved beyond the power of big business to control it: today, the people who wield the most power over Elvis's public image are the millions of individuals across the globe who are his fans (p.12–13).

By “real people” Rodman means fans who, by looking at these figures, envisage change can happen and the American dream is possible.

In his turn, Todd Gitlin (2001) elaborates on the subject:

At times [celebrities] are part of the background noise and flow – part of the wallpaper, we say – and at times they loom up as something more. Sometimes we evaluate them as physical beings and moral agents. Often, we find them desirable, or enviable, or in some other way they evoke the sentiments, the liking, irritation or boredom, that flesh and blood individuals evoke. Yet an aura of some sort surrounds them. They take up ritual places as heroes, leaders, scapegoats, magical figures, to be admired, envied, loved or hated: to matter (p. 32).

Analyzing the roots of the word ‘cult’, Matt Hills (2002) writes, “(...) cult implies ‘cultivation’, and cultivation is a badge of honour. It implies the dutiful pursuit of a dedicated apprenticeship to a particular object” (p. 124). It is highly significant who attributes cult status to whom.

In order to study popular culture, one has to examine, as Jenkins (2013) articulates, “(...) our own emotional experiences with forms of culture that matter to us” (p. xii). That is what fans do at the highest level<sup>111</sup>. Becoming a fan of someone or something, can, therefore, mean that one has enrolled in a “(...) membership in a particular subculture” since “meaning-making is social” (Jenkins, 2013, p. xiv) and may operate, for instance, in relation to patriarchal heteronormativity and ethnicity. By looking at certain celebrities, fans see that they have reworked myths and believe they will be able to do the same. Fandom, therefore, not only means individual engagement but also social participation. Jenkins's research has

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<sup>111</sup> Jenkins (2013), provides wrestling as an example of an activity that appeals to “lower class taste” and boosts “patriarchal pleasures” (p. xii).

shown how fans construct their own culture by 'poaching' content from mass culture, which implies a form of appropriation and remixing with different goals from the original ones.

The term 'poaching' was first used by Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), when he argued that everyday life works by a process of poaching on the territory of others, using the rules and products that already exist in culture in a way that is influenced, although not wholly, by such rules and products. The concept is further developed by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), where he defines the term as "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 9). With wide access to digital technologies, fans become, as Jenkins puts it, active readers, who, inspired by the texts they enjoy, participate in the production of content. Poaching can, thus, be a form of expressing frustrations and antagonism but also of showing resistance, awareness, and challenging social norms: "Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 60). As more and more groups have been responsible for the processes of cultural production and circulation, groups of fans are certainly among those that can be looked at as an example of the phenomenon of 'participatory culture'. The term 'participatory culture' refers to a culture in which private individuals act not only as consumers but also as contributors or producers. According to Jenkins (2006), it:

"(...) is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (p. 3).

Being a fan can make one feel emotionally empowered and eventually culminate in one's contribution, usually as part of a collective, to a cause. Fans can be said to be a 'different kind of media', in that they help spread a counter ideology. In this context, with their positive involvement in the 'participatory culture', they create their own communities in which they can express themselves by questioning prescriptive ideas of gender, sexuality, and other norms as a form of resistance.

Another important concept Jenkins (2008) discusses in this context is what he terms 'convergence culture' by which he means:

(...) the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences (...) Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers (...) each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information we have extracted from the ongoing flow of media around us and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3-4).

Jenkins concluded that fans in specific communities often hold the same values, and, because of that, they have been able to fight for their specific causes. Lately, probably more than ever, many celebrities have endorsed politicians running for elections and mobilized citizens to vote. They may also join efforts with television show presenters and appear in their shows as invited guests, parodying political figures.

Due to its importance, there has been a very long dispute pertaining to this issue, namely by critics such as Darrell M. West and John M. Orman (2013), who consider that:

Even though Americans tend not to trust politicians, they have greater respect for and confidence in celebrities who enter the world of politics (...) These individuals have a fame that transcends public service and a reputation for personal integrity. This allows them to succeed politically in ways that are unavailable to more conventional kinds of politicians (p. 102).

Graeme Turner (2013) explains that "(...) such candidates' personal celebrity actually provides them with an ethical advantage over the politicians" (p. 153). In this context, when Gitlin (2001) talks about the celebrity that 'matters' in his book entitled *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*, he is referring to the celebrity that becomes a myth, meaning that not all celebrities achieve such a status, yet some carry an intrinsic value because they combine a mixture of the heroic and the noble. Those are the ones that make us see above the mundane and, therefore, encompass time and present us with a 'vision'.

Along the same lines, Mark Duffett (2017), in his book *Understanding Fandom – An introduction to the study of media fan culture* explains that “Myths (...) have contours that can encompass what matters by tapping into the anxieties and desires at the heart of present-day society” (p. 210). This critic exposes his views on case studies of Madonna, Judy Garland, David Bowie, and Bob Dylan, among others. Such celebrities are highly important since we project our identities into them to “envisage a kind of fit” (p. 211). Duffett offers the reader the example of a story, not that of a celebrity: he considers that the story of Cinderella is “ (...) a resonant cultural myth because (...) it connects desire, romance and social mobility (...) relies on the acceptance of certain ideas about gender, monogamy and class to sustain its symbolic resonance”(p. 211). We agree with Duffett and add that when certain paradigms are questioned, the myths can be rewritten, namely by celebrities who may eventually become icons after having established a plethora of fans around their personas and their body of work. At this point, cultural values are re-evaluated and history is in the making. In the same context, in *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace: The Light on the Hill in a Postmodern World* McKenzie Wark (1999) elaborated, “Through celebrating (or deriding) celebrities it is possible to belong to something beyond the particular culture with which each of us might identify” (p. 33), while P. David Marshall (1997) asserted that, “(...) celebrities represent subject positions that audiences can adopt or adapt in their formation of social identities” (p.65). Agreeing with Dyer, he claims that the power of celebrities is “(...) connected to the interests of an audience (...) their power is ultimately part of a transformed public sphere (...)” (p. 17). According to him, when the public wants to know how a particular celebrity is “really” like, she/he is individualized and becomes the “representation of the potential of the individual” (p. 17).

## 5.2. Icons and Political Culture

Another relevant point presented by Marshall, is the erosion of “(...) the disciplinary boundaries between the domains of popular culture and political culture (...) through the migration of communicative strategies and public relations from the entertainment industries to the organization of the spectacle of politics” (p. xiii). As an example, he mentions the posters of Che Guevara, which, according to him, have been speaking louder than the actions of certain revolutionaries and raises the possibility that the celebrity has entered the language of culture and is, therefore, able to exist after her/his death.

Actually, in 2000 artist Scott King portrayed Cher as Che Guevara. What might be the impact of such a representation and why has a parallel been established between the two icons?

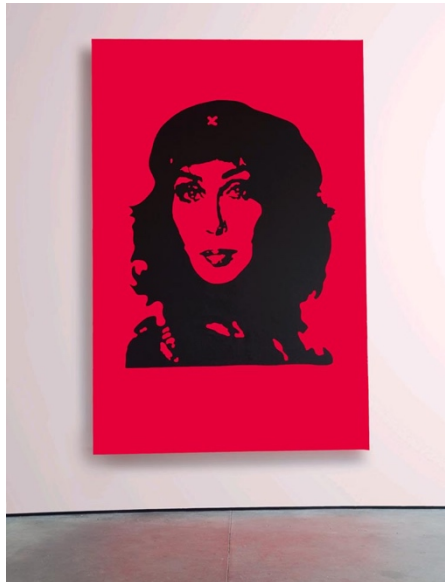


Figure 40. *Pink Cher* at the exhibition entitled Marxist Disco (cancelled) at the Saatchi Gallery in London (2008)

As King claims, "Most of the stuff I've done that is deemed political is actually about the failure of a certain kind of political ideology (...) It's about the failure of the left, mainly. So things like Cher Guevara (...) are really about the commodification of once meaningful imagery and gestures" (apud Justin Quirk, 2008, n/p<sup>112</sup>). In turn, the text that the art gallery offered on King's artwork, which is entitled *Pink Cher*, reads, "King's Cher stands in for counter-culture hero Che Guevara, a rebel-icon and its lost meaning, long dissipated by mass reproduction. Emblazoned in acid-house pink, left-wing radicalism becomes fused with celebrity obsession, a contemporary by-product of cultural dysmorphia"<sup>113</sup>. Have not feminists (women and men) been adopting the color pink to protest within a male dominated space, thus subverting the traditional associations of pink with passive femininity? Such has been the case at the Women's March in Washington (2017-2020). Pink is a bold, eye-catching color and the more it becomes visible the better, parodically representing women's voice and resistance to 'commodification'.

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<sup>112</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/31/art>.

<sup>113</sup> As it reads on the website of the Saatchi Gallery (retrieved on [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/scott\\_king.htm](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/scott_king.htm)).





Figure 41: A man wearing pink at the Women's March on Washington



Figure 42: Signs being held at the Women's March on Washington

In a similar context, we argue that Che Guevara's symbolic meaning was not lost due to its massive reproduction in posters, t-shirts, caps, and alike. In fact, its widespread representation has been associated with values of political and social resistance. We believe that, by associating the myth of Che Guevara with Cher's iconicity, King is extending the power of a celebrity to the realm of politics. It has been twelve years since that exhibition took place and Cher remains significantly present in today's popular culture.

### 5.3. Fandom and Participatory Culture

Fans sometimes seek to influence the text they inspired themselves in and claim the right to retell stories. It can be said that fans transform the experience of watching a performance into participatory culture since they appropriate popular texts and reread them in a way that serves their needs. Their response involves, on the one hand adoration for and on the other hand frustration with certain principles and they "(...) become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (Jenkins, 2013, p. 24). The struggle for popular access to the means of cultural production and circulation built the path to participatory culture. And, as we will now discuss, fandom is a very specific kind of participatory culture, one "(...) which facilitates the social negotiation of the meaning and value of popular texts, enables grassroots creative responses, and provides a context for debates about issues of representation, diversity, and inclusion" (Jenkins, 2018, p.11). It is meaningful to talk about audiences

and their activities, namely because of the fact that fans can belong to very different social groups (even scholars themselves acknowledge that they are fans of something of someone) validates the impact and social meaning of the contemporary fandom phenomenon. Such individuals, called ‘aca-fans’<sup>114</sup>, are labeled by Jenkins as hybrid identities, for whom identifying themselves as both fans and academics is not problematic. They are better prepared to write in an open way about their experience of fandom without feeling they need to be defensive for fear of not being taken seriously and, as Jenkins puts it, “what cannot easily be dismissed as ignorance must be read as aesthetic perversion” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 19), meaning that when certain people consider the work of an artist who belongs to the world of popular culture worth studying, they are categorizing that same work an extravagant, yet undeniably, valuable piece of art.

Jenkins’s interpretation is linked to Bourdieu’s epigraph at the onset of this chapter. No one owns the right to revendicate the so called ‘legitimate culture’ since cultural meanings are constantly being reorganized and renegotiated and the establishment of both ‘legitimate culture’ and ‘sacrilegious tastes’ are not necessarily exclusive. In his essay *The Aristocracy of Culture* (1984), Bourdieu discusses the way tastes operate for all classes and how they serve to produce divisions across the entire social field. For him, consumer preferences, are, as Douglas E. Allen and Paul F. Anderson (1994) put it, “socially conditioned and (...) the objects of consumer choice reflect a symbolic hierarchy that is determined from other classes of society” (n/p)<sup>115</sup>. Therefore, taste becomes a weapon used by society to differentiate from the most mundane items of consumption to objects that have a recognizable aesthetic component.

In this frame of mind, one can infer that pop icons can be labelled ‘visual theoreticians’, meaning that they express their ideologies not simply in words but also, and significantly, by the way they present themselves in the public eye (for instance, by the way they dress and by their mannerisms) and their cultural significance derives from the discourses from which they emerge. As Jeff Ferrell (1995) claims, in a postmodern view, “(...) form is content, style is substance, meaning, thus, resides in presentation and re-presentation” (p. 397). The interaction of people with certain representations has meaningful consequences since cultural history may be in the making. Their exposure to certain popular icons influences and may change the way they perceive the world around them and, consequently, the way they will act upon it. Therefore, as previously pointed out, after interacting with the work of their idols, the fans might appropriate and adapt their texts and thus participate in the production of culture. While history only talks about the ‘official’, in cultural history you find the ‘unofficial’. Similarly, as Geoffrey Eley (1995)

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<sup>114</sup> The term was popularized by Matt Hills in *Fan Cultures* (2002).

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7565/volumes/v21/NA>.

points out, during the first phase of the Women's Liberation Movement there was a strong hostility to popular culture since "(...) the power of conventional sex-gender signs in everything from makeup to romantic fiction was taken as evidence of backwardness, oppression and male exploitation (...)" (p. 26). Yet, during the third wave of feminism, this situation, in terms of social awareness and 'political correctness', changed and evolved:

"(...) we have seen growing efforts to explore how cultural production works on needs in appealing and contradictory ways (...) In this sense, 'culture' is defining a ground of politics beyond the space conventionally recognized by most political traditions as the appropriate context for policy-making in education and the arts" (Eley, 1995, p. 26).

It must, therefore, be concluded that historians should look more into the domain of representation in popular culture since it disseminates meaning and prompts strategies of resistance to the homological social order. When celebrities are not punished for their defiance of norms and manage to get away with positively being the 'Other', they remain powerful. When they are able to challenge authority and, in some cases, even rewrite themselves as that authority, they attain the status of social icons and their cultural narratives, thus empowered, become vehicles for the dissemination of alternative political ideas with wide impact. Eventually, new kinds of communities, with a different way of looking at their surroundings, are, as described in some of the examples we have previously analyzed, shaped around their artistic participation, which can ultimately deconstruct the myth of the rotten apple.

The well known phrase "One bad apple spoils the whole bunch" alludes to the spread of mold or decay from one infected apple to the rest. A person can be called a 'rotten apple' for being considered a 'bad' individual among a 'good' group. The term has been used by religious groups such as the United Church of God which advocates in its website Beyond Today that "(...) corrupting ideas spread their poisonous effects" (Seiglie, 2013, n/p). They mention how between 1962 and 1963 the U.S. Supreme Court made decisions to ban prayer and Bible reading from American public schools and cite Randall Price, an archaeologist and religious writer, "(...) these anti-values are marketed wholesale through the entertainment industry (movies, TV, and video games) that saturates our culture (...)" (Ibid). We would, instead, say that popular cultural helps deconstruct the above-mentioned myth. The website also refers that before the birth control pill was available, most women would avoid sex before marriage because of the risk of unwanted pregnancy but now they perceive it as "(...) a method

of avoiding consequences as license to commit sexual immorality (...)" (Ibid). That being said, these religious groups label the women who use contraceptives as 'rotten apples'. Yet again, as we have seen with the particular case of the film *If These Walls Could Talk*, popular culture is able to depict women according to a totally different perspective.

On new depictions of women, as Kimberly Ann Wells pointed out<sup>116</sup>, "(...) as more than "either/ors" [they] show options that previously did not exist for women, and in so doing, challenge our expectations of what being a woman means. (p. 31). In fact, and as Wells defends, new myths take away false binaries such as those of virgin versus mother, wife versus whore, or angel versus temptress, thus eliminating our perception of what makes sense and widening the powers with which women have been associated.

Such examples can be found in the way Cher herself has, throughout the decades, shaped her career. One such case can be found in the way the lyrics of the song *Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)* were rewritten, reverting the role that the woman plays in the story. This song, originally written by her then husband Sonny Bono, was a hit single for Cher in 1966. It tells the story of a relationship between the female protagonist and a boy who was a childhood friend and later her partner and how he made her suffer throughout the years. In 1987, she recorded another version for her 1987 Platinum-certified album *Cher* and performed it in concerts such as her *Heart of Stone Tour* and on *Living Proof: The Farewell Tour*. In 2014, it was instrumentally played on the *Dressed to Kill Tour*. While in the first version she is telling the story about the two of them, in the second one she is addressing him. Another difference is that in the lyrics of the first version, the female character wears white and the male wears black but in the second version the color of their clothes is reversed. Apart from these changes, this latest version added the following verses (italics):

*You shot me right between the eyes*

*You meant to paralyze*

Bang, bang, bang,

Oh, baby I am laying on the ground

*But I am never going down,*

Bang, bang,

*Oh, baby come on back to me,*

*You'll see how sweet is gonna be*

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<sup>116</sup> See Kimberly Ann Wells's PhD dissertation *Screaming, Flying, and Laughing: Magical Feminism's Witches in Contemporary Film, Television, and Novels* (2007).

## Bang, bang

This female subject is presented as much stronger and more empowered than the first one since, despite “laying on the ground”, she is never “going down”, hoping that one day her partner will come back because she seeks revenge “You’ll see how sweet is gonna be”.

The song was part of the soundtrack of Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003) which tells the story of a woman who seeks revenge after her former boss kills her fiancée and leaves her in a coma on their wedding day because she had decided to leave her gang after getting pregnant. Just like the woman in the song, she was shot down but not defeated. Recently, the CR Fashion Book #16 (2020), a biannual publication from Carine Roitfeld celebrating fashion and creativity chose Cher, Kim Kardashian, and Naomi Campbell to be bikers in the new short film called *Bang*, intertextually linking the later and the above-mentioned song. The setting is downtown Los Angeles and the film is in black and white. The story is narrated by a man who says he goes specifically to that part of town in order to see the female biker gang, the Angels of Santee Street<sup>117</sup>. He is narrating a dream he had the previous night during which he kept getting lost on those streets and finding these women in every corner. Instead of riding bikes they were now riding horses and showing up at every corner, making him fear for his life<sup>118</sup>. One can speculate if the short film took inspiration not only from the *Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)*, the second version, but also from the song *Just Like Jesse James*. Jesse James<sup>119</sup> (1847-1882) was the leader of the James-Younger Gang, which used to rob banks and trains. During the Civil War, together with his brother, he joined pro-Confederate guerrillas known as ‘Bushwhackers’. The song refers to a vain man who thinks too much of himself and takes pride in making women fall in love with him only to leave them afterwards. The narrator warns him that this time he is going to meet his “match”, and, therefore, he is going to fall in the trap he usually sets for his ‘victims’. The narrator of the short film *Bang* comments that Cher is said to have, once, robbed a bank and he fears these women may shoot him down at any moment.

The American actress and activist Geena Davis, known for having received numerous accolades for her portrayals of strong female characters, namely that of Thelma in *Thelma and Louise*, launched in 2004 the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, which focuses on working with the entertainment industry to dramatically increase the presence of female characters in media and reduce stereotyping of

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<sup>117</sup> The name given to the group of bikers seems to be inspired in the *Hell’s Angels Motorcycle Club*, whose members are known to ride Harley Davidson motorcycles. Cher herself is known to ride a Harley Davidson.

<sup>118</sup> See appendix II for the narrative and screenshots of the short film.

<sup>119</sup> See appendix I for the lyrics.

females by the male-dominated industry. For her work, she received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Bates College in 2009. Women who defy patriarchy and the roles they are given are in favor not only of equal footing but also of gender blurring. They are, in fact, trying to go back to a time before the split, when there was no division between men and women, that is, before Adam and Eve. They are feminists appropriating the concept of androgyny.

## Conclusion

Inevitably, today's stories are but prologues or sequels to other stories, true and less true stories, stories that are themselves intermissions, stories without end.

- Todd Gitlin, *The anti-political populism of Cultural Studies* (1997)

[T]he post-modernist temper demands that what was previously played out in fantasy and imagination must be acted out in life as well. Anything permitted in art is permitted in life.

- Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradiction of Capitalism* (1972)

There are lots of things I'd like to be and nice just doesn't seem good enough.

- Cher (1991)

Why Cher? Why is she, up to the present day, an interesting icon worth reflecting upon? Cher has been ahead of her time ever since she started her career, building the path for postmodernism and postfeminism. Angela McRobbie (2005), talks about a new set of interests in cultural studies and in sociology that emerged in the mid-1980s when postmodernism first came forth. She mentions “(...) a concern with surface, with meaning being paraded as an intentionally superficial phenomenon (...) stripped of its old hidden elitist difficulty (...) already familiar (...) a cover version of an original which never was (...) full of jokes (...)” (p. 2-3). Yet, Cher has been applying (as we have seen throughout this thesis) such principles to her performance since her early days in the music industry. Nevertheless, Cher, and female pioneers in general, are, as Joe Lynch (2017) puts it, “(...) typically under-celebrated when it comes to critical retelling of popular music's history” (p. n/p)<sup>120</sup>, which is one of the reasons the study of their body of work is highly pertinent.

Postmodernism, described by McRobbie (2005) as “(...) a multiplicity of fragmented, and frequently interrupted 'looks'” (p. 12), perceives nothing as being original and, since everything is a representation, the past becomes much more appealing in the hope of giving it a meaning that can be simultaneously old and new. Cher calls herself neither a singer nor an actress but, instead, an entertainer, which seems to allow us to label her, if we choose to do so, a paradigm of postmodern trends.

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<sup>120</sup> <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/7800161/cher-music-radical-icon>.

As the research presented throughout chapters 2, 3, and 4, acknowledges, Cher's performance fits into the concept of cultural performance and evidences many of the characteristics of the ethnic and feminist cultural performance almost right from its onset. Throughout the years, she has persistently been rewriting the role of the 'infamous' woman in cultural history having these premises as the pillars of her career: an image that is also associated to her persona. In his biography of Cher, J. Randy Taraborrelli (1986) refers to the criticism she was subject to at a preview of the film *Silkwood*<sup>121</sup> in 1983. The audience applauded when they saw Meryl Streep and Ken Russell on the screen but when they heard "(...) and costarring, Cher!" someone commented, "Oh sure! Cher! She'll be just great with Meryl Streep" and the entire theatre burst into laughter (p. viii). One of the reasons for Cher to be such a relevant case study is precisely the fact that she never conformed to the rules within the world of entertainment, namely those of Hollywood, and is, therefore, among its exceptions, as an exotic and 'ex-centric'<sup>122</sup> (Ana Gabriela Machado, 1998) character, even though working within the mainstream entertainment culture.

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 and in her work race, class, and gender issues seem to interlock in the struggle for energies in a fight for the rights of minorities. Throughout her career, she has used 'appropriation', an act which implies borrowing and recycling composited elements in the creation of a new piece of art as a strategy to deconstruct normative representations of class, gender and ethnicity. Marvin Carlson (2004) considers that 'appropriation' is typical of the politics of postmodern performance as a mode of resistance to the 'status quo' (p. 276). Cher's career embodies the debates that postmodernism, and more particularly postfeminism, is known to bring about. As Rosi Braidotti (1992) puts it, the postmodern subject is one in process (p. 183). In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), she describes how 'nomadic subjects' "(...) are capable of freeing the activity of thinking from the hold of phallogocentric dogmatism, returning thought to its freedom, its liveliness, its beauty!" (p. 8). She asserts, citing Donna Haraway (1992) in 'Ecce Homo, ain't (ar'n't) I a woman, and inappropriate/d others: The human in a post-humanist landscape' that we need feminist figures of

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<sup>121</sup> In *Silkwood*, she portrays the character of a working-class lesbian.

<sup>122</sup> See Ana Gabriela Machado's use of this concept in her article "Angela Carter's disquieting poetics: an ec-centricity excentrically assumed", *Daughters of Restlessness: Women's Literature at the End of the Millennium*, eds. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, Gerhild Reisner and Hanna Wallinger, Universitätsverlag, C. Winter Verlag, Heidelberg, 1998 (pp. 81-90).



humanity who “(..) resist literal figuration and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new terms of historical possibility” (p. 86). Cannot one say that Cher is a postmodern, postfeminist, ‘in process’, indeed much ahead of her time?

Cher’s career started during the second-wave feminism and her performance has allowed her to remain active up until the present day, providing us with a vast body of work that is paradoxically limited (since one is talking about a single case study), and contextualized and was, therefore, a viable and natural option. Cher’s success, unlike other artists, is not limited to one field of entertainment, which is ‘intersemiotically’ appealing: she has been honored with numerous worldwide awards and accolades for her success in music, television, fashion and film, which makes her a rather unique case in the entertainment industry. Just to give a few examples, she has won an Academy Award, a Grammy Award, an Emmy Award, three Golden Globe Awards, the Best Actress Award at the Cannes Film Festival, and the Icon Award at the Billboard Music Awards, making her one of few artists to have received those many top honors. Cher is also the only artist to date to have achieved a number-one single on a Billboard chart in each of the past six decades.

In 2001, when she was awarded the Artist’s Achievement Award, Steven Tyler introduced her by saying:

Tonight’s artist’s Achievement Award honoree has (...) turned on audiences for four decades so far and is one of the rare artists who has (...) number one singles, a Golden Globe, a Grammy, and (...) an Oscar. Mastering nearly every musical style (...) she is the definition of longevity but what it takes a multi-faceted artist is all about that voice (...). When *Believe* went to number one in 1999, Cher earned yet another amazing achievement: she became the most mature female artist ever to hit the top spot (...). I am honored to present the Artist’s Achievement Award to Cher (aerobettyfr, 2007, n/p)<sup>123</sup>.

Adding to such accomplishment, she also works as a producer and has been honored for her activism on behalf of various social and civic causes. For instance, on April 11, 2015, the fifth annual inspiration Gala São Paulo in Brazil, honored Cher with the amfAR (American Foundation of AIDS Research) Award of Inspiration. Speaking of her willingness and ability to use her fame for the greater good, the amfAR

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<sup>123</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLyHvHhc-Ac>.

CEO, Kevin Frost, described her as one of the great champions in the fight against AIDS. Moreover, in 2016 Cher, partnering with water company Icelandic Glacial, sent 181,440 bottles of water to low income housing areas in Flint, Michigan, after the population of the city became exposed to lead poisoning and other contaminants flowing in tap water after the city switched the water source to save money.

In this thesis, particularly throughout chapters 2, 3, and 4, we discussed in detail the main features of Cher's work and personality which give ground to the cult she is the recipient of. When looking at those issues, one is bound to rethink questions of identity, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and political progressiveness.

Another example of her role as political activist and engaged citizen in what concerns gay rights is addressed by Benjamin Svetkey during his 1999 interview to Cher for magazine *Entertainment Weekly*. During the above-mentioned interview, he commented, "You're very popular apparently in gay circles. And, I guess (...) I don't know if there's a camp element to it or not", to which she replied:

I think that my gay following is really respectful and if it verges into being camp, camp is a very specifically gay thing and that doesn't bother me at all, because I know that my gay followers really care about me, really love me, have loved me through thick and thin because that's the way gay men are. They understand not being part of the whole (Mahita Gajanan, 2016, n/p)<sup>124</sup>.

Cher is implicitly saying that she has always felt and lived her 'ex-centricity' (Macedo, 1998), her being an outsider to the mainstream culture, and that is the reason why the gay community accepts and praises her.

Cher is a longtime advocate of LGBT rights, due to events that happened early in her career, as well as her experience as a mother of a transgender child. Sean Michaels, in his article for *The Guardian* entitled *Cher: I won't play Winter Olympics due to Russia's anti-gay laws*, refers how she, in an interview given to the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* said, "People hated Sonny and I (...) because we looked and acted so different (...) people would call him 'fag' (...) only because we were dressing different" (Michaels, 2013, n/p)<sup>125</sup>. When invited to participate in the opening ceremony of the 2014 Winter Sochi Olympic games (which took place on 7 February) she decided to refuse the invitation.

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<sup>124</sup> <https://ew.com/article/2016/05/10/cher-blank-on-blank/>.

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/sep/16/cher-winter-olympics-russia-gay-rights>.

On the following month, more precisely, on March 8 2014, The Sunday Mirror published an article by Defence and Security Editor, Chris Hughes entitled *Defiant Ukraine Soldiers Play Cher's Songs to Drown out Russian Propaganda*, referring to the Russian military intervention that started to take place in Ukraine earlier that year. Russia considers that the sovereignty of Ukraine, an independent country since 1991, cannot be larger than that of the Warsaw Pact since Russian leaders perceive the possible integration of Ukraine into NATO as a jeopardy to Russia's national security. Hughes had gone inside the besieged special forces army base in Feodosya, where Ukrainians told him, "We are never going to surrender" (Hughes, 2014, n/p)<sup>126</sup> and, to his surprise, started playing Cher's 1965 hit *All I Really Want to Do*<sup>127</sup>. In the lyrics the narrator talks about the fact that he/she simply wants to be friends with the person being addressed and not meaning to compete or put her/him down in anyway. The Ukrainians probably meant to convey to the Russians that they were looking at their country as an enemy instead of a friend, making them feel ashamed of themselves.

Why did they choose Cher's cover instead of Bob Dylan's original version? Such a choice was probably linked to the fact that Cher had refused to comply with Russia's policies imposed on the LGBT community. Significantly, later that year (on May 21<sup>st</sup>), the Westboro Baptist Church threatened to picket Cher's Kansas concert over gay issues.

Interestingly enough, the cover of her 1965 single displays the statue of liberty in what we understand to be a provocative mode to the ruling culture.



Figure 4.3: Cover of Cher's single

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<sup>126</sup> <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/defiant-ukraine-soldiers-play-cher-3221563>.

<sup>127</sup> See appendix for lyrics.

Indeed, using music as a psychological warfare can be very damaging to any opposing side. It can lower their moral and boost that of those who play it<sup>128</sup>. There are numerous cases of armies, governments and police forces throughout history which used music as a weapon in order to gain a psychological edge over the enemy. The Ukrainians chose a popular icon who is known to represent and fight for the rights of minorities, establishing a parallel between their position in relation to Russian and Cher's personal life as a minority herself who has, from an early age decided to pursue her goals regardless of the barriers she systematically had to overcome, namely those presented by the Hollywood system.

In his essay *Cher on the Cover of Love Magazine: Queen of Chiffon and Sequins is the Ultimate Fashion Icon*, Alexander Fury (2015) makes the following provocative claim, "The only image of Cher that Cher is willing to share is absolute perfection. Camp has nothing to do with nature – nothing from nature is camp. There's nothing natural about Cher. That's a compliment. Albeit, a camp one."<sup>129</sup>, reaffirming what we pointed out in chapter 1 pertaining to the aesthetics of 'drag camp' and to famous feminist camp performances that demystify the concept of 'originality' and 'authenticity'.



Figure 44: Cher in one of her trademark feather headpieces on the 'Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour' (1973)

In 2019, as part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art spring exhibit entitled *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, which was highly influenced by Susan Sontag's 1964 essay *Notes on "Camp"*, some of Cher's iconic embellished costumes designed by her long-time collaborator Bob Mackie, were on display. Furthermore, stars such as Emily Ratajkowski chose to wear replicas of Cher's costumes. Ahead of the Meta Gala, she

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<sup>128</sup> For instance, in 1991 the Americans troops played *Ride of the Valkyries* on loud speakers while flying into Vietnam and *Never Gonna Give You Up* by Rick Astley while hunting Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega at the Vatican embassy.

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/cher-on-the-cover-of-love-magazine-queen-of-chiffon-and-sequins-is-the-ultimate-fashion-icon-10411943.html>.

took to social media and shared a set of images showing Cher in the 1970s at the Santa Monica Rock Awards. Her headdress also harps back to one worn by Cher during the 1979 TV show *Cher ... and Other Fantasies*. Meanwhile, Jennifer Lopez dressed in a sparkly silver Versace gown and wearing a headdress very similar to one wore by Cher in the 1970s. Back in 2015, also paying tribute to Cher, Kim Kardashian wore a Roberto Cavalli's gown to the Met Ball. On May 4 of that year she took to Instagram to explain that she had been inspired by the costume Cher wore at the 1974 Met Gala.



Figure 45: Emily Ratajkowski at the 2019 Met Gala and Cher in photos from the 1970s



Figure 46: Cher in the 1970s and Jennifer Lopez at the 2019 Met Gala



Figure 47: Kim Kardashian at the 2015 Met Ball and Cher with Bob Mackie at the 1974 Met Gala

Visual pleasure and power are intimately connected and the status of spectacle is not necessarily one of weakness since visibility helps secure power. As Kathleen Rowe (1995) claims, "In a postmodern culture of the image and the simulacra, power also lies in possessions and control of the visible" (p. 12)

and thus the 'unruly woman' "can be seen as prototype of woman as subject" (p. 31). Such woman can make use of the "female grotesque" (Mary Russo, 1995) that breaks with the ideology of the bourgeois individual and even cross-dress as a means of effecting gender inversion. The 'unruly woman' can also have a sharp tongue and an excessive speech, which can be linked to the production of cultural texts that disseminate threatening ideologies in the eyes of a patriarchal culture. In this context, it is of relevance to pay close attention to the role of particularly 'unruly' stars in cultural history since their images tend to play on ideological contradictions of their times and, interestingly enough help larger communities to resolve, or at least help minimize them. Such is the case of divas, whose typically tempestuous private lives make them build highly emotional relationships with particular audiences.

In a scene in Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), film stars are attending a gala night in Hollywood and Cher is introduced, "We will leave it to Cher to wear fire engine red when the impossible to come by invitations call for 'black and white only, please'". Altman presents Cher as a 'rule breaker', one of the things she is best known for and has gained her the alternative campaigner status she is recognized for. The fact that Cher is considered by some 'a weirdo', yet is able to penetrate barriers and be accepted, makes her fans believe in a better future for themselves.

Nevertheless, plenty of cruelty and sarcasm is still directed against these 'unruly stardom', particularly when we are talking about the transgressive older woman, which is the case of Cher. Tabloids, for instance, often present her as a grotesque clown. Such controversial media discourse is what makes the subject open to discussion and reminds us that the topic is worth reflecting upon in the global and globalized context of high and popular culture.

We will just present a few more examples of Cher's 'aura' and the impact she continues having on her fans and peers from the culture industry. On May 11 2016 Carrie Brownstein won the Moth Award<sup>130</sup>. Her acceptance speech delivers the message that the cult of a celebrity can either work as a trap or provide a sense of possibility and hope to the fans. Talking about her own experience when she was a teenager, she 'storytells' the times when she had an obsession with the soap opera *Days of Our Lives* and its actors and talks about the day Cher "cured" her of that obsession. She recollects the taping of a local talk show that had dedicated an entire week to that soap opera and the fact that, in a drawing, she won "an off-the-shoulder lavender, lace crop top that Cher had worn in one of her exercise videos" (Madeline Raynor, 2016). When cameras turned to her, she felt extremely embarrassed and covered her face with both her hands because from then on, "Cher's shirt seemed like the real prize." She "broke

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<sup>130</sup> The Moth is a group based in New York City dedicated to the art and craft of storytelling. Annually, it hosts a fundraising event called the Moth Ball in which it presents the Moth Award.

up” with *Days of Our Lives* because she had found out something “more exotic, more intriguing, more glamorous”. From then on, she no longer associated the soap opera with escape but with entrapment and humiliation<sup>131</sup>.

Previously, on October 10, 2013 John Kenneth Muir, celebrating The X-Files 20th Anniversary comments on Chris Carter’s use of Cher’s image in the episode *The Postmodern Prometheus* by posting on his blog entitled *John Kenneth Muir’s Reflections on Cult Movies and Classic TV*.

Cher represents or symbolizes in her blanket acceptance of others a kind of safe harbor or sanctuary for those society wrongly terms monsters. She is a diva and a pop-icon, but Cher is actually the Madonna or Mary of *The Post-Modern Prometheus* too: a kindly, semi-divine mother figure whose acceptance is crucial to self-esteem and the necessary self-transformation from monster to man (Muir, 2013, n/p)<sup>132</sup>.

And speaking about the importance of popular culture he adds:

And yes, this element of the episode absolutely ties into the commentary on TV talk shows and fame. These days we don’t seek personal validation from priests, or leaders, after all (...) but from celebrities (...) You know you’ve made it to the big time when Cher brings you out of the audience to share the stage with her (Muir, 2013, n/p)<sup>133</sup>.

To conclude these final remarks, one should agree that, undoubtedly, Cher has been in the spotlight for over fifty years and has become a phenomenon among the icons of popular culture. In 1975, after performing the song *Bennie and the Jets* with Cher on *The Cher Show*, Elton John tells her, “You are the sort of person that in fifty years-time will still be growing strong” (López, 2007)<sup>134</sup>. Her persona is

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<sup>131</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCJYxNMmZWY>.

<sup>132</sup> [http://reflectionsonfilmmandtelevision.blogspot.pt/2013/10/the-x-files20th-anniversary-blogging\\_10.html](http://reflectionsonfilmmandtelevision.blogspot.pt/2013/10/the-x-files20th-anniversary-blogging_10.html).

<sup>133</sup> [http://reflectionsonfilmmandtelevision.blogspot.pt/2013/10/the-x-files20th-anniversary-blogging\\_10.html](http://reflectionsonfilmmandtelevision.blogspot.pt/2013/10/the-x-files20th-anniversary-blogging_10.html).

<sup>134</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3Yvy7\\_rHA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3Yvy7_rHA).

associated with endurance, longevity, almost immortality. It has been said, with wit and irony, that after a nuclear holocaust, the only two things that will be left will be cockroaches and Cher.

Poet, photographer, and playwright Margaret McCarthy has written a poem entitled *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Cher*<sup>135</sup>, a meditation on the human drive to invent and re-invent one's self while aging, as she thinks of the numerous metamorphoses Cher has undergone throughout her career. The poem was published in her book of poems *Notebooks from Mystery School* (2015), which, according to the author, is, among other topics, precisely about “ (...) Aging (...) Finding our core creative spirit (...) Rebirth and illumination (...)”<sup>136</sup> and is, in fact, an interplay of photographs and poetry. McCarthy was inspired in Wallace Steven's poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1917), which was published in *Harmonium*, his 1923 collection. In this poem, Steven seems to suggest that reality is a matter of perspective since people can look at and perceive the world in their own way<sup>137</sup>, which is precisely Cher's empowering message that spreads throughout the world of popular culture and beyond.

In an interview for The Early Show on CBS (2003), the interviewer commented, “You don't reject failure, you think failure. To which she replied:

I think it [failure] is highly underrated (...) make a success out of it. Learn something (...) When you are happy and everything is going great you don't sit down and go, why is this happening? When you're failing you sit down and take some sort of inventory (...)”<sup>138</sup>

Further in the interview, she was asked, “Will there ever be another you?”, to which she replied:

No, because (...) if you can make an indelible mark, then you are that one thing. I was inspired by so many people, there will be people who are inspired by me and then they will be their own identity that has nothing to do with anyone else.

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<sup>135</sup> See poem in Appendix III.

<sup>136</sup> <http://margaretmccarthy.net/notebooks/aboutthebook/>.

<sup>137</sup> See poem in Appendix III.

<sup>138</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGekF4Y\\_IdY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGekF4Y_IdY).



Such a remark not only explains the reason why she feels comfortable with the fact that so many people impersonate her, but can also be linked with Negra's remark on Carter's appropriation of her image in the X-Files. Cher can actually be looked at as a metaphor for the possibility every human has of self-transformation. Furthermore, by saying this, she is fully embracing the postmodern premise that appropriation and adaptation is a natural process and, as such, not reproachable. She acknowledges the fact that she was influenced by many people and allows her followers to do the same because as Duffett (2017) rightly claims, "The most resonant myths are the ones that are characteristically unfinalized (open in content) and ongoing (open in authorship)" (p. 211). Such seems to be the case with Cher, an 'unfinalized' and 'open' popular icon.

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## Appendices

### I- Songs (by Cher) Referred in the Thesis

#### 1. Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves

I was born in the wagon of a travelin' show  
My mama used to dance for the money they'd throw  
Papa would do whatever he could  
Preach a little gospel  
Sell a couple bottles of doctor good

[Chorus:]

Gypsies, tramps and thieves  
We'd hear it from the people of the town  
They'd call us gypsies, tramps and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down

Picked up a boy just south of Mobile  
Gave him a ride, filled him with a hot meal  
I was sixteen, he was twenty-one  
Rode with us to Memphis  
And papa would've shot him if he knew what he'd done

[Chorus:]

Gypsies, tramps and thieves  
We'd hear it from the people of the town  
They'd call us gypsies, tramps and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down



Never had schoolin' but he taught me well  
With his smooth southern style  
Three months later, I'm a gal in trouble  
And I haven't seen him for a while, oh  
I haven't seen him for a while, oh

She was born in the wagon of a travelin' show  
Her mama had to dance for the money they'd throw  
Grandpa'd do whatever he could  
Preach a little gospel  
Sell a couple bottles of doctor good

[Chorus:]

Gypsies, tramps and thieves  
We'd hear it from the people of the town  
They'd call us gypsies, tramps and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down

Songwriters: Bob Stone, *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves* lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group.

## 2. Half-Breed

My father married a pure Cherokee  
My mother's people were ashamed of me  
The Indians said I was white by law  
The white man always called me  
"Indian Squaw"

[Chorus]

Half-breed, that's all I ever heard  
Half-breed, how I learned to hate the word  
Half-breed, she's no good they warned

Both sides were against me  
Since the day I was born

We never settled, went from town to town  
When you're not welcome you don't hang around  
The other children always laughed at me  
"Give her a feather, she's a Cherokee"

[Chorus]

We weren't accepted and I felt ashamed  
Nineteen I left them, tell me who's to blame  
My life since then has been from man to man  
But I can't run away from what I am

[Chorus]

Songwriters: Al Capps / Mary Dean, *Half-Breed* lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, North Music Group.

### 3. Hell on Wheels

Well I'm hell on wheels I'm a roll on mama  
I can slide down places that you never knew  
Try me on for size at the roll-a-rama  
If you tie my laces and I'll follow you  
Follow you follow you

[Chorus]

See something I like, gonna go for it  
See something I want, I'm gonna go after it  
See something I like, gonna go for it  
See something I want  
Let's roll hell on wheels let's roll

Come on and roll with me  
I roll at a quarter till three yeah  
And let's rock hell on wheels let's rock  
Come on and rock it with me  
I'll make you feel so free yeah, Look out

Well I'm hell on wheels say I'm roller crazy  
I won't go too fast no I won't go too far  
We'll be high on wheel if the room gets hazy  
Just look out for me I'm your guiding star  
guiding star, guiding star

See something you like, better go for it  
See something you want, better get down on it  
See something you like, better go for it  
See something you want

Let's roll hell on wheels let's roll  
Come on and roll with me  
I roll at a quarter till three yeah  
And let's rock hell on wheels let's rock  
Come on and rock it with me  
I'll make you feel so free yeah, look out

If you see something you like, you better go for it  
If you see something you want, you better get down on it  
If I see something I like, I'm gonna go for it  
If I see something I want  
You know I'm gonna get down on it

Well I'm hell on wheels I'm a roll on mama  
I can slide down places that you never knew

Try me on for size at the roll-a-rama  
If you tie my laces and I'll follow you  
Follow you follow you

[Chorus]

Songwriters: Bog Esty / Michelle Aller, *Hell on Wheels* lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc..

#### 4. A Different Kind of Love Song

What if the world was crazy and I was sane  
Would it be so strange  
I can't believe that I am alone in saying  
The things I'm saying  
I am a part of you  
These are universal truths  
We're all part of the light that flows through everything  
This is a different kind of love song  
Dedicated to everyone  
Different kind of love song-oh, oh  
What if the world calmed down and we could all breath  
Together easily  
Connecting the sky and the ground with you and me  
And everything in between  
I am part of you  
We have living proof  
There is some kind of light that flows through everything  
This is a different kind of love song  
Dedicated to everyone  
Different kind of love song-oh, oh  
This is a different kind of love song  
A higher plane we can flow on  
Different kind of love song-oh, oh

5. Walking in Memphis

(Marc Cohn's version)

Put on my blue suede shoes  
And I boarded the plane  
Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues  
In the middle of the pouring rain  
W.C. Handy, won't you look down over me  
Yeah, I got a first-class ticket  
But I'm as blue as a boy can be  
Then I'm walking in Memphis  
Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis  
But do I really feel the way I feel?  
Saw the ghost of Elvis  
On Union Avenue  
Followed him up to the gates of Graceland  
Then I watched him walk right through  
Now security they did not see him  
They just hovered 'round his tomb  
But there's a pretty little thing  
Waiting for the King  
Down in the Jungle Room  
When I was walking in Memphis  
I was walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis  
But do I really feel the way I feel?  
They've got catfish on the table  
They've got gospel in the air  
And Reverend Green be glad to see you

When you haven't got a prayer  
But, boy, you've got a prayer in Memphis  
Now Muriel plays piano  
Every Friday at the Hollywood  
And they brought me down to see her  
And they asked me if I would  
Do a little number  
And I sang with all my might  
She said  
"Tell me are you a Christian child?"  
And I said "Ma'am, I am tonight"  
Walking in Memphis  
(Walking in Memphis)  
Was walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis  
(Walking in Memphis)  
But do I really feel the way I feel?  
Walking in Memphis  
(Walking in Memphis)  
I was walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis  
(Walking in Memphis)  
But do I really feel the way I feel?  
Put on my blue suede shoes  
And I boarded the plane  
Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues  
In the middle of the pouring rain  
Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues  
In the middle of the pouring rain

Songwriters: Marc Cohn, *Walking in Memphis* lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

## 6. Walking in Memphis

(Cher's cover)

Put on my blue suede shoes  
And I boarded the plane  
Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues  
In the middle of the pouring rain  
W. C. Handy  
Won't you look down over me  
Yeah I got a first class ticket  
But I'm as blue as a girl can be  
Then I'm walking in Memphis  
I was Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis But do I really feel the way I feel  
Saw the ghost of Elvis On Union Avenue  
Followed him up to the gates of Graceland  
Then I watched him walk right through  
Now security they did not see him  
They just hovered around his tomb  
But there's a pretty little thing Waiting for the King  
Down in the Jungle Room  
Then I'm walking in Memphis  
I was Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis But do I really feel the way I feel  
They've got catfish on the table  
They've got gospel in the air  
And Reverend Green be glad to see you  
When you haven't got a prayer boy you're got a prayer in Memphis  
Now Gabriel plays piano Every Friday at the Hollywood  
And they brought me down to see him  
And they asked me if I would,  
Do a little number

And I sang with all my might, he said,  
Tell me are you a Christian child?  
And I said That I am tonight  
Then I'm walking in Memphis  
I was Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale  
Walking in Memphis But do I really feel the way I feel

Songwriters: Marc Cohn, *Walking in Memphis* lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

### 7. All I Really Want to Do

Now I ain't lookin' to compete with you  
Beat on, cheat on, mistreat you  
Simplify you, classify you  
Deny, defy, mystify you  
All I really want to do  
Is baby, be friends with you  
Baby, be friends with you  
Now I ain't lookin' to fight with you  
Frighten you or uptighten you  
Drag you down or drain you down  
Chain you down or bring you down  
All I really want to do  
Is baby, be friends with you  
Baby, be friends with you  
I ain't lookin' to block you up  
Dock or rock or lock you up  
Analyze you, categorize you  
Finalize or advertise you  
All I really want to do, yeah  
Is baby, be friends with you  
Baby, be friends with you



I don't want to straight-face you  
Race or chase or track or trace you  
Or disgrace you or displace you  
Or define you or confine you  
All I really want to do, yeah  
Is baby, be friends with you  
Baby, be friends with you  
Now I don't want to meet your kin  
Make you spin or do you in  
Or select you or dissect you  
Or inspect you or reject you  
All I really want to do  
Is baby, be friends with you  
Baby, be friends with you

Songwriters: Bob Dylan, *All I Really Want To Do* lyrics © Special Rider Music.

## 8. The Power

A king is crying from his throne  
He had a queen but now she's gone  
What is this magic that we seek?  
The mighty strong to mighty weak

Every good girl hears it  
Every bad boy fears it  
No matter what I see  
I believe, I believe

The power touches me  
The power sets us free  
The power holds my hand  
The power drives me crazy

A flower grows, an old man dies  
And through it all we still survive  
A poor man screams, but no one hears  
Ain't nothing changed much through the years

Every bad day needs it  
Every good day breeds it  
No matter how it feels  
When it's real you know it's real  
It's stronger than anybody  
Any man has ever made

The power touches me  
The power helps us see  
The power holds my hand, yeah  
The power drives me crazy

It won't take long to understand  
Just how lucky I am

Open up your eyes and see  
It won't take long to understand  
Just how lucky I am

Every good boy needs it  
Every bad girl breeds it  
No matter how I feel  
Oh, when it's real you know it's real  
It's stronger than anybody  
Any man has ever made

The power holds my hand, yeah  
Drives me crazy  
The power sets us free, yeah  
The power holds my hand, yeah  
The power drives me crazy

And I believe  
And you believe  
And we believe  
Everybody's gonna be alright  
Alright in just my mind

*Power [repeat until fade]*

Songwriters: Judson Timothy Spence, Tommy L. Sims, *The Power* © Universal Music Corp.

#### 9. Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down) – 1966 version

I was five and he was six  
We rode on horses made of sticks  
He wore black and I wore white  
He would always win the fight  
Bang bang, he shot me down  
Bang bang, I hit the ground  
Bang bang, that awful sound  
Bang bang, my baby shot me down  
Seasons came and changed the time  
And I grew up, I called him mine  
He would always laugh and say  
"Remember when we used to play?"  
Bang bang, I shot you down  
Bang bang, you hit the ground

Bang bang, that awful sound  
Bang bang, I used to shoot you down  
Music played and people sang  
Just for me the church bells rang  
Now he's gone I don't know why  
Until this days sometimes I cry  
He didn't even say goodbye  
He didn't take the time to lie  
Bang bang, he shot me down  
Bang bang, I hit the ground  
Bang bang, that awful sound  
Bang bang, my baby shot me down

Songwriters: Sonny Bono, *Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)* lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc

10. Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down) – 1987 version produced by Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora, and Desmond Child.

I was five and you were six  
We rode on horses made of sticks  
I wore black and you wore white  
You would always win the fight  
Bang bang, you shot me down  
Bang bang, I hit the ground  
Bang bang, that awful sound  
Bang bang, my baby shot me down  
Seasons came and changed the time  
And I grew up, I called you mine  
You would always laugh and say  
"Remember when we used to play?"  
Bang bang, and you shot me down  
Bang bang, and I hit the ground

Bang bang, that awful sound  
My baby shoot me down  
Music played and people sang  
Just for me the church bells rang  
After echoes from a gun,  
We both thought  
That we'd be one  
Now you are gone I don't know why  
Sometimes I cry  
You didn't say goodbye  
You didn't take the time to lie  
Bang bang, you shot me down  
And I hit the ground  
That awful sound  
My baby shot me down  
You shot me right between the eyes  
You meant to paralyze  
Bang, bang, bang,  
Oh, baby I am laying on the ground  
But I am never going down,  
Bang, bang,  
Oh, baby come on back to me,  
You'll see how sweet is gonna be  
Bang, bang  
Oh, baby I am laying on the ground,  
But I am never going down  
Oh, baby come on back to me  
You will see how sweet is gonna be.

11. Just Like Jesse James

You're struttin' into town like you're slingin' a gun  
Just a small town dude with a big city attitude  
Honey are you lookin' for some trouble tonight  
Well alright  
You think you're so bad, drive the women folk wild  
Shoot 'em all down with the flash of your pearly smile  
Honey but you met your match tonight  
Oh, that's right  
You think you'll knock me off my feet  
'Til I'm flat on the floor  
'Til my heart is cryin' Indian and I'm begin' for more  
So come on baby  
Come on baby  
Come on baby show me what that loaded gun is for  
If you can give it  
I can take it  
'Cause if this heart is gonna break it's gonna take a lot to break it  
I know tonight  
Somebody's gonna win the fight  
So if you're so tough  
Come on and prove it  
Your heart is down for the count and you know you're gonna lose it  
Tonight you're gonna go down in flames  
Just like Jesse James  
You're an outlaw lover and I'm after your hide  
Well you ain't so strong, won't be long 'til your hands are tied  
Tonight I'm gonna take you in  
Dead or Alive  
That's right

You break the laws of love in the name of desire  
Take ten steps back  
'Cause I'm ready baby  
Aim and fire  
Baby there's nowhere you gonna run tonight  
Ooh That's right  
Well you've had your way with love but it's the end of the day  
Now a team of wild horses couldn't drag your heart away  
So come on baby  
Come on baby  
Come on baby you know there ain't nothing left to say  
If you can give it  
I can take it  
'Cause if this heart is gonna break it's gonna take a lot to break it  
I know tonight  
Somebody's gonna win the fight  
So if you're so tough  
Come on and prove it  
Your heart is down for the count and you know you're gonna lose it  
Tonight you're gonna go down in flames  
Just like Jesse James  
You think you'll knock me off my feet  
'til I'm flat on the floor  
'Til my heart is cryin' Indian and I'm begin' for more  
So come on baby  
Come on baby  
Come on baby  
Come on  
If you can give it  
I can take it  
'Cause if this heart is gonna break it's gonna take a lot to break it

I know tonight  
Somebody's gonna win the fight  
So if you're so tough  
Come on and prove it  
Your heart is down for the count and you know you're gonna lose it  
Tonight you're gonna go down in flames  
Just like Jesse James  
Tonight you're gonna go down in flames  
Just like Jesse James  
Tonight you're gonna go down in flames  
Just like Jesse James  
I'm gonna shoot ya down Jesse James

Songwriters: Desmond Child/Diane Eve Warren, Just Like Jesse James lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, BMG Rights Management

## 12. Song for the Lonely

When you're standing on the edge of nowhere  
There's only one way up so your heart's got to go there  
Through the darkest night  
See the light shine bright  
When heroes fall in love or war they live forever  
This is a song for the lonely  
Can you hear me tonight  
For the broken hearted, battle scared, I'll be by your side  
This is a song for the lonely when your dreams won't come true  
Can you hear this prayer  
'Coz someone's there for you  
Well love don't need a reason  
She can pick you up or leave you bleeding  
I've seen a strong man cry  
I know the reason why



We all forgive we all forget  
We just keep believing  
This is a song for the lonely  
Can you hear me tonight  
For the broken hearted, battle scarred, I'll be by your side  
This is a song for the lonely when your dreams won't come true  
When you hear this prayer  
Know that someone's there for you  
So let it find you  
Where ever you may go  
I'm right beside you  
Don't have to look no more  
You don't have to look no more, oh no  
This is a song, a song for the lonely  
And that's not you only  
Through the dark night  
Gonna see the light  
Love don't need a reason just to leave you bleeding  
But you know inside it's gonna be alright  
It's gonna be alright it's gonna be alright

Songwriters: Mark Taylor / Paul Michael Barry / Steve Torch, *Song for the Lonely* lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, BMG Rights Management.

### 13. Strong Enough

I don't need your sympathy  
There's nothing you can say or do for me  
And I don't want a miracle  
You'll never change for no one  
And I hear your reasons why  
Where did you sleep last night?  
And was she worth it  
Was she worth it?

'Cause I'm strong enough  
To live without you  
Strong enough  
And I quit crying  
Long enough  
Now I'm strong enough  
To know  
You gotta go  
There's no more to say  
So save your breath and  
Walk away  
No matter what I hear you say  
I'm strong enough  
To know  
You gotta go  
So you feel misunderstood  
Baby, have I got news for you  
On being used, I could write the book  
But you don't wanna hear about it  
'Cause I've been losing sleep  
And you've been goin' cheap  
And she ain't worth half of me it's true  
Now I'm telling you  
That I'm strong enough  
To live without you  
Strong enough  
And I quit crying  
Long enough  
Now I'm strong enough  
To know  
You gotta go

Come hell or waters high  
You'll never see me cry  
This is our last goodbye, it's true  
I'm telling you  
Now I'm strong enough  
To live without you  
Strong enough  
And I quit crying  
Long enough  
Now I'm strong enough  
To know  
You gotta go  
There's no more to say  
So save your breath and  
Walk away  
No matter what I hear you say  
I'm strong enough to know  
You gotta go  
Now I'm strong enough  
To live without you  
Strong enough  
And I quit crying  
Long enough  
Now I'm strong enough  
To know  
You gotta go  
(There's no more to say)  
(So save your breath and)  
(Walk away)  
(No matter what I hear you say)  
(I'm strong enough to know)

14. Believe

No matter how hard I try  
You keep pushing me aside  
And I can't break through  
There's no talking to you  
It's so sad that you're leaving  
It takes time to believe it  
But after all is said and done  
You're gonna be the lonely one  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough  
What am I supposed to do  
Sit around and wait for you  
Well I can't do that  
And there's no turning back  
I need time to move on  
I need a love to feel strong  
Cause I've got time to think it through  
And maybe I'm too good for you  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough

Well I know that I'll get through this  
'Cause I know that I am strong  
I don't need you anymore  
I don't need you anymore  
I don't need you anymore  
No I don't need you anymore  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough  
Do you believe in life after love  
I can feel something inside me say  
I really don't think you're strong enough

Songwriters: Paul Barry / Steve Torch / Brian Thomas Higgins / Matthew Michael Gray / Stuart McLennan / Timothy Powell / Cher, *Believe* lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group, BMG Rights Management

## II - Narrative and Snapshots of the Latest Short-film by Cher (*Bang*- 2020) Emphasizing 'Unruly Women on the Road'



'Wednesday, five forty five sharp. Like every Wednesday after eating mom's cherry pie, I head towards the streets where they sell ladies fashion. Not that I care much about beads or rhinestones, but to watch them pass by. Sweet vanilla hair mixed with perfume of cheap gasoline and the sound of mean metal. Angels of Santee street, that's what I call them. Good ladies never show their curves my mother says, or do the things that are made for men. Well, these ladies must be real bad.

They are not like rain, soft and gentle, they're a thunderstorm. Prefer their liquor strong and their tea very sweet, girls who don't like pink, girls who dare to fight. They say Cheryl robbed a bank once. Changed her name and hair, that's how she ended up here. They say she had a family. She shakes her hair lightly, as if preparing for a western duel, her weapon always on point. Bang, bang. In my dream last night, I was riding my bike through the streets like every other day. All places seemed familiar, but I kept getting lost. And every corner, there they were, looking at me to the sound of gunshots. Pointing me left and right, their heels looked sharp like blades, and they were riding horses instead of their usual bikes. The more I tried to find my way, the more I got lost. Bang, bang. I woke up to the sound of the dog. I am still alive.'

III – Poem that Mentions Cher by Margaret McCarthy and Poem that Inspired it by Wallace Stevens

1. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Cher* by Margaret McCarthy (2015)

I

Why can't she just accept  
it  
the gravity  
of the situation, the downward tug then spiral?

II

The raven black hair easy  
to transform.  
The smooth, hard sheen  
of protection, her craft

III

A miracle!  
But now we know the nature of the cell is immortal  
She knew this first;  
her raven heart told her.

IV

60 years can be called  
miss. Is this  
what 60 looks like?

V

I do not know which to prefer, creation or transformation; what I make in this world,  
or the re-making of myself.

VI

Upkeep's ceaseless effort, Sisyphus  
rolling back over  
gray time,  
over and over

VII

The mirror's incisor lines, Imagination  
flies forward and back

VIII

I know the pressure  
of the rock bearing down, and I know that bird vision is involved in what I push.

IX

The dogs yowl  
at imperfection;  
the dogs yap  
at perfection's attempt.  
The sweet bird flies  
above the noise of beasts.

X

Must the crone die?  
Is the perpetual maiden the proper keeper of spirit's wisdom?

XI



The shadow of each equinox cast fear,  
she thought the nature of cycles impossible  
Is balance possible?

XII

Is it culture's rock or time's?  
The bird's eye sees time's river moving around rock and our desire  
to transcend  
rock and river.

XIII

The bird's shaman heart understands  
evening is going to cast its shadow all afternoon. Matter  
has been brought or bought  
to match spirit.  
In my raven heart I know  
she's right.

1. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* by Wallace Stevens (1971)

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow

An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.