How Pop Music Celebrities Connect the Mind and the Body during the Adolescent Phase

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Riassunto: L’adolescenza è un’età creativa di confine tra il mondo dell’infanzia e il mondo adulto. L’ascolto e la produzione di musica consentono all’adolescente di regredire allo stadio intrauterino e, allo stesso tempo, di progredire verso nuove tonalità affettive. Come il ritmo del battito cardiaco della madre accompagna lo sviluppo fetale, e le stesse ninne nenni contribuiscono allo sviluppo emotivo del lattante, così la musica conduce l’adolescente verso nuovi sviluppi, nuove nascite, alla stregua di una vera e propria “colonna sonora”. C’è una grande affinità tra la vita di un giovannissimo e quella di una pop star: entrambi, infatti, vivono di sguardi, come avviene nella relazione tra la madre e il neonato. L’amore per la musica e per il mondo dello spettacolo, per gli stili e le sonorità della pop music, è una modalità propriamente adolescenziale di ritrovamento della tenerezza della madre.

Abstract: Adolescence is a creative age between the boundaries of childhood and adulthood. Listening to or playing music allows adolescents to regress to the intrauterine stage but, at the same time, to move forward new Stimmungen. As the heartbeat of a pregnant woman accompanies fetal development, and lullabies contribute to the emotional development of infants, so music leads adolescents to new births, much like a real “soundtrack”. There is a great affinity between the life of an adolescent and that of a pop star: they both, in fact, exist through the eyes of others, just as in the relationship between mother and child. Through their love of music and the entertainment world, pop music styles and sounds, adolescents try to obtain again, even if only mentally, the tenderness of the mother.

Keywords: pop music, teenagers, family, education.

According to the classic scientific view, teenagers are supposed to be restless, rowdy and naughty: new sexual impulses, bodily changes, and intellectualisation processes lead adolescents towards a complete self-redefinition, sometimes with uncertain results. Adolescence, really, is a creative age that turns the child of years past, totally dependent on parents, into a new person who is able to define himself as the author, or leading actor, of
his own existence. In this phase, the need for independence motivates teenagers to search for new points of reference and to exchange the real family for the “social family” of friends. When teenagers feel confused, they often take refuge in emotional myths that characterised their childhood and choose to identify with pop music celebrities. If adolescents are accompanied by families concerned about their education, these affective representations could help them to grow up and to become adults. «The reference to the steady interaction between the shape of the family and the social/cultural context cannot ignore the real importance of the sound experience acting within the cognitive and emotional construction of the personality and could be properly used in the family communication» (Malavasi, 2003, 549). Teen-ids are the very embodiment of maternal love: pop stars preserve, in essence, the magical world of childhood.

1. Not a Girl, Not yet a Woman. The Age of “Re-Invention”

It is not easy to be an adolescent today. New teenagers have to face the challenge of sharing their problems with “post-modern parents”. While adolescents want to grow up, new adults, in fact, want to go back to adolescence; thus, «adults measure their parenting by evaluating their children’s talents, and adolescents measure their autonomy by trying to achieve the most level of independence from their parents’ desires» (Dizard, Gadlin, 1990, 96-97). «The new adolescent discomfort is simply the difficulty to define desires; this trouble is linked to an excess, and this excess, rather than being adolescent, is typical of present adults» (Barone, 2009, 122). This excess is perhaps represented by the excessive lengthening of maternal care: teenagers are hyper-protected, and families seem to lack paternal education (Stramaglia, 2009). Today, it is «[…] necessary not only to pay attention on the education of young people, but also on the re-education of adult people, the ones who have given up their educational role in the last years because of the lack of confidence and fear, thus forgetting how they are important as a point of reference for their children» (De Vita, 2010, 9-10).

Since birth, the «mother is still in the frontlines; it is still she who must use her own resources to sustain the new adventure of parenthood and at the same time try to achieve her own self fulfillment, the latter being an inalienable right of any human being» (Biagioni, 2010, 31). During the process of growth, adolescents are involved in integrating the rules of civil
society (in the name of the father) with the affective sphere and needs for self-expression (in the name of the mother). The continued and enduring presence of the mother, along with the “discoloration of the father figure”, leads teenagers to search for maternal love even when adolescence is over. Many Italian and international pop stars seek the mother’s tenderness in music, as if they were teenagers. For example, Nicoletta Strambelli, also known as Patty Pravo, was raised by her grandmother because her mother was too young to take care of her; the red-hair singer Veronica Scopelliti has chosen the stage name of “Noemi” because this was the name that her mother wanted to give her when she was born; the great performing artist Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone, also known as Madonna, lost her mother when she was only five years old; and Christina Aguilera had a violent father, who caused a great deal of suffering for her mother (and herself). All these artists find in music a way to express their need for maternal care: being loved by viewers is essentially an adult skill to find again The Look of Love (Madonna, Leonard, 1987) of the mother.

It is important to understand what occurs within teenagers on the psychological level. Adolescents are no longer children, but not yet adults. What does it mean to grow up? What does it mean to be a male or female? What does it mean, in the end, to be an adult? They live suspended in time, in search of their real identity. When we speak of “time” in pedagogical terms, we don’t refer to a conception of a simple sequence of events, but rather to a cyclical return, through one’s entire life, of the same sensations, feelings and states of mind (Erikson, 1980). To illustrate, each stage of development does not correspond to a static phase of growth, but to a life cycle: to what Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche called “the eternal return” (Nietzsche, 1885), and Sigmund Freud called “the eternal recurrence of the repressed” (Freud, 1914). Adolescents love to remember their childhood: they unconsciously miss that “magic period” in which “all was possible”, and the quality of the primary maternal love is very important in order to build a positive image of themselves as adults.

Pop stars, through the clothes they wear and the ways in which they present themselves, materialise the conflict between the need to grow up (sex) and the childhood nostalgia (innocence). In a recent photograph, Katheryn Elizabeth Hudson, better known as Katy Perry, wears a turquoise wig decorated with a heart made of blue plastic, a bizarre bra composed by two big pastries with cream and cherries and sexy glittery shorts. This effectively turns the pop star into a new Lolita: simultaneously provocative and
A few years ago, American and national papers published some images of the controversial singer Lady Gaga (Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta) dressed as Hello Kitty and Kermit the Frog from the magical world of Muppet Babies. «Britney Spears, the teen pop phenomenon at the turn of the new century, exemplifies the adoption of sexuality as a form of metamorphosis. Spears debuted in 1998 at age 17 with the album …Baby One More Time as a pretty strawberry blonde dressed in a private school uniform in the title video. Her dancing was choreographed, but not overly so, and any inherent sexuality was perceived in the minds of viewers who appreciated her short skirt and a glimpse of midriff. By Spears’s third album, Britney, released when she was 20, she was nearly unrecognizable. Now her body, often shown in extreme close-up, was muscular with no trace of baby fat. Her hair was platinum blonde and her skin tanned. The videos released to promote Britney clearly stated that this artist had been through a metamorphosis, with I’m a Slave 4 U featuring Spears barely clothed in a nude chiffon halter top and low-cut pants. The video is set in a dark, steamy room full of other similarly clad dancers, writhing and grinding to the music. Water or steam begins to fall from the ceiling, making Spears’s costume more revealing, and at various points, the other dancers lick her face or rub their bodies against hers. Aside from the increasingly risqué videos, Spears definitely displayed her “mature” image at the 2001 and 2002 MTV Awards, where she stripped to a nude body stocking and allowed a python to provocatively explore her body as she performed» (Andsager, Roe, 2003, 88–89). On the cover of her latest album (2011), Britney Spears seems to be a baby girl, but plays the role of the Femme Fatale just as Katy Perry does.

While female pop stars exhibit an excess of femininity, male celebrities usually show an excess of masculinity, which is regarded by fanatic young boys as beneficial in separating themselves from the world of the mother. The famous and successful singer and dancer Justin Randall Timberlake posed shirtless for some photos to show his Apollonian body, symbol of strength, self-government and tenacity (is that not the stereotype of masculinity?). Robert Peter Williams (Robbie Williams), in the video for Rock DJ (Williams, Chambers, Andrews, Pigford, Paris, 2000) directed by Vaughan Arnell, stripped off his clothing, showing a series of tattoos which enhanced his athletic body; in the end of the video, he stripped off his muscles, as well, reducing himself to a dancing skeleton in order to get to the attention of a seductive female DJ.
Kelly D. Schwartz and Gregory T. Fouts conducted a comparison between adolescents who love pop music (termed “light music” by the scientists), those who listen to heavy music and those who prefer eclectic music: «Adolescents preferring light music were more likely to be preoccupied with trying to do the right and proper things while still keeping their emotions in check. [...] In terms of their sexuality, they tended to have greater difficulty in reconciling childhood beliefs with new sexual impulses and the conflicting values surrounding the expression of sexuality. [...] They also exhibited some difficulty in negotiating the balance between independence from and dependency on peers [...]. Since peer acceptance is important during adolescence, such adolescents may want to share [their problems] with other listeners and performers who are experiencing the same issues [...]. These developmental issues likely produce a variety of negative and/or conflicting emotions, e.g., anxiety, tenderness, excitement, confusion. [...] Thus, light music may provide an emotionally safe vehicle for easing their transitions into becoming more independent, expressive adults and finding meaningful connections (through music) with others» (Schwartz, Fouts, 2003, 211-212).

Anxiety, need for tenderness, excitement and confusion are emotions involved in creating myths, which, embodied by pop stars, persuade adolescents to love pop music.

2. In the Name of the Mother. Madonna’s Original Intent

It is then the relationship between mother and child – the origin of the previously noted childhood nostalgia – that we must consider in order to truly understand processes of growth. This relationship begins very early in the womb through intrauterine communications between mother and fetus.

Among these communications, the rhythm of the heart acts as a prenatal impression of musical rhythm. The heartbeat is associated with the maternal environment, so the baby, once born, will love to feel cradled by her mother through lullabies and warm hugs (Cfr. Bence, Méreaux, 1988, 23). Rolando Benenzon writes: «That’s why it is important to organize the birth and the first days of life in order to maintain the intrauterine sound environment, which consists of a false silence accompanied by the beating of the heart, of the murmurs of mother’s body, of the grinding uterine wall, and gradually...
transform this world of sound. So it is good to keep the child on the left against the breast; the only sound elements of the first day of life should be the slow and gentle voice of the mother. There are a lot of examples that prove the unconscious search of musical sounds that accompanied the period of breastfeeding» (Benenzon, 1981, 79). The mother’s care gives the baby the impression of still being protected inside the womb; thus, the external environment will gradually become familiar: in the first instance, as an extension of the mother, and, in the second, as the home atmosphere. During the early years of life, parents should make the child listen to music (the mother’s sound) to persuade him to trust the outside world. Alvin writes: «The child who has been accustomed to listen to music, in a way that combines joy and fun with social consciousness, becomes increasingly able to join with other listeners and enjoy the benefits of music, even without learning to play or sing. In each stage of development, music can be a world in which share with others the same tastes and the same pleasures [...]» (Alvin, 1965, 71).

During adolescence, music «can represent in the field of the educational family communication a right way to thrill a teenager, to enlarge sensibility and intelligence, when it is used to make an individual aware about himself and his capacity to interact with other people» (Malavasi, 2003, 552).

The adolescent period reawakens emotional myths that characterised the original relationships between parents and child.

The myth of the mother is linked to the mourning caused by the loss of childhood innocence. Charmet and Rosci elaborate: «One of the most complicated adolescent processes is to face the intimate fear that growth could cause the funeral of childish creativity. Often, in the mind of pre-adolescents, growth is imagined as a process that puts forever to rest the truest part of themselves, the “true self” which they had always hoped to realize intentions and aspirations, and that, now, the obligation to grow definitely seems to put to rest. Often, it is the failure in the process of mourning for the creative and expressive omnipotence of the “true self” of childhood that causes the most problems for the unconscious mind of adolescents. If they don’t realize that growth may be based on a possibility to have another chance to “sing their song” – the possibility of adolescence –, they are forced to think about growth as a final mourning, as a sad funeral for their hope to finally have free access to the creative and expressive power, once broken dependency on parents» (Pietropolli Charmet, Rosci, 1995, 132).

Some famous pop songs attempt to harmonise the tenderness of child-
hood with mature sexuality in order to facilitate the overcoming of the adolescent fear of growing up; this carries the same symbolic function that a sweet lullaby sang by the mother has for a crying baby.

That’s how Madonna “talks about” sex in one of her successful hit songs: «See which flavor you like and I’ll have it for you/ Come on in to my store, I’ve got candy galore/ Don’t pretend you’re not hungry, I’ve seen it before/ I’ve got turkish delight baby and so much more […] I’ll be your one stop/ Candy shop/ Everything/ That I got/I’ll be your one stop/Candy store/ Lollipop/ Have some more» (Williams, Madonna, 2008).

The myth of the father is connected to a specific need for removing bad emotions and memories of childhood through a severe control over the affective sphere. Charmet and Rosci state: «Any spontaneous expression of desire and fantasy is repealed; they stop to invest in social behaviours; fussiness; exaggerated subjection to the rules; rigid scheduling of time; endless tests; fears of being punished, of the new and of the unknown; troubles in social contacts with peers; obsequious and seductive complaisance towards influential adults; loathing for the erotic and emotional exchanges» (Pietropolli Charmet, Rosci, 1995, 200). Teenagers go crazy for horror movies because these kinds of films are based on stories which illustrate the childish fears of monsters, of the dark, of the unknown, of punishments. Watching horror movies is a ritual that aims to dispel the fears of the past; exorcising fears is a way of taking control of the emotions aroused by the new reality that adolescents must defy. This is why Lady Gaga defines herself as “Mother Monster”, and why she jokingly calls her fans “Little Monsters”. Gaga likes to provoke, to amaze and to surprise the audience. «She uses the blood, exposed bones and the macabre to show what she is willing to do for fame and, at the same time, what the world expects from its pop icons» (Goodman, 2010, 22). The singer’s second album, not by chance, is called The Fame Monster (Lady Gaga, 2009). «She likes to exaggerate or transform and manipulate what is traditionally considered provocative until it becomes obscene or disgusting» (Goodman, 2010, 136).

And she has hit the mark.

Charmet and Rosci explain that the myth of the messianic child is referred to as the typical narcissism of teenagers; «[…] the source of narcissism is often the relationship between mother and child; the latter takes on a special duty to heal the mother, the parents, from suffering; a miraculous obligation to take care of the world. […] beyond this task, there is always a deep loneliness that can never be cured, because an adolescent who was
adored as a messianic child can never forget he was not loved and not “reflected” in the eye of his mother for what he really was» (Pietropolli Charmet, Rosci, 1995, 149).

A person who was treated as a messianic child develops an ambivalent attitude toward sexuality and, consequently, a contradictory behaviour that varies between heresy (perversion) and asceticism (sacrifice). Just as the character of Madonna, the very embodiment of pop music. «Some people believe in music as it was a religion, and call it so; others express something similar in a more erotic direction […]» (Benenzon, 1981, 26). Madonna, Like (The) Virgin (Kelly, Steinberg, 1984), wants to be Universal (she really wants to be believed)\(^1\): that’s why religion, sexuality, and family affairs are the most important themes that she sings about in her successful album Like A Prayer in 1989. As Falconi writes: «After the hit song Like A Prayer, the spiritual journey goes on with the ballad Promise To Try, that Madonna sings accompanied by piano. The singer doesn’t need another arrangement for a song where she speaks directly to her mother. “One of the hardest things I have ever faced in my life was the death of my mother. I am still saddened by this”, confesses Madonna. The song is almost a promise to try to live without her, but to follow her teachings and preserve the precious love that Madonna Fortin gave to Madonna for the first five years of her life. Oh Father closes the spiritual triptych of the album. The song atmosphere is different, however, from that of Promise To Try. There is a veiled anger, the remembering of a difficult childhood, the worry about an absent father, too busy in working to feed his large family. […] The video clip tells of a girl, left without a mother, that finds herself with a sullen and cold father, sometimes even violent. The scene of the open coffin creates a dark and dreary atmosphere. The woman has her lips sewn: an image that has haunted Madonna’s childhood. […] Keep It Together faces the issue of familiar union, and emphasizes the importance of staying close to our brothers and sisters even when life tries to separate ourselves from our common origins» (Falconi, 2011, 49-50). In the CD booklet, Madonna writes: «This album is dedicated to my mother who taught me how to pray» (Madonna, 1989).

On September 14, 2009, Madonna gave a speech in memory of the late Michael Jackson recalling the childhood of both: «I spent my childhood searching for my mother figures; sometimes I was successful. But how do you recreate your childhood when you are under the magnifying glass of the world for your entire life?»\(^2\).
The focus of Madonna's poetry is not sexual freedom, but the adolescent desire to transgress, to break the rules in order to obtain again, even if only mentally, mother's tenderness. Madonna has always sung ballads dedicated to her mother: «I can't stop thinking of you/The things we used to do/The secrets we once shared/I'll always find them there/In my memories/But this heartache isn't going anywhere/In the public eye I act like I don't care/When there's no one watching me/I'm crying» (Madonna, Hall, Hooper, 1994); «I ran from my house that cannot contain me/[…] From my mother who haunts me/Even though she's gone/[…] Up into the hills, I ran to the cemetery/And held my breath, and thought about your death» (Madonna, Orbit, 1998); «There's a strange melody/Sends me straight to heaven/There's a voice in my head/Non one else can hear/There's a prayer that I say/Always bring me closer/To the presence of you/To always have you near/No one can take your place/I'm still looking at your face/No one else saw the things that you could see/I'm trying hard to drive my tears/Yes father, you know I'm not so free» (Madonna, Ahmadzai, 2003). Madonna «[…] honors the memory of her deceased mother like a country Sicilian orphan, hangs a rosary from the rear view mirror in her car, and admires nouns» (Guilbert, 2002, 167), but, like a teenager, «[…] is desperately seeking a body able to generate illusion […]» (Baudrillard, 1995, 126). Madonna Ciccone turns into music and art the adolescent conflict between the childish thinking and the blooming body.

In the opinion of Georges-Claude Guilbert, «[…] there might very well have been some desperate element in the way Madonna did just about everything to reach stardom, a world stardom intelligently elaborated by a career woman, set on a power race that nothing seems to be able to stop» (Guilbert, 2002, 26). Madonna means: The Mother. The original intent of Madonna was to embrace, by singing and dancing, Madonna Fortin. The power of Madonna is that her audience connects with the nostalgia that pervades her lyrics. Her search for Madonna Fortin, like her incredible success, will never end. Madonna, in fact, embodies the adolescent need of the mother: success is written on her name and her story. As a “grown adolescent”, she's the greatest icon of post-modern ambiguous society: «Madonna can be read as a barometer of culture that directs our attention to cultural shifts, struggles, and changes» (Schwichtenberg, 1993, 3).

It is not a coincidence that «Gail Sheehy indicates Madonna as the sym-
bol of young adults» (Naccari, 2010, 211), just like Lady Gaga, Madonna clone, is a symbol for today’s adolescents.

Young adults and new teenagers are definable as the “Look-at-Me” Generation. In this regard, at the end of the Nineties, Geri Halliwell, known as Ginger Spice, published the ironic catchy song, Look at Me (Halliwell, Watkins, Wilson, 1999), which, in sociological and musicological terms, is comparable to a file rouge, a generational trend, linking the teenagers of the Eighties with those of new millennium. “Look at Me” is the categorical imperative that adolescents turn to peer groups and influential adults to express their need to be original, important (as a V.I.P.) and loved for who they are. The song is the manifesto of the “Cult of Images” which, originally born from television, has spread even more through music videos and the unmistakable styles of pop stars. The music Industry promotes pop singers not only by advertising their vocal, theatrical and musical skills, but also and especially by improving their image through make-up, gymnastics, cosmetic surgery and expensive clothes produced by the most famous international fashion designers (Giorgio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Louis Vuitton, Valentino Garavani, Donatella Versace, Stella Mc Cartney, etc.). The adolescent body, in the same way, is not only a form that transforms itself as if it would be the creation of an unknown artist, but also a transvestite body (with tattoos, piercing, hair extensions, etc). That’s why pop stars are very popular among teenagers: they are artificially built as special mirrors of the adolescent growth. As the newborn sees himself reflected in the face of the mother, so teenagers can see some parts of themselves in performances, behaviours, charisma and styles of pop music celebrities.

3. Mamma Mia, How Can I Resist You?

In summary, pop music is based on three main elements: sex (which is a metaphor for the body), religion (a metaphor for the mind) and, last but not least, childhood nostalgia (or the fear of losing innocence once and for all).

The following pop songs can function as examples with regard to sex: I Feel Love (Summer, Moroder, Bellotte, 1977), I Want Your Sex (Michael, 1987), Erotica (Madonna, Pettibone, Shimkin, 1992), Dirrty (Aguilera, Rockwilder, Muhammad, Redman, Cameron, 2002), and many more.

Regarding religion, how can one forget the stage names of Abba,
Madonna, or Lady Gaga’s dance piece dedicated to *Judas* (Lady Gaga, RedOne, 2011)?

And with regard to childhood nostalgia, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno writes: «Even the most insensitive hit song enthusiast cannot always escape the feeling that the child with a sweet tooth comes to know in the candy store» (Adorno, 1938, 307). How can one not be reminded of Madonna’s previously quoted pop song *Candy Shop*, Sporty Spice Melanie C’s re-make of *I Want Candy* (The Strangeloves, 1965), or Aguilera’s *Candyman* (Aguilera, Perry, 2006)?

As one documented research examines «the relations between Big-Five personality characteristics and [...] music preferences in a sample of Dutch adolescents» (Delsing, ter Bogt, Engels, Meeus, 2008, 112), it is found that adolescents «who enjoy [...]» pop music and dance music «[...] tend to be relatively high on Extraversion and Agreeableness [...]» (*Ibidem*, 125).

Family education can contribute greatly toward transformation of the natural predispositions to extraversion and agreeableness into useful attitudes toward growth and socialisation. Parents should increase the educational meanings related to the *mother’s code* with those related to the *father’s code*: in other words, teenagers should be helped by their families to combine the *omnipotence of thoughts* with the *affective law* embodied by father figure. Teenagers intimately miss mother’s tenderness (which stands for “sex”), but they need father’s education (which stands for “religion”). As heroes, pop music celebrities also have a *paternal function*: they catalyse *sexual impulses* and *confused thoughts* and give back to viewers these feelings and worries in the form of *music* and *visions*. Pedagogy strives to encourage adolescents to move from the level of “mental representation” to the level of “production” and, gradually, to that of “social productivity”. «Adolescent communication, implemented through the production of youth expressions, [...] is another way of relating through images and sounds, bringing out, in this way, the personal difference from peers and adults. Therefore, it can be argued that, even if their artistic productions are the result of narcissism, the meaning that teenagers ascribe to them is a clear sign of rituals of passage that are determinant growth factors» (Anfossi, 2011, 122).

Adolescents separate themselves from their parents only if their mothers and fathers take care of them; pop stars cannot act as positive models of identification if their task is to replace absent families or to fill the loneliness felt by today’s kids. «It is not true that a teenager rejects an adult (a parent, a teacher or an educator) because of his need to rebel; a teenager
is, actually, attracted to a capable adult who is a real witness of consistency, competence and role and not a fake imitation of a teenager. That is the reason why some teachers, some educators, some coaches have a charismatic charm. A competent adult always has a strong charm for a teenager, even because he can provide proper answers to the authentic needs of a teenager to grow: needs to be heard and guided first of all» (Corrente Sutera, 2008, 19).

The devotion for a pop star could, therefore, hide a deep need to feel bound to significant adult people.

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Note

1 Robbie Williams (featuring Pet Shop Boys), inspired by Madonna, sings: «She's got to be obscene to be believed». R. P. Williams, N. Tennant, C. Lowe (2006), She's Madonna (with Pet Shop Boys), in R. Williams, Rudebox, USA, EMI Records.

2 Madonna (2009), Tribute to Michael Jackson, MTV Music Awards, New York, Radio City Music Hall.

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