

CHERILYN SARKISIAN – ‘CHER’ OR THE POSTMODERN PROMETHEUS: VOICING THE ‘MARGINAL’

CHERILYN SARKISIAN – ‘CHER’ OU O PROMETEU PÓS-MODERNO: DANDO VOZ AO ‘MARGINAL’

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This paper aims at showing how Cher’s performance helps break barriers of official identities, celebrates difference, and ultimately voices the marginal. Her career is a vast repertoire of ethnic, feminist, and postmodern representations. It celebrates hybridity and self-transformation and is rooted in her ancestry and the sociocultural context of the United States of her childhood and adolescence. In the episode of *The X-Files The Postmodern Prometheus* the series creator rewrites Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* and, establishing a parallel between Cher’s public image and the myth of Prometheus, shows how her subversive performance empathizes with the marginal and helps build a collective experience that culminates in an impressive number of followers.

Keywords: performance, hybridity, self-transformation, Prometheus, postmodernism, feminism, ethnicity

Este artigo tem como objetivo mostrar como a performance de Cher ajuda a quebrar barreiras de identidades oficiais, celebra a diferença e em última instância dá voz ao marginal. A sua carreira é um vasto repertório de representações étnicas, feministas e pós-modernas. Esta celebra o hibridismo e a autotransformação e tem origem na sua ascendência e no contexto sociocultural dos Estados Unidos da sua infância e adolescência. No episódio de os Ficheiros Secretos *O Prometeu Pós-moderno* o criador da série rescreve *Frankenstein ou O Moderno Prometeu* de

Mary Shelley e, estabelecendo um paralelo entre a imagem pública de Cher e o mito de Prometeu, mostra como a sua performance subversiva revela empatia com o marginal e ajuda a construir uma experiência coletiva que culmina num impressionante número de fãs.

Palavras-chave: performance, hibridismo, autotransformação, Prometeu, pós-modernismo, feminismo, etnicidade

O brave monster! Lead the way.
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Introduction

According to Marvin Carlson, a 1990 report on the performance taking place in Los Angeles pointed to the fact that the majority of the identity performance was being produced by “a coalition of women, gay men, African-American, Hispanic, and young Asian-American artists whose aesthetics and politics challenge both the art world’s and the media’s version of our socio-cultural reality” (Carlson, 2004, p. 177). He refers that the study showed one of the most important characteristics of the end of the century performance in the United States: a growing interest in multiculturalism and in the expression of minorities, which would promote a stimulating diversity of approaches to the performance of identity. Its basis is similar to that of the latter but the emphasis lies on the experience of the members of a minority group instead of on the experience of an individual. Carlson cites Gómez-Peña, who considers that the object of the art of performance must, from then on, be to attack “the European myth of the artist as a marginal bohemian” (Carlson, 2004, p. 177), one still common in the United States. According to Carlson, Gómez Peña emphasizes the importance of having minorities ‘making culture’ and talking from the center. Cultural performance aims at that.

In the period referred to, the early 1990s, feminist performance is interested in questioning, exposing and deconstructing the cultural and social ground governing traditionally feminine and masculine roles. The emphasis is now on the “social construction of the body, the body as a carrier of signs, and with it the social construction of the subject in per-

formance” (Export, 1992, p. 33). In the 80s and beginning of the 90s the woman artist starts having a say and refuses her traditional role, that of ‘the Other’, that of object of the male gaze. Traditional representation, committed to repetition, tries to establish and control ‘the Other’ as ‘the Same’ and that is why Elwes thinks that women performers should “never stay the same long enough to be named, fetishized” (Elwes, 1985, pp. 63-94). Another approach to this problem is that of Judith Butler, who argues, “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” (Butler, 1999, p. 180), encrypted and stamped by society upon the individual. Butler considers that those predetermined roles established by society can be altered if appropriate tools are used to support a different cause and points to “the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configuration outside the restricting frames of masculine domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1999, p. 180). Both Export and Butler are using “performance” as the display of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior that artists are at this point aiming at exposing and condemning, that is, condemning “the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character” (Butler, 1999, p. 180). We have thus reached a point in which the work of the artist (her / his performance) denounces the roles we play according to what society expects from us.

Postmodern theories value the work of the artist as a way of resisting dominant cultural models of behavior as well as the concept of ‘deviance’ in repetition and its importance for cultural changes to occur. Authors such as Derrida, Bakhtin, de Certeau, and Adorno advocate such ideas. The postmodern political performance of resistance, especially that of women and ethnic artists, emphasizes the importance of lack of stability. Artists frequently engage in performances with strong ethnic connotations that can be subject to irony and engender a political game with a double meaning. By playing these roles, artists introduce a subversive parodic self-consciousness very common in contemporary engaged performance. It is the case of Cher’s work throughout her vast career: it has been helping spread such an ideology. Consequently, one can compare the impact of her presence in popular culture with Prometheus’ actions upon the humans. Chris Carter expresses the same opinion in *The X-Files*

when he chooses to write an episode called *The Postmodern Prometheus*¹, linking Cher's image to the myth of Prometheus.

1. Cher's Empowering Performance: Social Responsibility and Activism

Cher's career has a strong correlation with her origins. Her father was Armenian and her mother is American with, among others, Cherokee ancestry. As she was growing up, she wanted to become a Hollywood actress but the standard one had fair skin and blond hair. She did not fit in and started to look for role models in irreverent entertainers such as Tina Turner and Audrey Hepburn. Fifty years ago Cher belonged to a 'no man's land', to an uncomfortable territory even in the context of the melting pot of the United States.

In both Cher's *Do you Believe?* (1999-2000) and the *Living Proof: The Farewell Tour* (2002-2005) references to a circus setting occur through the figure of the clown, the tamer, and the display of aerial shows. In one of the segments of the first Cher asks the audience if they agree with her and think she looks like Kabuki Bozo the Clown. On the subject, Loran Marsan comments, "In traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre all female parts were played by men in exaggerated makeup and dress ... she addresses herself as a woman-playing-a-man-playing-a-woman-playing-a-clown" (Marsan, 2010, p. 54). Cher is identifying herself with the marginal, with hybrid identities. Right after this segment she alludes to two of her songs, *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves* and *Half-Breed* by saying:

Before we go any further we have to raise the lights because I have to see something, Ok? Ok, so I see tramps there, lots of tramps there, lots of tramps here too, some gypsies over there and some half-breeds back there. Big tramps just stood up back there ... you guys are just gypsies, tramps and thieves. I'm sorry, we just got a pocket here. I have to know these things because I know you guys can be difficult so I have to move the show right

¹ *The Postmodern Prometheus* is the episode 5 from season 5 of the series.

along, I don't want to piss any of you guys off. ... When I did this show I kind of wanted it to be ... like HBO marries Cher marries Cirque du Soleil, so it's kind of Cher du Soleil. So this is the beginning of the Cher du Soleil extravaganza right now.

When Cher asks for more light she is shifting the focus from her to the audience and simultaneously identifying herself with them: they are all in some way marginal figures. Still during the same segment Cher mentions that she has many natural hair colors (wigs) and that she does not understand how she has a 35 year-old repertoire when she is not 35 years old yet (by the time she was 53). As Marsan points out, Cher is embracing what seems to be opposites (youth / old age; natural / artificial) and by doing so defying rules and showing labels shall not be used since opposites can go together (Marsan, 2010, p. 54).

Further ahead in the *Do you Believe?* show, when introducing the song *Walking in Memphis*, she talks about its video, which is on display on the giant screen, "I made this really cool video where I got to play Elvis, I actually didn't play Elvis; I was Elvis ... I want to warn you gay guys, don't fall in love with me because I am a really cute guy." Marjory Garber, talking about the politics of transvestism asserts, "clothing constructs (and deconstructs) gender and gender differences" (Garber, 1992, pp. 9-10) and cites Sandra Gibert and Susana Gubar, "cross dressing is ... a dream of prophecy and power for women ... The 'third-sex' turns out to be largely a way of securing power for modernist women" (Garber, 1992, pp. 9-10). Cher's performance of the song *Perfection* (that claims the importance of love over the fight for perfection) in *Extravaganza: Live at the Mirage* (her first live music video title) starts with one of her impersonators on stage, making the viewers believe for a while that they are in her presence. It is one more case in which Cher's performance reinstates Butler's concept of gender as performativity.

The lyrics of *Walking in Memphis* mention the ghost of Elvis roaming Graceland, which alludes to his immortality. Cher is herself associated to this image due to the longevity of her career: she has been called the 'Eternal Phoenix' given her capability of reinventing herself during the

last five decades. In the *Living Proof: The Farewell Tour* Cher started the shows dressed as a tamer commenting on the length of her career, “Ladies and gentlemen, and flamboyant gentlemen. Boys and girls and children of all ages. Welcome to the Cher-est show on earth” and ending with “And all I have to say is, follow this, you bitches.” The use of subversive language is recurrent in Cher’s public appearances and it cannot be separated from her personality and the image of irreverence associated to her. Steven Forry commented that after having read *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* William Beckford said, “This is perhaps, the foulest Toadstool that has yet sprung up from the reeking dunghill of the present time” (Forry, 1990, p. ix) and counter argued, “Foul toadstool it may at times be, but it has proven to be a rather resilient toadstool nonetheless” (Forry, 1990, p. 100). The same can be said about Cher since her career is now 50 years old. J. Randy Taraborrelli refers to the criticism Cher was subject to at a preview of *Silkwood* in 1983. The audience applauded when they saw Meryl Streep and Ken Russell on the screen but when they heard “... and costarring, Cher!” someone commented, “Oh sure! Cher! She’ll be just great with Meryl Streep” and the entire theatre burst into laughter (Taraborrelli, 1986, p. viii). Two years later, Cher stars in *Mask* and she is highly acclaimed for her acting. Nevertheless, the Academy fails to nominate her. The following year, she presents the nominations for best supporting actor dressed in a Mohawk outfit and says, “As you can see I did receive my academy booklet on how to dress like a serious actress.” Some considered the remark a sort of ‘middle finger’ to the Academy. She displayed herself as a sort of a Native American ‘aberration’ in the eyes of the Hollywood ‘gods’. Cher systematically assumes a political postmodern identity rooted in difference, in ‘otherness’.

2. The Myth of Prometheus

There are different versions of the myth of Prometheus but one of the best known is Hesiod’s. It tells how Prometheus toiled diligently over the creation of the first man from a lump of clay and how, when he realized his brother Epimetheus had bestowed all the qualities from the gods

upon the other animals and had left none for humans, he devised the plan to steal fire from the gods and give it to them. The actions mentioned above share the principles subjacent to Prometheus' behavior: on the one hand, he is a thief and a transgressor, and, on the other hand, he is a savior. The literary theorist Ihab Hassan says, "Prometheus is himself the figure of a flawed consciousness struggling to transcend [...] divisions" (Hassan, 1977, p. 207). Prometheus crosses borders between the human and the divine and allows mankind to overcome its limits through art and technology. His story symbolizes the defiance of tyranny and authority as well as it recounts the birth of enlightenment. Comparisons have been drawn between Prometheus' defiance of Zeus and the French revolution as well as between Shelley's *Frankenstein* (his attempt to reanimate life in the lifeless) and also the French revolution.

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

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

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

that he rejects the creature he created.

3. The Role of Metafiction in *The Postmodern Prometheus*

Many dramatizations of Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* took place before *The Postmodern Prometheus* aired on television network Fox on November 30, 1997 but, interestingly, by then Scientists at the National Institute of Health were raising questions and concerns similar to those raised by Shelley's contemporaries: Dolly the sheep had been cloned the year before and newspaper and magazine articles talked about the dangers of transplanting animal organs, of 'playing god' as Prometheus did.

The episode of *The X-Files The Postmodern Prometheus* begins when a comic book, *The Great Mutato*, is opened. Eighteen-year-old Izzy, Shaineh Berkowitz's son, goes on a trip and she stays at home alone. While she is watching *The Jerry Springer Show* (a mother with a very hairy baby is being interviewed) a circus tent covers her house. She starts listening to *The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore* by Cher as the room is filled with smoke. Then she sees a disfigured form approaching and becomes unconscious. FBI special agent Fox Mulder receives a letter from Shaineh, who has heard about him from *The Jerry Springer Show*. She describes the event to him and claims she is now pregnant as a result of the attack. The same had happened when she got pregnant 18 years ago. Mulder and his partner, Dana Scully, travel to rural Albion, Indiana. After talking to Shaineh and Izzy they learn that the creature that attacked her looks like one of the characters from Izzy's comic book, *The Great Mutato*, who, in turn, is inspired by a mysterious creature who has been seen by the locals. Izzy takes Mulder and Scully to a wooded area where they see *The Great Mutato*² from a distance and talk to an old man who tells them there are no monsters there and advises them to go

² The Great Mutato is a big Cher fan who has established a parallel between his life and that of Rocky, the character from the 1985 film *Mask* (based on the life of Roy L. "Rocky" Dennis, a boy who suffered from craniodiaphyseal dysplasia).

see his son (Dr. Pollidori, a genetic scientist) if they are looking for a monster. Pollidori shows them his experiments and Mulder starts suspecting Pollidori created The Great Mutato. In the meantime, Elizabeth, Dr. Pollidori's wife, is attacked in her house in the same manner as Shaineh had been. As Mulder and Scully are passing by the house they see it covered by a circus tent and hear *Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves*, another song by Cher. Inside, they find Elizabeth unconscious and soon after they also fall unconscious. Dr. Pollidori's father steps from the smoke with a gas mask covering his face. When Mulder and Scully regain consciousness they find a chemical residue from an agricultural agent used to anesthetize animals and they grow suspicious of Dr. Pollidori's father, a farmer. At the old man's house, while The Great Mutato is watching the film, *Mask*, the old man affectionately calls him son and advises him not to stay up until late. In the scene from *Mask* Cher's character is also displaying her affection for her deformed son. Dr. Pollidori comes to his father's house and kills him. The Great Mutato finds the body and buries it in a barn alongside pictures of him with the old man. Mulder and Scully come to the house and find the grave. They decide to protect The Great Mutato from an angry mob of townspeople who Dr. Pollidori has, in the meantime, lead. He explains to all he was created 25 years before, the result of a genetic experiment gone wrong by Dr. Pollidori, and that Pollidori Sr rescued and raised him. To provide a friend and mate for him, he tried to create hybrids from his farm animals. The townspeople realize The Great Mutato is not a monster and Dr. Pollidori is arrested for the murder of his father. Mulder demands to see the writer of the story because he thinks Dr. Frankenstein (Dr. Pollidori) should pay for his evil ambitions and The Great Mutato should escape and go search for his bride. Mulder and Scully take The Great Mutato, along with the townspeople, to a Cher's concert. Shaineh and Elizabeth go to *The Jerry Springer Show* with their newborn babies (The Great Mutato lookalikes) and are asked if it is hard to love those babies: Shaineh replies, "What's not to love." The story ends with Cher³ calling

³ An impersonator played the character of Cher.

The Great Mutato on stage and Mulder and Scully dancing to the song *Walking in Memphis*. It is the end of *The Postmodern Prometheus* as well as the end of the comic book. It is understood the story of the episode is the story of the comic book.

A metafictional story self-consciously alludes to the artificiality and / or literariness of a work⁴ by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions and traditional narrative techniques and by doing so it poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. By having a rewriting of Shelley's novel start with the front cover of a comic book (*The Great Mutato*) Chris Carter deliberately calls the attention of the public they are in the presence of fiction and simultaneously 'ignores' the classical barrier between 'high' and 'low' culture.⁵ He offers the viewer a metafictional piece in which the writer of this comic book, Izzy, (also a character in his own story) is writing it as the story unfolds. Being so, as the viewers are watching the episode, the end is still open and Mulder can influence the writer to choose an end different from the expected one (some sort of replica of Shelley's novel). Mulder also reminds the viewers they are watching fiction since the story he is 'living' is Izzy's story. At the end of the *Postmodern Prometheus* Mulder wonders if he should arrest The Great Mutato, "This is all wrong, Scully. This is not how the story's supposed to end. ... Dr. Frankenstein pays for his evil ambitions, yes, but the monster's supposed to escape to go search for his bride." Scully replies, "There's not gonna be any bride, Mulder. Not in this story." But Mulder insists, "Well, where's the writer. I want to talk to the writer." The Great Mutato does 'escape': he is not arrested and is even given the opportunity to attend a Cher's concert, implicitly finding his bride in the person of Cher.⁶ Form fits content.

⁴ In this case we are clearly presented with a rewriting of Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

⁵ Fiction and reality are once again intertwined when the story lays claim to an historical personage (Cher) and The Great Mutato does not differentiate her from the character she plays in the film *Mask*. He says, "Cher loved that boy", referring to how her character, Florence (Rusty) Dennis, loved her son Rocky.

⁶ The Great Mutato, as was the case with teenager Cher, feels he does not conform to the

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

Later Scully tells Mulder:

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

When Pollidori murders his father, the community easily believes The Great Mutato was the murderer and gathers efforts to kill him. When

parameters labeled as normal by society and wishes to find someone who looks like him.

he is able to tell his story the community realizes he is not a monster. At this point the camera keeps moving from focusing on animals in the barn to townspeople, alluding to resemblances between them, a parallel similar to that made by Cher when the lights shift from the stage to the public during her *Do you Believe?* tour.

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

Fans of The X-Files, and of this episode in particular, praised Chris Carter’s choice of Cher. On October 10, 2013 John Kenneth Muir, celebrating The X-Files 20th Anniversary, posted on his blog

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

(n/p).

And speaking about the importance of popular culture he adds:

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

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

Conclusion

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

When Victor Frankenstein asks himself 'Whence did the principle of life proceed?' then as a gratifying summit to his toils creates a hideous phantasm of a man he prefigures the Postmodern Prometheus. The genetic engineer

whose power to reanimate matter – genes into life – us – is only as limited as his imagination is.

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

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[Submitted on April 27, 2015 and accepted for publication on June 15, 2015]