

Edição v. 38
número 1 / 2019

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577
Niterói (RJ), 38 (1)
abr/2018-jul/2018

A Revista Contracampo é uma revista eletrônica do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação da Universidade Federal Fluminense e tem como objetivo contribuir para a reflexão crítica em torno do campo midiático, atuando como espaço de circulação da pesquisa e do pensamento acadêmico.

Urban simulacrum and Madonna: the post-modern environment of music videos

Simulacros urbanos e Madonna: a ambientação pós-moderna dos videoclipes

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Gusmão, Roney; Araújo, Sérgio. (2019). Urban simulacrum and Madonna: The post-modern environment of music videos. *Contracampo*, Niterói, 38(01).

Submitted on: February 15th, 2019 / Evaluation A: April 3th, 2019 / Evaluation B: April 5th, 2019 / Accepted on: April 9th, 2019

DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v38i1.28090>

Abstract

The language of music videos presents characteristics associated to postmodernity, especially for densifying images and contributing to the deconstruction of symbolic hierarchies. Madonna's career in the 1980s and 1990s served as an archetype for understanding postmodern art mainly because her music videos imprint contemporary aesthetics on urban scenes, recruited as an ambience for her art. We are therefore interested in understanding the way in which her work cooperates in the construction of urban simulacra in the period, translating the sign construction of postmodernity.

Keywords

City; Music Video; Madonna; Postmodernity.

Resumo

A linguagem dos videoclipes apresenta características fortemente associadas à pós-modernidade, sobretudo por adensar jogos de imagem e contribuir para desconstrução de hierarquias simbólicas. A carreira de Madonna no transcurso dos anos 1980 e 1990 serve de arquétipo para entendimento da arte pós-moderna principalmente porque seus videoclipes imprimem a estética contemporânea em cenas urbanas, recrutadas como ambiência para sua arte. Interessa-nos, portanto, compreender a forma como sua obra coopera para a construção de simulacros urbanos no referido período, traduzindo a construção signífica da pós-modernidade.

Palavras-chave

Cidade. Videoclipe. Madonna. Pós-modernidade.

Introduction

Once you understand art as a projection of the values of a historical time, music videos can be interpreted as a direct reflection of the postmodern ethos. The ethics, aesthetics and narrative (or lack thereof) of the music videos translate contemporary social dynamics, especially since it reveals the combination of postmodern capital with the values of a society in full transformation. Therefore, we are interested here to analyze the diffusion of music videos in the post-1980, as well as the approach of social values and the relationship with urban life present in these cultural products.

First, before proceeding with the analysis, it is useful to remember that the American media production in the aforementioned decade was also marked by Reagan's neoliberal politics, whose rhetoric resorted to sentimental values as a strategy for the dissemination of neoliberal ideology. Reagan appealed to the history of the United States to justify the overvaluation of individualism as a condition for prosperity and personal well-being.

The essence of this discourse was the reduction of the state's role in the economy, as well as the cooling of social ties that represented limitations to bourgeois capital. Reagan, as a former Hollywood actor, had strong penetration in the cultural industry, recruiting various productions of the time as a strategy of ideological dissemination. Therefore, in addition to the neoliberal political scenario, the 1980s are also marked by the expansion of postmodern cultural influence in full force during the Cold War period.

In this context, strengthened by the emergence of MTV in 1981, music videos also emerged as a locus of contestation and / or dissemination of the political and economic structure of the time. The densification of images, the aesthetization of segregated groups or the deconstruction of hierarchies are some of the characteristics visible in music videos that are very much related to postmodernity. After all, narratives and aesthetic concepts broke with rigid forms of thought and suggested plural alternatives of identities. Individualism itself can be analyzed in this context on the other side, since in this context, contestations arose for the alterity of previously invisible groups, whose negotiation of signs was an important prerogative to impress on the body discourses of empowerment by the contestation of individuality.

Another very important element was what Jameson (1996) calls hyper-presentism, that is, for him the loss of hope in the past and the obscuration of utopias made postmodern subjects take refuge in a kind of perpetual present. It is this presentism that it becomes the focus of postmodern subjects, fixed in the transient aesthetic experience that dwells in the now, making hedonism a visceral search of contemporary men. In the hyper-presentism, severe values were discredited, which, coupled with the transitoriness of contemporary signs themselves, contributed to the legitimation of so many unconventional identities.

It is for reasons such as these that video clips exhibit refractions of this desire for sensory experience in postmodernity, making narcissism and hedonism conditions for solitary fulfillment in an individualistic society. Composed of short narratives, enhanced by multiple values, video clips translate this postmodern fixation into speed and enjoy transient aesthetic experiences. Thus, the generation of the 1980s was already entering a format of entertainment much faster, packed with ethical and aesthetic appeals of rapid obsolescence.

It is in this setting that artists such as Michael Jackson, Prince, Cyndi Lauper and David Bowie became references for the understanding of postmodern pop culture of the 1980s, since their music videos were gradually becoming more sophisticated and more relevant as filmic expressions of their albums. Similarly, Madonna also followed the evolution of music videos, which by the end of the 1980s had become much more exquisite, some of them directed by exponents of film production.

Of course, video clips presented messages that somehow are associated with the historical context and, as such, may present clues to understanding the cultural configuration of a time, both when they contest the conjuncture and when they aesthete the values of a society. Madonna's career perfectly

translates the US historical context of the 1980s, as well as express postmodern art inscribed in the language of music videos. As the first example let's see what she says at the opening of the VHS of her first tour "The Virgin Tour" (1985):

I went to New York, I had a dream. I wanted to be a big star, I didn't know anybody, I wanted to dance, I wanted to sing, I wanted to do all those things, I wanted to make people happy, I wanted to be famous, I wanted everybody to love me, I wanted to be a star. I worked really hard, and my dream came true.

This brief speech serves as an archetype for what we intend to address for many reasons. First, consider the number of times the pronoun "I" appears in her speech. Egocentrism is open to discourse, a fact that makes megalomaniac narcissism part of the glamorous condition of a postmodern celebrity, and this, of course, reveals many of the behavioral traits of a society that has a behavioral reference in them (Morin, 1989). Second, it is useful to note how much the American Dream of the Reagan era is acclaimed in the speech above transcribed, mainly because this speech engages in casting highly audacious dreams, making them democratically accessible to all who simply "work hard". This discourse defends fortune as a reward for those who work hard, ensuring success and fortune as rewards for individual struggle.

This neoliberal discourse on notoriety as an inevitable guarantee to all equalized to meritocratic rhetoric only deepens fetishization as one of capitalist values. From the neoliberal point of view, exclusion ceases to be a structural problem of the system to become a product of individual incompetence, which makes the subject solely responsible for its failure. Thus, the meritocratic idea has become so recurrent in the neoliberal context that to speak of "work really hard" is to speak of a condition for usufruct of the "American Dream", after all to work exhaustively without resorting to collective struggles is the most recurrent cliché in the Reagan speech.

The third point we draw from Madonna's speech is the preponderant role attributed to the city of New York. During the 1980s and 1990s the portrait of a successful and cosmopolitan urban youth became very apt for the dissemination of contemporary capitalist ideals. New York was the ambience most recruited by American cultural production to portray yuppies in the 1980s. Harvey (2005, p. 56) recalls that at that time "corporate well-being took the place of social well-being. The elite institutions of the city mobilized to sell the image of New York as a cultural and tourist center (inventing the famous 'I love New York' logo). Films and music videos began to appeal to the New York scene with promoters of the media spectacle, a fact that also contributed to the insistence on values such as freedom, democracy, inclusion, success and cosmopolitanism.

New York's urban space was not only approached as a concrete setting for anchoring mythic narratives, it became part of neoliberal mythology itself by the spectacularization of corporate image and postmodern cultural experimentation (Harvey, 2005). The hyper-reality of postmodern films and music videos is present in the dilution of models of life in urban space, adhering aesthetic concepts, values and signs to the buildings, squares and streets of the city-spectacle, which accommodates everything and everyone in a mythical urban dynamics. The city is portrayed fetishized simply because issues aestheticize its dynamics and omit (or soften) its perversity.

In this way, it is for the sake of understanding how cities are represented and simulated in the spectacle of music videos that this text is structured. To develop this analysis, we will use Madonna music videos produced in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on the portrayal of urban life and values diluted there. New York is a fundamental part of the mythical narratives around his career and so is also a significant part of his music videos, but what stands out most is how urban simulacra are built, especially for portraying the fetish of urban life. The city is approached by Madonna both from the hegemonic point of view, but also from the ghettos, after all, the eccentric is also a source of inspiration for his art.

Therefore, to speak of the way the city is approached in the music videos of Madonna is to

deal with this very ambiguity that marks the postmodernism, because it sometimes reports the urban dynamics in an aristocratic perspective, sometimes enters the suburbs and from there extracts cultural expressions once invisible. Deconstruction of cultural hierarchies is a hallmark of the city from Madonna's videographic point of view, and it is not by chance that this is also an element of postmodern art.

Urban simulations and postmodern thinking

There are many debates that point to the fact that the city contains signs that transcend the concrete surface, because the urban space can be interpreted as the empiricism of subjectivities. Through this idea, the city is here deciphered organically by the realization that it is in urban concreteness that representations, signs and travel memories become spatially superimposed. Consequently, we are interested not only in the materiality of the city, but also in the senses that have been emphasized in urban dynamics, whose decoding requires the articulation of space, time and discourses.

It is important to add that the diffusion of urban images in the postmodern culture operates through a discursive nexus, which consequently integrates the images that we elaborate on city life. When we think of New York, London or Rio de Janeiro, we invoke a series of discourses that participate in the imaginary construction of these spaces and, therefore, we assume the fact that we are permeable to the ideological insinuations that frame the meanings of these cities. For this reason, analyzing discourses about urban spaces is so important today because, in postmodern imagistic times, conceptual space has acquired status as relevant as concrete space itself. This finding, although it seems ambiguous, is confirmed at a time when the discursive image about the cities seems more real than urban materialism itself, to which Baudrillard defines hyper-reality. In his argumentation, this hyper-reality is a thickening of the games of images, which generates a

[...] unbridled production of real and referential, parallel and superior to the unbridled production of material: this is the simulation in the phase that interests us - a strategy of real, neo-real and hyper-real, which makes for the collapse of a strategy of deterrence (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 14).

The decoding of space by the image and, later, diffusion through the media instruments is the product of an arbitrary selection orchestrated by ideological attempts. So the lush urban silhouette in the film, the skylines displayed at the opening of the series or the ghettos that make up the music scene are carefully framed under lighting conditions that seduce the viewer and persuade the glamor and mysticism of urban life.

Through this simulacrum, the city is spectacularized and scenarios produce nebulous meanings that operate by the simulation of persuasive images (Ferrara, 2004). This rhetoric occurs because the performances merge with the urban scene, offering the hedonic usufruct of the flavors associated with the mythology of the city. Thus, the city is an occasion to satiate the senses of postmodern subjects, fixed in the solitary usufruct of the pleasures offered by the city dynamics.

In this way, Baudrillard's conception becomes even more coherent at a time when, for him, the distinction between the real world and the simulation is increasingly difficult. On this, he argues that the commitment to "improve" reality causes simulacrum to simulate the structure by distancing from the original reality, bringing the object closer to a new conceptual version of itself: hyper-reality. Not that the simulacrum opposes the real, it only conceals a new concept of reality that sometimes makes the simulation more real than its original.

The urban simulacrums of postmodernity insist on creating a perfect (hyperreal) city by constructing juxtaposed images, with clear tension of forces that insist on concealing everything that is not ideal for the simulated version of the city. However, unlike utopia, the simulation operates by the

similarity of equivalent points, although this equivalence exists as utopia (Baudrillard, 1991). Thus, urban simulacra serve to induce meanings about the city, since it presents a hyper-reality built on points of convergence that operate in this dialectic authentication / dissimulation of reality.

It is important to add that it is in the historical context that we find coherent explanations for the understanding of the suggested simulations about urban life, since the simulacra are permeable by power relations that insinuate meanings. To deal with such simulacra in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, requires understanding that the selection of urban signs operates in a manner analogous to the political and economic attempts of the time and, therefore, urban space has not only become an important locus for attraction (which is called city-business), but it is also a vital part of a marketing that attests to this hyper-reality and that guarantees “a place in the new geopolitics of international networks” (Jaques, 2003, p. 34).

It was also in the 1980s and 1990s that cities, especially Americans, were the object of spectacularization in various elements of mass culture, whose selection of urban scenarios in films or video clips translates the postmodern ethos itself based on individualistic hedonism. To better guide this approach, we will characterize that the contemporary urban simulacra are connected to three characteristics of postmodernity pointed out by Featherstone (1997): i. Aestheticization of everyday life; ii. Freezing of games of images and symbolic appeals and iii. Dissolution of symbolic hierarchies.

The urban simulacra disseminated in films and music videos of the 1980s and 1990s occurred due to the aestheticization of city dynamics, mainly due to the fetishization of the life of its inhabitants, implying that metropolitan pleasures could be democratically enjoyed by all. For this, the urban image was portrayed by the spectacularization of diversity, with glamorization of social relations and supposed tolerance towards aesthetic forms ghettoized. It was worth everything to seduce and make the city (more than a product) an aesthetic experience that permeates its surface with the spectacular rhetoric of the games of images. In the construction of the urban simulacra, the three characteristics of postmodernity pointed out by Featherstone are found, since the daily life of the urban subjects is spectacularized in the arbitrary images of these simulacra, and for this, symbolic appeals loaded with affection insist on the argument that all the differences coexist in the same space, which would supposedly guarantee tolerance for diversity.

This discourse, which insists on living among tribes in the western city, is often portrayed as a place where democracy resides, operating through the spectacularization of everything exotic in order to sustain harmonious coexistence. Music videos, for example, are eventually produced in ghettos, integrating the urban scene as an extension of the ethical, aesthetic and social traits printed on the portrayed characters. The city, therefore, is a fundamental ambience to build the multicultural atmosphere that postmodern aesthetics demands, a fact that builds simulacra from the game of images.

Evidently, the portrayal of life in urban ghettos attests to the deconstruction of hierarchies that mark postmodern art, above all by the weakening of the binomial high / low culture, yet the ambiguity of this discourse occurs in the real life of these ghettos. Under stigmas of segregation, many of its residents still coexist with discourses of intolerance and oppressive forms of power, being sometimes only used as key pieces for a spectacular caricature. In an unequal city, this phenomenon is clear when ghettoized cultural identities become commodities in the service of tourist voyeurism, which is, in the great majority, agitated by big capital.

Another evidence of the ambiguity of this glamouring of everyday life is the fact that culture is periodically reified into commodities, with the purpose of serving market intentions in the postmodern context. On this, Jameson (2001, p. 142) observes:

What characterizes postmodernity in the cultural area is the suppression of everything outside the commercial culture, the absorption of all forms of art, high and low, by the process of production of images. Today, the image is the commodity and that is why it

is useless to expect from it a negotiation of the logic of the production of commodities.

Urban spaces obey this same logic of reification of images in goods, as pointed out by the author. Thus the absorption of “high” and “low” art in the diffusion of postmodern art is analogous to the absorption of “high” and “low” spaces in the postmodern spectacle, which, in fact, weakens arbitrary demarcations, but, on the other hand, may suggest new, equally sectarian stereotypes. That is why these discourses insist on the impression of distinctive marks on some spaces, which makes the spectacle a pretext for the coexistence of market interests and the subsistence necessity of the subjects, obfuscating perversities inherent in the objectification of daily life.

In view of this, it is useful to add that in this play of power, forms of resistance are hatched in the ghettos, and although such contestations are sometimes also reified into spectacles, their effects are as multifaceted as social groups are. If the urban simulacrum impoverishes the images of the royal city or creates a spectacular “avatar” of urban life, it is not for us to answer here; but it is safe to say that simulacra produce meanings, the effects of which can be as ambiguous as postmodernism itself proves to be.

Finally, it is worth remembering that in the present context it is necessary to recognize how much society has been marked by the ambivalent interpretations of the signs produced by itself, which obliges us to admit the coexistence of the infinite ways of challenging and interpreting the dubious contemporary signs. The urban tribes themselves today have found in aesthetic experience a means of assembling identity senses and sharing distinctive ways of existing in the city.

Music Video and urban simulacrum: the spectacle of postmodern aesthetics

Frequently some debates about postmodernity become reductive because they insist on understanding culture in this period as a mere substrate of capitalist forces. This discourse denies the fact that the analysis of cultural goods does not have to occur through their total subordination to the ideological dictates of capital, since the very idea of consumption runs through the negotiation of socially and culturally reconstructed signs.

In fact, in the postmodern period the economic and cultural spheres have become even closer, since the consumer’s own appeals have recruited a vast combination of sensory sensitization, which allows us to understand that in contemporary times we have consumed not just commodities, but also sensory experiences highly charged with affection (Connor, 1992). Thus, this fixation in the immediate pleasures is heightened by the individualism that marks so much the current behavior, something clear in the weakening of the associated social ties the transience of desires and values. The loss of the “long term” is noticeable, both in the cooling of the ties in the corporate field, as well as in the social and affective relations outside the work (Sennet, 2008), adding to it the fugacity of fetishes, dreams and aesthetic experiences.

It was at the epicenter of this process that MTV emerged, broadcasting short videos uninterruptedly, warehouses by marketing systems and effervescent stickers. The station broadcasts an exceptional overlap of images aimed at young audiences, whose attention is focused on the speed of easily assimilated content that, thanks to the break with long narratives, sends obvious messages full of affection. Here we attest the obsession of postmodern subjects by what Jameson (1996) defines as a “perpetual present,” that is, a schizophrenic fixation by the enjoyment of multi-sensorial appeals offered by the culture of the spectacle. On this subject, Kaplan (1987, p. 143) adds:

More than other programs, then, MTV positions the spectator in the mode of constantly hoping the next ad-segment (of whatever kind) will satisfy the desire for

plenitude: the channel keeps the spectator in the consuming mode more intensely because its items are all so short.

Since its inception in 1981, MTV has incorporated strong characteristics of postmodernity, marking a generation already acclimatized to the pulsating pulsation of pop culture. The diffusion of the short videos, framed by an agile concatenation of images, pulverized multiple ideological seductions, which ended up authenticating a multitude of aesthetic concepts and many other non-hegemonic cultural identities. Some artists had their careers in simultaneous rise with MTV, whose performances also assumed this mixture of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic aesthetic concepts. As a result, dealing with celebrities of postmodern pop culture transcends the “scholarly” and “popular” binomial, for here a tangle of values is unraveled by the conventional ways of interpreting the sayings of art. As an example of this postmodern “shambles”, we intend to focus on Madonna, who had her first album recorded in 1983.

To begin this approach, the first music video we use as analysis is “Borderline” (1983). The narrative reveals a young Madonna in search of success as a model, a fact that causes disagreements with her boyfriend, played by the Puerto Rican musician Louie Louie. The plot is set in a suburb of Los Angeles, whose external locations point to Latin culture. Urban space is then a fundamental part of revealing the subversive profile of the artist who, at the time, used an underground style flash-trash in her clothing, very well harmonized with the settings of rustic locations.

The emphasis on ethnic minorities is also borne out by the Latino traits of the characters, including the protagonist’s boyfriend, who in the plot represented juvenile insubordination, having the streets the ideal place to express rebellion. “Borderline” punctuates minority groups as the emblem of the deconstruction of rigid values, a fact that contrasts with the black and white scenes of the music video, when Madonna vandalizes classic works and refuses to subdue conventional aesthetics. To the sound of the verses “you just keep on pushing me over the borderline”, Madonna dances with a spray in hand before a classic male statue with an “X” graffiti in the pubic region. Thus, in reference to street art, graphite here is used as counter-hegemonic language imprinted on icons of a conservative society. The cover of the single also alludes to the subversive aesthetic profile of Madonna, presenting the artist with underground clothing on the map of Manhattan, highlighting it as an expression of eccentric urban youth. Something also visible on the cover of her first single, “Everybody” (1983), which omitted her face, but presented a chaotic mix of buildings and eccentric characters walking through the streets.

“Borderline” became the most successful single from Madonna’s first album, being exhaustively aired on MTV. Something very similar occurred with the videos of “Papa Don’t Preach” (1986) and “La Isla Bonita” (1987), which also portrayed suburban areas of the United States. The first recorded in Staten Island, industrial district of New York, and the second in a Latin district of Los Angeles. In both videos the urban space is summoned to compose the plot and announce the empathy of Madonna’s career with the cultural identities ghettoized. In “La Isla Bonita”, for example, Madonna wears a typical flamenco outfit and blends young Latinos in suburban Los Angeles, leaving behind the seductive freedom and diversity of metropolitan life.

Performance, which mixes Hispanic culture with marginalized identities, is closely related to the very characteristics of postmodernity, since cultural categorizations are increasingly fragile in this context of intertextuality. It is worth remembering that everything that is exotic was the inspiration to reinvent the styles of contemporary art, a fact that has a dual function: it reaches new market niches and, at the same time, allows the reinvention of performances in a context in which duration has become a risk (Bauman, 2001). Therefore, the postmodern artist

who does not reinvent himself risks being forgotten, because it is in the transmutation that he places the capacity for perpetuation in the market.

By having this aesthetic of the eccentric, the subterranean cultural spaces contained an interesting language and aesthetic for artists like Madonna, who only remained in the media because of the capacity to incorporate everything that was different. As McCracken (2007) recalls, groups living on the fringes of society, such as hippies, punks, or gays, offered very innovative cultural meanings, and could be represented as inspiration to performers who wish to break away from rigid cultural conventions.

In this way, the segregated urban spaces were framed in several music videos, translating this desire to recreate the spectacle and to show an imagined version edited from ideological attempts that reinforce metropolitan life as a democratic "habitat" of diversity. Of course, all this connects art and the market more intimately, not by the indistinction between the two, but by the approximation of the bonds that bind them: "what characterizes postmodernity in the cultural area is the suppression of everything outside the commercial culture, the absorption of all forms of art, high and low, by the process of producing images" (Jameson, 2001, p. 142).

Years later, the video "Express Yourself", released on MTV in 1989, incorporated German Expressionist aesthetics by distorting images and portraying dark, austere urban settings. The video begins with Madonna in a cry of order "Come on girls, do you believe in love? Well, I've got something to say about it and it goes something like this." The music, the lyrics and the film content of the music video have a strong feminist connotation and evoke the idea that power is exactly on the expression, which, as performatized by Madonna, must be announced. And the place for such, as the narrative of the video shows, is the city, this being the perfect setting to challenge notoriety. In order to support this narrative, the song "Express Yourself" has an aggressive tone, which, merged with morbid urban images, aims to disturb and manipulate desire, provoking an anxiety similar to that produced by horror movie soundtracks (Morton, 1993).

Another very important element in this video is the way Madonna performatizes the flow of gender because, while exhibiting lingerie and makeup, she uses manly gestures, monocle displays, and grabs the groin. Here her intention is to ironize masculinity, and to subvert any severe demarcation of gender, a fact that, at that moment, already served as a prelude to the provocations that would have begun in the 1990s. Not incidentally, in the video "Express Yourself" director David Fincher enhances the Madonna's gaze and fuses it with the murky images of the city, making evident the fact that this look expresses no female subordination to the norms prevailing in that context, but rather expresses a haughty attitude towards the asphyxiated identities and desires imprisoned in the metropolis of the 1980s. In contrast to the expressionist film, *Metropolis*, here Madonna observes that it is not enough to change the place of power, but rather that it is necessary to subvert the forms of subjugation: "Madonna insists that we are not conquered by the power relations to which we are subject. We can produce 'talking cures' if we express ourselves, resist the seductions to complicity, and do not put our power in domination over others" (Morton, 1997, p. 233).

The following year, the music video "Vogue" (1990) was released and, although it had no imaginative mention of the city, it was inspired by a style of hip hop called

"voguing", much acclaimed by the gay community in suburban New York. Subversion and irreverence are distinctive in this style, and the music video, while bringing visibility to ghetto performances, brought Madonna closer to the underground scene that marked her pre-fame New York life. Contemporary of the documentary "Paris is Burning", "Vogue" is a celebration of alterity in urban life, and although we do not want to enter into the ambiguous results that it has caused, it has its relevance to the effervescent world of cultural differences that have become the metropolis in the end of the 20th century.

The portrait of underground life in "Vogue" was aesthetized and softened by the concept to which the video was built, something very similar to the video "Erotica" and the book "Sex", both of 1992. Here the city is portrayed under a decadent atmosphere through various languages¹ (image, video, music, texture), with the intention of offering the consumer an immersion in the libidinous universe explained by Madonna. The densification of games of images, the exhibition of urban simulacra, and hyper-reality suggested by the vagueness of reality x action (since it is not clear until point Madonna acts and to what extent reveals parts of her perverse personality²) are some of the characteristics that put this work in the postmodern condition.

Here the New Yorker underworld gains relevance by being aesthetized and transformed into a commodity by one of the greatest symbolic forces of postmodern pop culture. The boundaries between "high" and "low" culture, between "good" and "bad" taste, between "beautiful" and "ugly" are again infringed on this obsessive need for reinvention and incorporation of everything that seems. Therefore, Madonna's performances in music videos reveal aesthetic concepts very equalized to postmodern values, pointing out important clues to understanding this chaotic cultural scene at the end of the 20th century.

Images from both high and low art are now arguably clichéd, threadbare, archaic in the computer and space age. Rock videos may be seen as revitalizing the dead images by juxtaposing and re-working them in new combinations that avoid the old polarities. This may be the only strategy available to young artists struggling to find their place in society and to create new images to represent the changed situation they find themselves in. (Kaplan, 1987, p.47).

Now, in order to portray more faithfully the underground context, artists like Madonna had to enter into ghetto urban scenes, making us see the overvaluation of their landscapes. Cities acted as time-space acclimatization for the video clips and for the verses sung there, so in order to understand the language of the postmodern videographic culture, it becomes fundamental to pay attention to the dialectical interconnection between time and space imprinted on the living image of urbanity.

The city offers credibility to the performance and convinces the listener of the aesthetic concept transcribed there, a fact that in Madonna was very noticeable in the conceptual coherence that impregnated her albums, like "Erotica", whose New York urban scene framed a rough aesthetic of the work. That's why the book "Sex" and the single "Erotica" reproduce public and private environments in

¹ Simultaneously were released the book "Sex", the music video and the album "Erotica". All obeyed a New York underground aesthetic and were produced to generate poly-sensorial stimuli, because the hedonic climax of the music and the video, in addition to the tactile seductions of the book were aligned to a same concept rude.

² We warn the reader that we do not apply the word "perverse" in a pejorative connotation, but in the Freud-Marxist sense, a discussion that we have not had time to delve into in this article.

order to amplify the fetishism already imprinted on the surface of some urban scenes, such as the Gaiety Theater in Times Square, the Chelsea Hotel in the south of Manhattan or the streets of Miami. Thus, urban simulacra are created and recreated, which makes the city ancillary to reified subjections, interconnecting art with the signs that permeate the city.

Another music video coming from the album *"Erotica"* is from the single *"Bad Girl"* (1993), whose sonority follows the same style contained in the rest of the album, with subtle arrangements of piano, saxophone and synthesizers that resemble jazz. Although the lyrics portray a permissive, hedonic feminine behavior, the music video has an elegant atmosphere in which Madonna plays Louise Oriole, a distinguished New York yuppie who, living a daily life with alcohol, cigarettes and sex, ends up murdered in her bed for hanging. Manhattan here is framed in its aristocratic face and the costumes paraded by the protagonist enhance the harmony between the successful life of the executive and the icy scenery of the city. Urban life is treated from a glamorous point of view, highlighting the solitude of a wealthy metropolitan woman who, even in line with the fascinating patterns of the American dream in postmodernity, reveals the emotional maladjustments of enclosure amidst the urban crowd.

Another important video for our review, *"Secret"* (1994), directed by Melodie McDaniel, was set in Harlem in the following year. McDaniel sought inspiration from *"East 100 Street,"* a book of photographs by Bruce Davidson in the 1970s about Hispanic Harlem (O'Brien, 2008). Like Davidson's book, the music video depicts Harlem looking raw and hostile, presenting in black and white the supposed everyday life of those residents. The acidity of the urban scene is a fundamental raw material of both works, a fact observable both in the grimy walls interposed by steel frames, as well as in the characters that show melancholic and sometimes aggressive features.

However, it is precisely in this urban asperity that the rustic beauty of the two productions resides, for with this location an atmosphere of mystery is aroused by the reader who inevitably asks himself about the details there omitted. While the photographs deal with this revelation / omission game by framing (something quite provocative in Davidson's work), the music video revolves around a secret that is versed in music. One of the plausible speculations is that the character that makes pair with Madonna would be a transvestite, possibility that well accommodates to the underground scene of the photography.

In this work, Madonna contrasts in the city and with the city, taking her as an extension of her movements, looks and gestures. Without Harlem as a location and without the extras that allude to Davidson's work, the secret would have a totally distinct semantics, perhaps more literal and less poetic. Poetry here is the urban simulacrum that makes for a drama as enigmatic as *"East 100 Street"* and so closely associated with the unraveling needs of the other intriguing strands of Manhattan.

Finally, the last video we want to analyze is *"Ray of Light"* (1998), which, although not the last one of Madonna that addresses the proposed theme, is useful for closing our approach because, more than the others, it owns deep postmodern characteristics. It should be noted that Madonna's strong correlations with postmodern aesthetics do not deny evidence that her career still has strong influences of modernity, a fact that makes negligible any attempt to analyze her work under rigid categorizations. Some of her music videos feature a linear, realistic background sequencing in which "images are mere illustrations of the lyrics and realistic narratives to accompany lyrics and music (eg, 'Papa Do not Preach', 'Live to Tell', 'Oh, Father', 'This Used to be My Playground', 'Rain') "(Kellner, 2007, p. 366). However, video clips like *"Ray of Light"* break with this pattern of linearity and evidence a frantic juxtaposition of glittering images that blend abstraction and concreteness at an exceptional speed. *"Ray of Light"* is so convulsive that it becomes delirious, having as its only linearity the temporal sequence subtly demonstrated by the luminosity of the scene and by the tonality of the light reflected in the skin of Madonna. The video incorporates characteristics of postmodernity also in the intersection of the concepts insinuated there, since the aesthetics of the cabal is mixed with a jovial and stripped-down look of the singer.

Madonna was dressed like a teenager at a rave party, a denim jacket showing off her midriff; and she danced in the *Ray of Light* video at a vertiginous speed, while behind her urban landscapes and techno club scenes moved about, like a hymn to the joys of ecstasy (Guilbert, 2002, p. 173).

Directed by Jonas Akerlund, brief video footage is shown daily in cities such as New York, London, Stockholm and Los Angeles, which at first glance are indecipherable due to the exceptional speed of the work. "Ray of Light" praises the Western urban simulacrum at a time when it aestheticizes daily life and uncomfortably exasperates the tastes and dislikes of convulsive dynamics in the city. The association of "Ray of Light" with postmodern aesthetics is so great that the song was used as soundtrack for Microsoft commercial. The propaganda scenes were also mostly urban, and they emphasized speed and fluidity as requirements in today's life, after all, more than ever, instant communication had already become priority for postmodern social life and, timely, Microsoft concludes to the sound of the song: "And I feel like it just got home, and I feel ... quicker than a ray of light." The verses allude to the agility, flexibility and fearless profile of a free female figure, that is, it is the full acclaim to the personality postmodernly assumed.

In the music video "Ray of Light", Madonna dances, sings and squirms effusively, having her image fused to urban scenes at fast speed. The temporal notion is destabilized as it compresses its linearity and leaves an uncomfortable feeling of loss of orchestral control to the accelerated pulsation of the music. Contemporaries to "Ray of Light," other videos have also demonstrated a similar distortion between time and space in the approach to the city. Here we mention two: "Two Become One" by the Spice Girls and "Stranger in Moscow" by Michael Jackson (both 1996). What binds the two videos is the incorporation of postmodern characteristics by the diffuse narrative, but what distance them is exactly the temporal approach, because, while in the first it is possible to observe an acceleration of the urban dynamics, in the second occurs the inverse, the time is delayed with a view to detailing its sedimentation in space.

In "Two Become One" the city is summoned as stage for smooth performance, in an intentional inconsistency between the temporalities of the artists in contrast to the city. The difference of style of the five singers is glued to the urban silhouette, which accentuates the cosmopolitanism that is meant to allude. In "Stranger in Moscow," Jackson treats exactly this loneliness in modern urban life and, for that, decelerates time and draws the detail of everyday life that is so neglected by the rush of city dynamics. In both productions, the only thing that seems to connect the characters is the urban space, even though their temporality distorts, disturbing the photograph.

Thus, similar to "Ray of Light", the postmodern aesthetics of these videos occurs precisely because of the discomfort they cause, since both the sequencing of images and the fragmentation of time mobilizes the senses and catches the attention, even though or by the asymmetry between time and space. The city, therefore, is the scene of this acceleration and deceleration that marks the reading of the world, after all, what would urban space be but the concatenation of temporalities and the condensation of historically constructed signs?

Our objective in this item was to demonstrate the ways in which cities can be interpreted in the language of video clips, which allows us to understand that the urban portrait by artists obeys an ethics and aesthetics inscribed in a historical time. During the 1980s and 1990s, cities were portrayed in Madonna music videos in quite varied forms, but something that remains is the way unconventional aesthetics were used without dispensing with the surrounding scenarios. The city was conceived as the stage of the eccentric, place of creative subversion and the emergence of differences, which makes postmodern artistic production this ambivalent game of dichotomous forces, deconstructing representations.

Considerations

Miklitsch (1998) recalls that Jameson emphasizes cinema as the first distinctly mediatic art, seen

as an important artistic expression for understanding culture throughout much of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, if the film can be understood as a pioneer form of media art, TV is today the predominant vehicle of postmodern media. Following this reasoning the author deduces:

The current cultural hegemony of television suggests, in fact, that the general economy of the art-commodity is deeply implicated in the whole question of televisuality. It is with this televisual imperative in mind, then, that I turn to music television (i. e., MTV) and, in particular, the academic, cultural-political appropriation of Madonna, or so-called "Madonna Studies" (Miklitsch, 1998, p. 98).

In continuation of this idea, we add that, since art is a product of symbolic exchanges in a historical time, it is the music videos that best condense the traffic of meanings in postmodernity. They do not submit to linearity, nor to the hierarchy of values of old; they can be subversive or simply equalized to hegemonic ideological voracity. The great genius is that they can be everything, even vile, grotesque or altruistic: music videos are the full evidence of this wide circulation of signs in the postmodern media.

Madonna is one of the great exponents of this postmodern imaginative path, and therefore it can be understood as a "machine of significations" (Kellner, 2007), which is not suited to the status of hegemonic art nor to the status of subversive art, simply because it reflects the very contradictions of a time when hegemonic and counterhegemonic aesthetics coexists in the sign field. Of course, the ambivalent words of Madonna's videographic trajectory were mostly coupled with a city setting, thus reinforcing the construction of urban simulacra permeated with values, fetishes and seductions.

Works such as "Borderline" (1983), "La Isla Bonita" (1987), "Erotica" (1992), "Secret" (1994) or "Ray of Light" (1998) presented cities with completely different optics, fetichizantes on the urban life in different sociocultural prisms. From the hegemonic angle to the angle of the ghettos, Madonna was able to enter different universes, shocking at times, but capable of promoting multiple meanings about the dynamics of the city and, above all, about these errant identities of the urban subject. By aesthetizing Harlem's gay culture, unveiling the lewd New York underground scene, in contrasting with the ghettos' Afro-Latin, Madonna made visible plural alternatives to metropolitan life and, at the same time, ratified the fetishization of stereotyped urban simulacra. But if, in the end, this exchange of meanings only disturbed the lull of arbitrarily demarcated identities, we do not know, but undoubtedly this play of meanings is a provocative part of this (contra) culture that has spread in postmodern times.

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