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**MADONNA, THE MOTHER OF PERVERSION: AN  
ANALYSIS OF *SEX* AND *EROTICA***

**Porto Alegre**

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EROTICA***

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“People say that I'm so controversial, but I think the most controversial thing that I've done is to stick around.”

CICCONE, Madonna

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## **ABSTRACT**

This present work focuses on part of the oeuvre of Madonna, namely, the book *Sex* and some of the songs presented in the album *Erotica*, both from 1992. The analysis relies on a psychoanalytical perspective and it focuses on behavioral and social issues addressed by the selected corpora. The initial evaluation of the bibliographic material was carried out by reading the articles and academic works in general, with the purpose of selecting those that met the objectives of the study mentioned in its introduction, namely, to provide an overview of the presence of perversion in the aforementioned works by Madonna. The main research hypothesis is that Madonna, in expressing perverse behavior, addresses sexuality in unprecedented ways for a female artist to date, and the texts by Freud (2016), Lipovetsky (2004), and Stoller (1975) are present in the analysis of the photos and texts from the book, as well as lyrics from some of the songs of the album *Erotica*. The research results suggest that Madonna's sensual and provocative work was not a simple act of rebellion or something that wanted only to shock society, but, through postmodernism, cause critical thinking in society.

**Keywords:** Madonna; Perversion; *Erotica*; *Sex*; Freud.

## RESUMO

O presente trabalho enfoca parte da obra de Madonna, a saber, o livro *Sex* e algumas das canções apresentadas no álbum *Erotica*, ambos de 1992. A análise parte de uma perspectiva psicanalítica e se debruça sobre questões comportamentais e sociais abordadas pelo corpus selecionado. A avaliação inicial do material bibliográfico foi realizada pela leitura dos artigos e trabalhos acadêmicos em geral, com o objetivo de selecionar aqueles que atendessem aos objetivos do estudo mencionados em sua introdução, ou seja, fornecer um panorama sobre a presença da perversão nas obras acima mencionadas de Madonna. A principal hipótese de pesquisa é que Madonna, ao expressar comportamentos perversos, aborda a sexualidade de forma inédita para uma artista feminina até então, e os textos de Freud (2016), Lipovetsky (2004) e Stoller (1975) estão presentes na análise de as fotos e textos do livro, além de letras de algumas músicas do álbum *Erotica*. Os resultados da pesquisa sugerem que a obra sensual e provocativa de Madonna não foi um simples ato de rebeldia ou algo que pretendia apenas chocar a sociedade, mas, por meio do pós-modernismo, provocar um pensamento crítico na sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Madonna; Perversão; *Erotica*; *Sex*; Freud.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Madonna Veronica Louise Ciccone was born to Silvio and Madonna Ciccone in Rochester, Michigan, USA, on August 16, 1958. A mere glimpse of the girl's name indicates her solid Italian and religious background, as well as the bond with her mother, with whom she shared the name and the burden of being named after no other than the Virgin Mary. It is hardly needed to say that this girl from a satellite city of Detroit has become over the past four decades a worldwide-known, powerful pop icon with a versatile career in music, performing, acting, directing, writing, and business. Over the past four decades, Madonna has epitomized female empowerment, versatility, polemic - and, as per the main hypothesis underpinning the research presented here, perversion.

In the second half of 1992, Madonna released the book *Sex*, the single *Erotica*, music videos and an album of the same name. Although this album was not among the most successful of her career, it is undoubtedly the most controversial, alongside the book *Sex*, which sold 150,000 photocopies on its first day of release. By the early 1990s, Madonna had already achieved a position of power that few artists in history have achieved, and her hegemonic status was a factor in her favor when she was tasked with raising these controversial issues.

This coffee table book with provocative contents addressed themes such as sadomasochism, homosexuality, orgies and female masturbation, all of which were based on the photographs and texts that made up the work. In the book, Madonna incorporated her alter ego, Dita, who, in reference to German actress Dita Parlo of the 1930s, occupied a dominant position in most of the images, becoming eccentric precisely because she dealt with subjects little known by the general population.

For the shoot, Madonna and photographer Steven Meisel rode through New York's underground cosmos, using places like burlesque theaters, strip bars or some of Miami's public areas. The fantasies dealt with in the book, although they travel through the urban underworld, aestheticize the exotic and make sex a commodity to be sold and enjoyed by the consumer. In this way, the work as a whole comes about through the saturation of sensory experiences, ranging from the whispered voice in *Erotica*, to the explicit pages of *Sex* or the juxtaposition of images in the music video; everything ready to sensitize the consumer to taste the instant delights offered to the senses. It is the portrait of the Madonna that serves as the

prototype of this period, mainly because it implies that she is, in the popular imagination, a stimulus.

**Figure 1 - Madonna leaning over a fish-shaped fountain**



Source: MADONNA et al. (1992, p. 71)

However, something that tends to go unnoticed is that this artistic compilation not only expresses postmodernism, but also walks through the consumers' unconscious, touching on points that Freudian psychoanalysis conceptualizes as perversion. Perversion is a deviation of behavior, pointed out by psychoanalysis as one of the tripods of psychopathologies, along with neurosis and psychosis. Popularly, the term is used to indicate a kind of "sexual depravity", but specialists work in a much broader field in which it expresses defense against psychosis, the fragmentation of the ego.

In this sense, the combination of perversion and sexuality becomes perfect for the instantaneous satiety of this postmodern obsession with individual satisfaction, a fact that is clear in the extensive marketing campaign that accompanied the work, whose focus coincided with postmodern hedonism itself and the defense of psychosis. From then on, *Sex* offered to sell delights in the service of the masturbatory gaze, but, far beyond that, it represented the objectification of that postmodern fixation on instantaneous delights, both for the superficiality of generic values and for the promise of eccentric delights. It is at this point that Madonna

expresses postmodern hyper-individualism in its dubious power to subvert the structures of the institution in new ways of enjoying hedonic alterity, as Lipovetsky argues:

Hyper-individualism does not coincide not only with the internalization of the homosexual oeconomicus who pursued the maximization of his achievements in most spheres of life [...], but also with the breakdown of old forms of social regulation of behavior accompanied by a rising tide of pathologies , disorders and behavioral deviations (LIPOVETSKY, 2004, p. 56).

Qualities adverse to civilizational normality, that is, subject to criticism within the social context to which they belonged, have been called “perversions” throughout history, but Freud judged them as natural qualities of a human being who suffered some kind of repression in his or her life. socialization process. In this sense, the book perfectly fulfills this role of exposing and confronting the perversions that permeate the unconscious minds of individuals, as together with the CD that accompanies it, it allows consumers to immerse themselves in all the psychological nuances of the imaginary suppressed in the process of civilization.

Even so, all the material was designed to explore and deal with all these issues, from the smallest details to the apex: enjoyment. In this perspective, the consumer, when buying the book, is obliged to tear off the paper cover that covers the book in a way that symbolizes the opening of a condom package. Both are acts that precede the promised act of pleasure here by savoring images never conveyed by such a celebrity. So the book will be cold with the aluminum cover and the (X) in the background signals Madonna's power manifesting itself in her vulva, mixing all the sexual symbolism behind the repression of female sexual manifestations.

**Figure 2 - Cover and packaging of the *Sex* book**

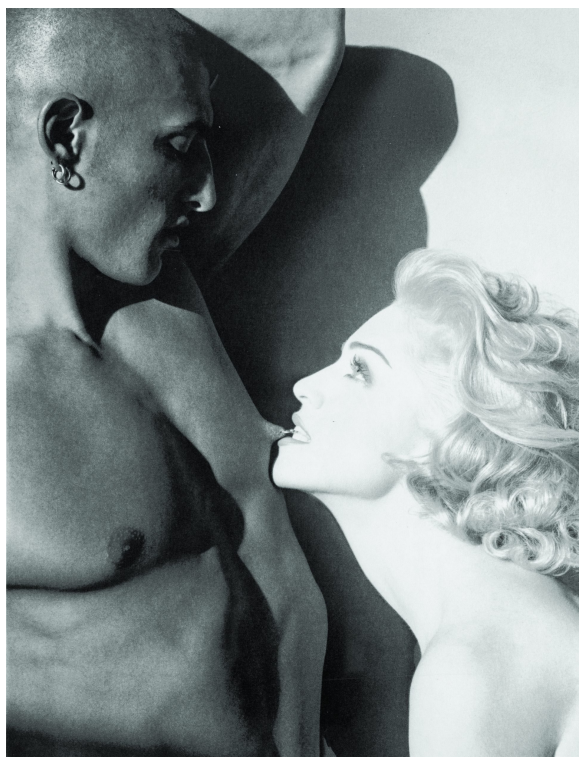


Source:

When flipping through the pages, the consumer touches the raw pages bound in a metal coil, which makes the book's raw appearance clear. The images are arranged asymmetrically in dark tones, mixed with erotic texts written in rough fonts to further promote the symbolic aspects of dirt and impurity that society attributes to sex. The underground setting of the photographs harmonizes with the fetish objects and costumes (or lack thereof) presented there. There's something to the *Erotica* music video, too, and the album's aesthetic, whose songs veer between hot jazz (*Where Life Begins*) and aggressive funk (*Waiting* and *Did You Do It*).

The vibe is very New York, and Madonna, always in dominant yuppie mode, using her position of power as a host of salacious musings, is the immediate impetus behind the slogan "I'll teach you how to get laid." We then understand that dealing with *Sex* implies taking into account the very dialectic relationship of this production and the artist with historical time, since, like every mythical figure, Madonna embodies a time and, as such, the analysis of her image offers relevant substances. to interpret postmodern social values as well as socially negotiated aesthetic norms.

**Figure 3 - Madonna biting a model's nipple**



Source: MADONNA et al (1992, p. 30)

Consequently, talking about the commodification of Madonna's body image is also recognizing how the western population in the current capitalist context also negotiates brands and images printed on the body. In this regard, Miklitsch makes an astute observation about Madonna Studies: “My working hypothesis here is that, somehow, to some extent, everyone is a commodity brand today, as there is no way to completely escape the ubiquitous codes that seem to me, of spectacular stars like Madonna's Miklitsch” (1998, p. 109).

In addition, it is important to note that, when working with psychoanalysis, we are referring to Freudian symbolism, which is characterized by referring to a behavior or thought with hidden meaning to the subject, in this sense all the work of the New York singer is a mixture between all subjects hidden in the unconscious of consumers of her art and, a contrast with the mercantile post-modernism of the female body and its pleasure.

Thus, the psychoanalytical characteristics pointed out here are fully condensed in the work *Sex / Erotica*, which allows analyzing it as a product of a hypermodern, hyper hedonistic, hyperdiverse and, above all, hyper contradictory era. Consequently, we are interested in understanding tasks that go beyond the surface, to make a statement in light of the needs of the public's faith thirst for momentary happiness. *Sex* is interpreted here as a

perverse fetishist commodity, capable of covering up and revealing ambivalent forms of contemporary existence, capable of disturbing, not only because of the acidity of its aesthetics, but above all because of the values that exist there and are reified.

Having said that, this work aims to analyze Madonna's career, with excerpts from specific moments that match the proposed theme, bringing the psychoanalytical perspective of what is perversion and how this behavior fits into the works *Sex* and *Erotica*. Furthermore, I intend to talk about the importance of Madonna not only in the pop scene, but for the LGBTQIAP+ community in the 80s and 90s, at the height of an AIDS epidemic and how important, exquisite and also perverse, in the eyes of a prejudiced society, these her works, speeches and positions were.

## 2 PERVERSION, POST-MODERNISM AND EROTICS

The word "perversion" originated from European contact with African culture in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was under the influence of the Western Christian perspective that the medieval Portuguese term "facturae" was used with an evil connotation. Since then, the word "perversion" has been incorporated into several languages and adopted by some authors as an expression of the mystery that transcends the materiality of the "perversion object". It is a story of structure, soul and spirit.

With regards to society's view of women, historically, women have often been subjected to patriarchal values and expectations that view them as passive and submissive. This has resulted in a skewed perception of women as objects to be consumed rather than individuals with agency and desires of their own. In this context, a psychoanalytic interpretation of perversion could suggest that societal norms and expectations surrounding women contribute to the development of perverted desires, such as the objectification and the fetishization of women. Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx are among the theorists who most frequently use "perversion" to discuss their conjectures.

Another tool used by Madonna throughout her career was postmodernism. It was a cultural and intellectual movement that emerged in the late 20th century, characterized by a skepticism towards objective truth, a rejection of grand narratives, and an emphasis on the role of language and power in shaping reality. The movement has had a significant impact on a wide range of disciplines, including art, literature, philosophy, and architecture. Catharine MacKinnon claims that "What postmodernism gives us instead is a multicultural defense for male violence - a defense for it wherever it is, which in effect is a pretty universal defense." (Sontag, 1992, p. 109).

Madonna's image and persona have been interpreted as reflecting postmodern ideas about identity and the construction of reality. Her constant reinvention of herself through costume, makeup, and hairstyle can be seen as a critique of fixed, essential identity categories. Madonna's use of irony and parody in her music and videos also reflects postmodern ideas about the role of language and power in shaping reality.

Originally, Christians interpreted "spell" as the incorporation of dark forces into an object, understood as threats that had to be controlled and overcome. Something similar occurs in Marx, who interprets perversion as a falsification of reality (false consciousness), which omits the unequal power relations contained in the commodity. For Freud, perversion appears as the rejection of the conscience of the lack, whose knowledge would be too painful, and creates a fantastic object capable of accommodating the fight against the truth.

The ideas of Robert Stoller, an American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who made significant contributions to the study of human sexuality and gender identity, differed somewhat from Freud's. Stoller viewed perversion as a more complex and varied phenomenon. According to Stoller (1975), a sexual perversion is any sexual behavior that involves a deviation from what is considered socially acceptable or normative. Perversion, in this sense, is not necessarily pathological or harmful, but simply reflects the diversity of human sexual expression.

Stoller's work on perversion was influential in the postmodern era, when scholars began to question the idea of a fixed, stable sexual identity. In this context, Stoller's emphasis on the variability of sexual desire and behavior was seen as a useful corrective to the rigid categories of sexuality that had been constructed in previous eras.

We know, therefore, that perversion resides in this thin line between presence and absence, between consciousness and the unconscious, a truth that conceives the subject, not only by its factual substance, but also by the subjective rhetoric that surrounds it. When analyzing an object like the book *Sex*, we must recognize that it has a tangible specificity and, at the same time, contains a verbal bond that goes beyond its surface. The amulet in both Freud and Marx represents a lack. And it is this lack that we are interested in understanding. Marx tried to decipher the complexity of what is included in the production cycle. He called the product.

In his perception, an object has 'use value', but when transmuted into merchandise, it also begins to exhibit 'exchange value'. This second evaluation is only possible through the badge system that comes with the product. It is this commodification of signs that makes the commodity not only an inanimate thing at the service of use, but also an objectivation of work and socially negotiated values. Some of the social bonds that form between people are considered terrible ways of relating things.



And comparisons we must turn to the vague realm of faith. There, the products of the human brain seem to have a life of their own, independent figures that retain relationships with each other and with people. This is what is happening to crafts in the commodity world. I call this situation fetishism, which is always linked to the product of labor when it becomes a commodity (MARX, 1999, p. 94). Through this understanding, the commodity hides exploitation relations and alienates the worker from the final object of his effort, as it deprives him of recognizing himself as a producer.

Furthermore, the fetishism of the commodity also hides the fact that the commodity is the product of unequal relations, depriving humanity of recognizing a reality other than its fetishized surface. Thus, commodities are dual only because they include the system's own contradictions, and this duality is not the product of chance but the result of asymmetrical forces hidden behind the attractive images of commodities. The great incongruity of the commodity resides in the distortion caused by fetishism that denies its essence, transforming it into "pure positivity" as the maximum expression of wealth perversion due to its capacity, misery, exploitation and concealment of the death invested in its body. (KEHL, 2008, p. 29). It is important to add that consumer demand has more to do with the meaning than with the real usefulness of the product. In this power of fetishization resides the promise of happiness through consumption as a primary component of the system. Thus, hedonism is understood as the only way to achieve the delight of fulfilling eternal whims and unattainable standards of satiety in commodities. Indeed, complex seduction strategies are designed into everyday life, the purpose of which is to seduce with promises of endless delight.

At this point, it is opportune to introduce another intersection between psychoanalysis and historical-dialectical materialism: the fixation on the will to delight. In Freud's concept, this comprises the inherent nature of perversion in which the psychoanalytic concept is consistent with "Some imaginary subjective position that considers the acceptance of the other as an object. Because the distortions only want from the other what the other "wants" can provide happiness and satisfaction. nothing more than that" (JORGE; BASTOS, 2009, p. 25). In Marxism, the capitalist takes on evil qualities when he appropriates someone else's labor power for his own enjoyment. In this way, inequality ends up favoring this perverted right of use while at the same time forcing the proletariat to submit to the capitalists.

Let him lend his body to craft forged goods, which ends up alienating their work and making their relations hostile. From then on, the worker becomes dehumanized from his

condition as a subject, because in the obsessive delight of profit the capitalist changes him into a simple "object of enjoyment for a master who enjoys this enjoyment and with whom he has not the slightest contact". often not. I don't even know him [...]. It is the object that produces the object of happiness" (JORGE; BASTOS, 2009, p. 28).

The unequal relationship between the capitalist and the proletariat is also mistaken because under capitalism it is not like the feudal yoke. Subordinates were treated as if they were independent. As if they all contain the opportunity not to sell their labor power. However, what this discourse denies is that, by selling their workforce, the wage earner has stolen their freedom and that not working is far from being an option in an unequal society. Thus, in the proletarian condition, submission to the conditions imposed by the bourgeoisie is the only alternative for survival, duly masked by the discourse of universal freedom.

It is important to note that, in capitalist language, social relations existed between "free" people and not in the overt forms of yoke and domination. Here, the relationship between "free people" must be contractual, because in this way the selfish will to assert personal interests is guaranteed. In relation to the other, the subject focuses on an object of interest: a commodity capable of guaranteeing pleasure, be it the body or work, both acquired by contractual stipulations. For this reason, Žižek (1996) understands that cynicism is the response of the dominant culture, seeing in this perverse appropriation of work a legitimate activity for the delight of those in power: "The cynical mind, with all its ironic detachment, leaves the fundamental level of ideological fantasy untouched, the level at which ideology structures social reality itself" (Žižek, 1996, p. 314).

The author goes on to argue that this cynicism does not only affect work relations, but is also confused with social reality, demonstrating that fetishized doing is not the product of a total alienation of subjects, but of a fantasy that is confused with reality. In this sense, Žižek (1996, p. 316) extends the Marxist formula "they don't know it, but they do it" to "they know that, in their activity, they follow an illusion but they do it anyway". Finally, giving in to the temptations and disillusionments that shine in the merchandise, we decide to absorb all the pleasure it promises us and, when it runs out, we move on to something else – perversion – in an endless zeal for satisfaction.

It assumes the status of a subversive commodity tycoon and, at the same time, compares itself to capitalist subtitles. Madonna follows the same perverse logic described above. In that sense, the scam appeared in the book *Sex*, which sold out quickly. It has

attracted consumers who crave the instant pleasure it has to offer. Perhaps the cynicism that characterized Zizek not only marks Madonna's perverse behavior, but also expressed itself in the behavior of the market itself and, by extension, of those who, to a certain extent, recognized in this work the grotesque substratum of being "free". The work as a whole is subversive to make the eccentric visible, but it obeys the same perverse gear of what it means to be a capitalist in an era marked by narcissism and the dictatorship of delight.

### 3 MADONNA, SEXUALITY AND GENDER

The word “sex” carries with it a vast history, accompanying social changes from classical antiquity to the present day. The evolution of sexual discourse is notable for the social inclusion and free will conquered by the so-called minorities – women, non-cis, non-Caucasian, and non-heterosexual people, for instance – which introduced 'new' sexualities, as well as practices that might be deemed as ‘distorted’ (notice that a heterosexual is referred to as “straight”, which by default implies that not being a heterosexual equals being “crooked” or “twisted”). In the 21st century, sex is still taboo and its discussion still is morally condemned in certain circles, but not here. The intent here is to freely discuss sexual activity without moral, political, and/or religious judgments. Therefore, "sexuality" must be understood as a historical-social phenomenon with a focus on Western civilizations, which is built from the knowledge developed about it in the society in question.

The concept and terminology of "sexuality" as we know it today arrived at the end of the 19th century as an invention of the Western man to describe the psychological and physical phenomena that occurred in his life. However, the discovery of sexuality began long before the so-called Western civilization.

We can say that the emergence of sexuality is directly related to oppression; and this is intertwined with power, as already mentioned. In this context, the sexuality of the working classes was suppressed so that they could spend all their energies in the exhausting work they performed, and not divert their attention to the pursuit of pleasure and/or to the feeling of rebellion for domination.

Due to power relations, sex underwent several changes over the centuries until it reached what we know today, but we cannot confuse sexuality and gender, despite the two instances being related to each other. Louro (2000) explains that they are parts that constitute the subject's identities, throughout his life, being mutable and even contradictory. In short: sexual identities are constructed through the way individuals live their sexuality; gender identities are constructed when subjects identify themselves in society, throughout history, as male and female.

In many cultures, female sexuality is built through the values defined by male sexuality. It is a “product of male power to define what is necessary and desirable – a historically rooted power”, says Louro (2000). Sexuality has as much to do with our beliefs,

ideologies and imaginations as it does with our physical bodies”, he reiterates. The oppression of women comes from antiquity and its origins are directly related to the display of the body. In the case of Athens, exposure is common on the battlefield, and in the future, sports will replace warfare, which is an activity especially for men.

Due to the way the body is displayed, it is an admiration for men and a deprivation for women, as they cannot be equally represented without being punished. When the human being moves away from the original basic form, the heterosexual man and woman, these representations can suffer discrimination or subordination, as is the case, for example, of homosexuals and bisexuals.

In light of what has been said we can make a few comments on sexuality in Madonna’s work. Throughout her career as a singer, actor, dancer, director and even writer, she has always demonstrated that there are no limits to her artistic expression. When it comes to sex Madonna has been liberal and daring, adjectives that the media and conservative critics have always used, especially in the 80s and the 90s in reference to her music, her video clips, her shows, in short, to virtually everything related to her. Madonna preaches like a world-renowned artist. In turn, the singer faced these criticisms through her own work, mostly private, with proclamations and controversial interpretations, the most spontaneous and direct way of exposing his points of view.

Contrary to feminist creations, anthropologist Camille Paglia (apud SOARES, 2004) defines that girls are “always masked” and vocalists are in this reflection. Andrew Goodwin (1992) emphasizes: “Madonna's image was particularly important in the last years of the 80s, inverting the notion that the singer was a chameleon of precarious existence.”.

The fixation on objects of pleasure offered by postmodern society is no longer considered a deviant behavior, mainly because in the current context there has been a sharpening of the characteristics of capitalism turning them into a power irrepressible. In view of this, the content of the song harmonizes with the book “Sex” insofar as it the implicit seduction in phrases like “take you from behind” and the manipulation of “push myself into your mind” become visible in the aesthetics that run through the book and the work as whole that, finally, connect perfectly with the hedonic ethics of postmodernity.” (GUSMÃO, 2019, p. 79)

Madonna's sexualities arise from these "masks" she has been wearing over the years, in the field of sexuality she has been heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, sadomasochistic,

fetishist, androgynous, promiscuous, etc, to the point of making the general public confuse her personal sexualities with the words and interpretations that she exposed in their work. In this exhibition, this analysis addresses Madonna's audiovisual sexuality, focusing on the perversion experienced in her 1992 collaborative work, *Erotica*.

#### 4 EARLY CAREER: MADONNA AND THE HIV EPIDEMIC

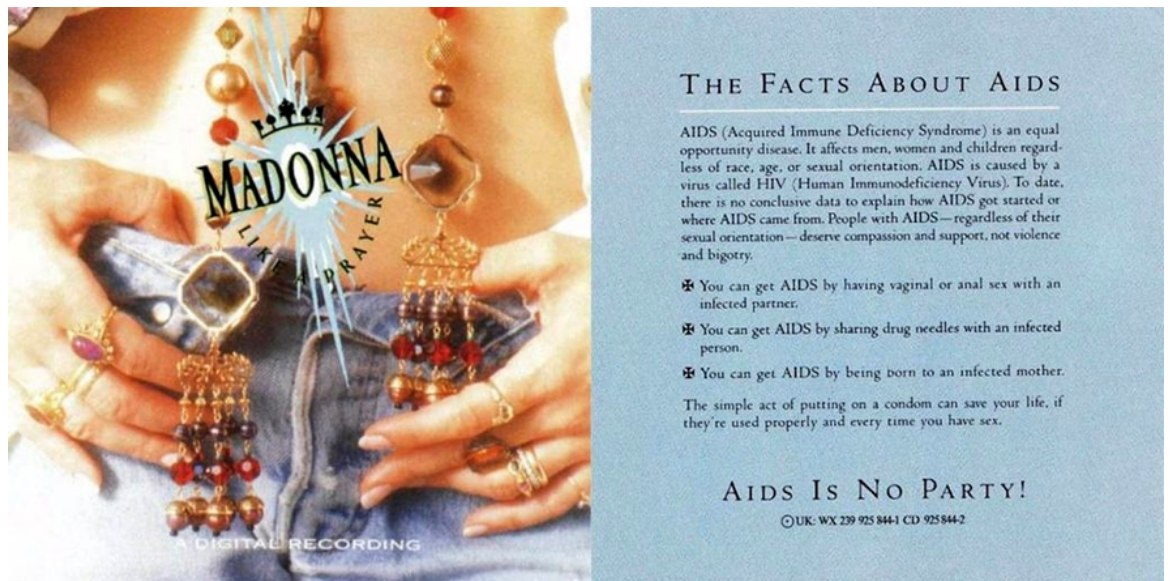
During her speech at the GLAAD Awards in May 2019, Madonna opened up about life in Detroit in the late 1970s and her relationship with Christopher Flynn, the gay dance teacher who was the first man to call her 'beautiful'. The professional relationship turned into friendship, and Flynn took it upon himself to take the young Ciccone to his first gay cabaret. "For the first time I saw men kissing men, girls dressed like boys, boys wearing hot pants. Insane and incredible dancing and a kind of freedom and joy and happiness that I had never seen before. I finally felt like I was not alone, [...] and that gave me hope", said Madonna about the experience. From that moment on, one of the strongest allies of the LGBT community in the entertainment industry was born. The 1980s brought Madonna to New York, where she befriended many artists, including the most openly gay artists such as photographer Herb Ritts. It was the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, which was then known as "gay cancer".

Over the years Madonna has lost many of her close friends to HIV such as Martin Burgoyne and Keith Haring, who are well known figures in the pop art world. *Holiday* is her first song riding a wave that will only get bigger with *Like a Virgin* two years later. There, a new pop sensation was born. She was on the cover of Time magazine and named the most famous woman of the decade and an American teen icon. 1986 was a peak year for MadonnaMania. Since then, she is no longer worried about the negative impact of criticism and, as proof of this, she releases the video for the #1 hit *Open Your Heart*. In it, the artist embodies a peep show dancer for an audience made up of several spectators, including two sailors locked in a cabin, who insinuate that they are gay, and a woman dressed in men's clothing, almost a drag king. Certainly, this was one of the first mainstream videos to show such scenes on North American MTV, but it was far from being Madonna's main "act" to give more visibility to LGBTs.

At the end of the decade, Madonna released *Like A Prayer*. Along with the physical version of the LP and the booklet with the lyrics, Madonna decided to publish a card with information about AIDS in the booklet of the album, which not only warned about their ways of infection, but also explained how people with HIV needed support and compassion, regardless of their sexual orientation. At the end of the booklet was the message: "AIDS IS NO PARTY!" Today, in times of Google and the internet, this may seem banal, but this was

1989, when paper and ink were expensive and access to information was scarce. Families didn't talk about sex, schools even less. And, in the media, HIV was still treated, as mentioned earlier, as a gay disease.

**Figure 4 - In 1989, Madonna brought a booklet with information about the HIV virus in the booklet of *Like a Prayer***



Source: Google Images, 2023.

In the early 1990s, Madonna released one of her biggest hits to date with the Dick Tracy soundtrack. *Vogue* was inspired by dances hosted by the LGBTQ community in NYC, primarily blacks and Latinos. Some bibliographical sources mention that the inspiration came directly from the Xtravaganza house, famous for the Harlem dances. The song pays homage to the subculture that brought the artist worldwide exposure and spent three weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. As part of the campaign, Madonna performed one of her most famous live performances so far on the stage of the Video Music Awards. Appearing at the *Vogue* camp, she lived out her dream of an unabashedly beautiful Marie-Antoinette surrounded by gay men.



**Figure 5 - Madonna performing *Vogue* at the MTV Video Music Awards, 1990**



Source: Google Images. 2023.

## 5 PERVERSION IN *SEX* AND *EROTICA*

The opening stretch of the song *Erotica* is quite emblematic to characterize the way in which Madonna incorporates psychoanalytic elements. One of these characteristics is precisely the shamelessness expressed in this hedonic quest for enjoyment, as the lyrics themselves are a tribute to the concupiscence of a character (Dita) fixated on enjoying anything (including “people” in this term) that is within reach.

The fixation on objects of pleasure not offered by postmodern society is no longer considered a deviant behavior, mainly because in the current context there has been an aggravation within what it proposed, making them an irrepressible power. In view of this, the content of the song harmonizes with the book *Sex*, insofar as the implicit seduction in phrases such as “take you from behind” and the manipulation of “push myself into your mind” become visible in the aesthetics that run through the book and the work as a whole that, finally, are perfectly connected to perversion, the repressed desires that were once repressed by civilizing, repressing processes.

First, it is necessary to point out that Madonna not only assumes the position of entrepreneur, but she is also the commodity itself in its supreme power of fetishization. In the same year (1992) Madonna founded the company “Maverick Recording Company”, a label of “Time Warner”, which managed part of her career and that of other artists. Allied to other companies owned by it, “Maverick” only ensured greater control by Madonna over her own career, making it possible for her to manage more actively the production and uses of her image.

At the time, the name “Madonna” had already become a major undertaking, a fact that attests to how much celebrities, in general, offer themselves according to the same logic as merchandise, being materialized in products that give the public the illusion of enjoying intimately of his idol's object-personality. This transformation of things into commodities is also applicable to human figures, as “stars – like Marilyn Monroe – who become commodities and transform themselves into their own image” (JAMESON, 1996, p. 38).

Not by chance, the analogy with Monroe, as used by the author, is also extended to Madonna and, even more profoundly, since in the postmodern context the combination of stardom with the market has become a condition for survival in a scenario of fierce competition. That is why we have reached the point where image and merchandise become

indistinguishable, where celebrities imprint personality as a thing offered for sale, which gives the impression that it is in her (image and merchandise) that idol and jouissance merge.

“Maverick Recording” and other companies managed by Madonna attest to her position as a capitalist and, in reference to psychoanalysis, as a perverse character imbued with the exploitation of others for the service of her capital. Some of the artist's productions miss this image, be it the video clip for *Express Yourself*, the documentary *Truth or Dare: In Bed With Madonna* and, in this case, the book *Sex*, showing a dominant Madonna, an entrepreneur who appropriates everything around her in order to entertain, fetishize, exploit and, in addition, sell. Dita, Madonna's alter ego in the *Sex* era, conveys exactly this perverse image, as she is seductive, domineering, manipulative and focused on a single end: personal satisfaction.

In some images of *Sex*, Madonna shines, in contrast with opaque and expressionless young models, something very common in the photo shoot held at the Gaiety Theater with naked boys. They are in muddy tones, without much contrast with the scenery, while Madonna, clad in jewels, controls the situation, being the only one to show an expression of pleasure. At other times, Madonna is the only one who emerges with an expressive identity, while the models are clearly dehumanized and reduced to the scenery, they are mere objects of satisfaction.

*Sex*, therefore, crudely portrays this perverse relationship of usufruct of others to the satisfaction of those who occupy a privileged place in the social hierarchy, becoming a clear object of fetishization insofar as it reveals and simultaneously omits the cruelty of what it intends to portray. To illustrate what is argued above, Joey Stefano, a gay pornographic actor present in some photographs of the book, can offer clues to understand the perverse logic of *Sex*. The underground scene served as an inspiration for Madonna, who traveled through this “underworld” during the production of the work. *Sex* resorted to pornographic actors and locations usually filled by practitioners of sadomasochism and professionals in the pornographic industry.

Despite being happy to participate in the work, Stefano was disappointed with the 150-dollar fee he was paid and, after participating in the sessions, along with other models, he returned to his real life and, under a daily misfortune, two years later he died of an overdose of a fatal combination of cocaine and heroin. On this subject O'Brien quotes the biographer Isherwood:

“When Madonna and Co. packed their bags and left the Gaiety, they took with them the flamboyant chic that oozes from the pages of *Sex*. They left behind mundane reality and the boys who had to live with it seven days a week. When they were duly rendered, he and the pop star went their separate ways (O'Brien, 2007, p. 193). an underworld legitimately explored by the protagonist who appears splendid to the public. “Sex” is fetishized merchandise as it eclipses all the devastating traces of an unequal society, which was aestheticized and portrayed there, but with no intention of overcoming it.

**Figure 6 - Madonna sucking a model's big toe**



Source: Google Images. 2023.

In this, both Freud and Marx help to understand what fetishism there is in the perverse personality reified in *Sex*, according to Kehl: in capitalist societies, people cease to be a perverse exception to become the rule. In a market society, the perversion of the commodity is one of the main organizers of the social bond (KEHL, 2008, p. 29).

Although “Sex” is raw and aggressively unveils a universe, it still fetishizes the cruelty of the everyday life of the subjects reproduced there and the public, as suggested by Žižek, does not seem to care so much about this fact. The logic of cynicism operates here because it finds fertile ground in postmodern ethics. After all, what is it to be postmodern if not to incorporate perversion in an individualistic way, crushing everything and everyone that serves

as an obstacle to this? Isn't Dita, to some extent, an alter ego of postmodern men and women? Miklitsch does not fully answer these questions, but he points out interesting clues to problematize them:

I think it is safe to say that the body of Madonna is at once esoteric and obscene, normal and pathological. It is, in a word, representative. That is, the body of Madonna is a dream of and for the polis, screening as it does those collective and sometimes not so republican desires and fantasies that fuel the nation imaginary. (MIKLITSCH, 1998, p. 109)"

Here, at no time, do we dare to state that *Sex* is unethical for making use of merchandise-bodies portrayed with opacity, since this is the logic of the contemporary voluptuous market. From a marketing point of view, *Sex* is not unethical and Madonna embodies the same perversity as any other capitalist, with the difference that, in addition to being an entrepreneur, she is also raw material and a product of fetishization. Moreover, it is worth remembering that *Sex* is a clear expression of postmodernity also because it is situated between the conservation and subversion of the aesthetics of minority groups, whose exploitation of everything eccentric is justified by the provocation of its visibility.

**Figure 7 - Madonna in sadomasochistic poses**



Source: Google Images 2023

Thus, *Sex* became controversial, both for conservative groups who judged it vulgar, and for minorities themselves, who judged it cruel as it made up the “underworld” as a mere curious piece. With this, it is safe to say that Madonna's trajectory in the media is marked by ambiguity, regardless of the angle from which one chooses to analyze it. Lesbians, for example, were portrayed both within the stereotyped discourse and outside of it, making this an occasion for the diffusion of an allegedly fluid sexuality in Madonna. She plays with bisexuality, sometimes in a dominant role, sometimes as a voyeur, sometimes in a fragile appearance in the arms of another woman.

It is clear that Madonna shamelessly explores countless positions and places of pleasure, and whether this expresses the truth about herself or just hides the hyper-reality of a fiction at the service of her heritage is up to the public to decide. The same controversy was applied to the feminist movement at the time, which was divided between those who accused Madonna of stereotyping women by sexuality, and those who celebrated her haughty conduct on the subject. It is noticeable that in most of the images, Madonna is the dominant pole and, in the texts of *Sex*, fantasies are explored as a product of a controlling creativity of her alter ego. Metzstein (1993), for example, remembers that the emblem (X) engraved on the aluminum back cover represents a praise to the vagina, denoting that in the work the phallus is in the woman, more specifically in Madonna.

In some texts this idea arises: “I wouldn't want a penis [...] I think I have a dick in my brain. I don't need to have one between my legs”. (MADONNA et al, 1992, p. 40) The phrase surrounds an image that focuses on Madonna's expression of pleasure, while touching and staring at a naked boy's penis. The extra is presented from the back and without his face showing, only his buttocks, parts of the back and legs appear. Here the focus is on her, only Madonna. Something similar is registered in the photographs with her then boyfriend, Vanilla Ice. Madonna is naked, Ice wears ragged jeans and, as Guilbert points out (2002, p. 55), “Ice doesn't take his clothes off because he is fundamentally harmless: the phallus is on Madonna's side”.

To this it is worth adding that the great innovation of *Sex* was not the exposure of underground environments or the game with sadomasochistic perversions, what is new here is the fact that all this has been carried out by a woman, assuming her vocation enterprising, having in sex a propelling theme of its ostensive position in the market. At the same time the work talks about sex, *Sex* talks about business. As a final problematization of this theme, it is

pertinent to consider that in 1979 - that is, prior to her fame - Madonna had posed nude for a low-circulation pornographic magazine. Although it dealt with this same “Madonna”, at the time her place of speech exposed her total vulnerability to the masturbatory gaze of the consumers of that product.

The crucial difference in relation to *Sex* is that now Madonna is a show-woman, an entrepreneur of undeniable importance and a postmodern myth who, unlike many others, does not expose herself in a subservient position when it comes to sex appeal, but made her own body a tool, not only at the service of the lustful look of others, but, and above all, at the service of her heritage. In *Sex* Madonna exposes herself, not out of necessity, but because she understood that sex at that moment would be the best theme to awaken love and hate that would guarantee her visibility and, at the same time, to sustain the fetishism of a commodity that earned her huge figures.

**Figure 8 - Madonna and sexual perversion, in which satisfaction is linked to suffering or humiliation inflicted on another in the act of being naked in public.**



Source: MADONNA et al. (1992, p. 118)

As Wiseman (1993, p. 101) well differentiates, “in 1993 the photographs themselves show Madonna (in 1979 they showed a model) partly clothed, unclothed, with a cat, and

progress to images of her on all fours imitating the pose of a 'hungry pussy'". Madonna's images corroborate to remind us that discourses about sex never occur outside of power relations. *Sex* is a legitimate expression of this Foucauldian idea, since, having become an icon of pop culture, Madonna assumed a discursive position that allowed her to play with perversions as the dominant pole. From this, it is sensible to conclude that the place of power conditions the way in which sex is perpetrated in discourse and meaning in language games as explained by Foucault.

From the singular imperative, which imposes on everyone to make their sexuality a permanent discourse, to the multiple mechanisms in the economy, pedagogy, medicine and justice that incite, extract, organize and institutionalize the discourse of sex that our civilization demanded and organized (FOUCAULT, 1988, p. 34). Although we recognize the epistemological distances between Foucault and Marx with regard to power relations, it is useful here to consider how the place of speech should be taken into account in this debate, after all, dealing with power inevitably forces us to insert the contexts and conditions that modulate speech interlocutions.



## 6 PERVERSION THROUGH THE LYRICS IN *EROTICA*

In *Erotica*, the lyrics of the songs present a bold and defiant vision of sexuality, addressing themes such as BDSM, voyeurism and fantasy. The title track, *Erotica*, is a clear example of this. The lyrics talk about the power of seduction and submission. Madonna sings: "My name is Dita, I'll be your mistress tonight / I'll be your loved one, darling, turn off the light". The song features explicit references to BDSM, such as "Bondage is a game / That you and I will play and never lose".

The song *Where Life Begins* presents a metaphor about oral sex, using the female genitalia as the starting point of the song and using a double meaning so that the listener draws his own conclusions. The lyrics include lines like "Go down / Where it's warm inside Go down / Where I cannot hide / Go down where all life begins."

"Why Is It So Hard" is a song in which Madonna deals with themes of social justice and equality, as well as the struggle for human rights. Madonna's intention with this song was to raise awareness about the discrimination and prejudice that marginalized groups face in society. The song begins with the lines, "Why is it so hard to love one another? / Why is it so hard to love?" These lines highlight the central message of the song, which is a call for people to love and accept one another, regardless of their differences. The lyrics also acknowledge the difficulties of achieving this kind of acceptance, as discrimination and prejudice are deeply ingrained in society.

"In This Life" is a tribute to her friend, Keith Haring, who died of AIDS during the height of the HIV pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s. The lyrics are very profound and reflect the loss and pain that Madonna and other people around the world experienced during this time, and also the need for understanding and acceptance of those living with HIV. The chorus of the song echoes this sentiment: "In this life, I loved you most of all, what for? / Cause now you're gone and I have to ask myself, what for?" These lines can be understood as the depth of Madonna's grief and the lasting impact that the loss of her friends had on her.

In *Rain*, Madonna takes a break from social causes and gives the album a more commercial tone. Despite the dubiousness of the lyrics and the possible interpretations of "I feel it / it's coming" Madonna, through a light and romantic ballad, makes the listener of the album relax and have, as previously said, a more commercial experience. This is clear in the

music video for the song, released in July 1993. The mega production, the black hair and the "pop diva" tone bring out yet another Madonna persona, this time the non-ironically material girl.

**Figure 9 - A brunette Madonna in Rain's music video**



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15kWITrpt5k>

The track *Deeper and Deeper* has a more positive tone towards sexuality, with Madonna singing about the joy of letting go of pleasure: "I can't help falling in love I fall deeper and deeper the further I go / Kisses sent from heaven above / They get sweeter and sweeter the more that I know." In the music video, Madonna takes a trip to the 70s, representing a time of struggle, repression, but also freedom, fun and, of course, perversion.

**Figure 10 - Madonna and her friends eating banana in Deeper and Deeper video**



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJV29ZQIUhs>

**Figure 11 - Madonna in 1920s costume in Deeper and Deeper video**



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJV29ZQIUhs>

*Bad Girl* is a sadder song, which talks about a woman who uses sex to deal with her loneliness and sadness. The lyrics include the line "Bad girl, drunk by six / Kissing someone else's lips / Smoked too many cigarettes today / I'm not happy when I act this way."

**Figure 12 - Madonna lighting a cigarette in the Bad Girl video**



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsHnROYjdgo>

**Figure 13 - Madonna playing a dead woman at the end of the Bad Girl video**



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsHnROYjdgo>

The song *Fever*, a cover of Peggy Lee's 1958 original song, presents a more sophisticated and seductive atmosphere, with Madonna singing about the intensity of desire: "You give me fever / When you kiss me / Fever when you hold me tight", whereas in *Bye Bye Baby*, Madonna sings about ending a relationship and finding new sexual partners: "I keep on waiting, anticipating / But I can't wait forever".

In general, the *Erotica* album is very explicit in its lyrics and presents a bold and provocative image of female sexuality. The lyrics can be considered perverse and sexual in their direct and explicit approach to themes such as BDSM, sexual fantasies and sexual pleasure.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Madonna is libertine and daring, adjectives always used by the media and conservative critics, especially in the 80s and 90s, to define her music, her video clips, her shows, in short, everything she stood by as an artist of global visibility. In turn, the singer countered these criticisms through her own work, primarily of a private nature, with controversial statements and performances, the most spontaneous and direct way to explain her opinions. It was in my interest in this work to show the ways in which fetishist ideas are present in the *Sex* book. For Freud, the dimension of lack of perversion appears when the perverted object replaces agony (castration) with an emblem that is easier for the conscious to bear.

In this regard, Kaplan argues that Madonna can easily fulfill this function of filling the unconscious space of phallic desire between men and girls, stars like Madonna filling that space with desire – that space that forms the subject of desire for the object – and thus many who sell products to teenage consumers cynically undermine this mechanism and use Madonna to sell merchandise (Kaplan, 1993, p. 152-153). From the Marxist point of view, the "sex" craze can be demonstrated because it constitutes the end product of the organization not only treating people as objects, but also because it ignores the inherent cruelty of the universe it portrays.

*Sex* is the product of social relations mediated by the object of a predatory enterprise run by capital at the service of the big bourgeoisie. Here he puts himself in the position of the merchandise to Madonna. But what distinguishes Madonna from the others objectified in the book is that she occupies a position of dominance, that is, she is the legitimate representative of the sadistic capital itself. Madonna has never been coy about including this twisted character. How did she perceive at the time that "sex" was an allegory of a postmodern society based on individual narcissism and the obsession with delight. It is not that narcissism was invented in the postmodern era, but we must remember that "Sex" only illustrates the rise of capitalist seduction to selfish delight in the postmodern age.

By the way, it is useful to remember the words in *Human Nature* (1994), a song from her 1994 album *Bedtime Stories*, released right after *Erotica*: "Oh, I didn't know I couldn't talk about you (what was I thinking?)". To some extent, it is a representation of postmodern men and women trapped in the pursuit of self-realization at the heart of a society where tyranny is "enjoy", "enjoy", "consume". said is the portrait of the immediate need to become an image

and metaphor of capital. that turns everything and everyone into a commodity at the service of the selfish dream of life centered on narcissism. Bauman (2001, p. 74) characterizes the postmodern man's profile well, representing the transience of satisfaction, and such characteristics apply a lot to Madonna and, by extension, to the fetishist values of her work.

That said, it all depends on the person. It is up to the individual to find out what s/he is capable of doing, to develop that capacity to the fullest, and to choose the ends which that capacity can best serve, that is, with the greatest conceivable satisfaction. It is up to the individual to tame the unexpected so that it becomes entertainment. (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 74) “Jaez” is a rethinking of postmodern behavioral logic: because it intends to beautify the unknown, because it obfuscates the brutality of this cosmos, because it is manipulated by the perversion of the system, and even because it expresses a cruel method. Analyzing some of her interviews during the *Sex/Erotica* era, I start to reach the conclusion that when Madonna dehumanizes people in *Sex*, she intends to give a voice to gays, lesbians and other members of the underground space, but in her work these issues are silenced by the pretentious power that makes each discourse different through marketing links.

Finally, it is worth reaffirming that “gender” is in this dichotomy between the maintenance of hegemonic systems and the rise of unequal groups. In addition to the binary theories of contemporaneity, Jameson (1996) proposes to analyze postmodernism as progress and catastrophe at the same time, after all, in this period an exotic aesthetic is used for the trade of goods, but at the same time this appropriation serves ( or may serve) empowerment for invisible groups. In the end, patterns and otherness were created. This complicates modern times and makes them less predictable than Manichaeic analysis can achieve. Making everything “weird” beautiful is sometimes seen as a triumph of conservatism. It is sometimes interpreted as a tool of resistance.

Before we think of "sex" as mere pornographic language or the meticulous product of a company called Madonna, we need to recognize that "sex" has to do with postmodernity, the fusion of primitive impulses with the more predatory impulses of capitalism. The substratum of the attraction of "delight" in its most perverse sexuality. “Sexuality” talks about us as postmodernists – which brings us once again to the verses in “Human Nature”: *Oops, I didn't know I couldn't talk about you.*

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