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Paper Dolls: Female Stereotypes in Anglo-American Music from the 1950s and the 1960s

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ABSTRACT: This article puts up for a brief cultural comment some videoclips of Anglo-American songs from the 1950s and the 1960s, which, while displaying the visual centrality of women and the beauty of the female body, also (re)produce stereotyped gender images, as well as overt or implicit macho assumptions and prejudices.

KEYWORDS: Anglo-American music (1950s-1960s), representations and images of women (1950s-1960s), female stereotypes, women as "dolls", "Paper dolls"

RESUMO: Este artigo propõe para um breve comentário cultural alguns *videoclips* de canções britânicas e norte-americanas das décadas de 1950 e 1960, que, ao mesmo tempo que atestam a centralidade visual da mulher e a beleza do corpo feminino, (re)produzem imagens estereotipadas do género, bem como pressupostos e preconceitos tendencialmente ou explicitamente machistas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Música anglo-americana (Anos 1950-1960), representações e imagens da mulher (Anos 1950-1960), estereótipos femininos, a "mulher-boneca", "Bonecas de papel"

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The female body remains an active battlefield.
Myra MacDonald

To Dr Isabel Lousada (CICS.NOVA FCSH)

After the end of the Second World War (1945) and notwithstanding the existence and subsistence, in the following decades, of two highly militarised superpowers, each one with its own areas of geostrategic, political, commercial, and economic influence, Europe and the western world, especially the countries run by democratic systems and open economies, benefited by and large from considerably high levels of growth, development and progress from the mid-1950s onwards.[1]

These favourable circumstances manifested themselves in higher visibility of middle-class women, who nonetheless remained largely confined to the domestic space in the 1950s. In times of greater affluence, the "neo-Victorian" survivals of the (image of) woman as the "angel in the house" were accompanied and supported by guidebooks and magazines extolling the roles of the perfect hostess, wife and mother, always alert to the needs of home, family, friends and guests, ever smiling and willing to fetch fresh drinks from the brand new fridge, placing them on tables and sideboards of straight, simple lines, and modern design. The very rise in the number of TV sets, complementing the crucial communicational and socially cohesive role played by the radio in the first half of the century, is pointed out by C. J. Bartlett:

> In the same period [1950s] there was the opening of new vistas through the coming of television (over 70 per cent of the population had sets by 1959) ... The growth in the employment of married women was facilitated by the availability of labour-saving equipment in the home, and was also stimulated by family demand for increased purchasing power. (1977, 147)

Likewise, to Mark Donnelly, "Television's rise to become a near universal presence in people's homes was the most important cultural transformation of the sixties. Between

1961 and 1971 the number of households with a set rose from 75 per cent to 91 per cent" (2005, 77). Finally, in *Never Had It So Good*, Dominic Sandbrook argues that

> Like the car and the wireless before it, the television transformed the mental landscapes of ordinary viewers: where once their experience might have been confined to the narrow streets of their neighbourhood, now the BBC and ITV conjured up worlds almost beyond their imagining. Political and cultural events that would once have reached the public second-hand, through newspapers, now reached them directly, through the television. (2006, 408)

The increase in the ownership of TV sets and the ensuing massification of audiences now made it possible to broadcast news and images on a larger and more effective scale, especially as "From the mid-fifties 'image' became a prime concern. Not only the image of products, but the image of people ... became fitting subjects for the services of the marketing experts" (Ford 1992, 17-18), though, in fact, one of the possible meanings of "image" points towards some degree of untruth or even falsehood.

The following quotes assess the post-war situation in Britain and the United States:

> The position of women in society, and therefore ... within the family, ... had been greatly accelerated by the Second World War. However, the ... differentiation of roles as between husband and wife prevailed, with a wife's tasks clustering round her function as homemaker and child-rearer, just as a husband's clustered around his function as principal breadwinner.
> ... it is in middle-class professional families that husbands would be most likely to share domestic chores with their wives. One must tread carefully, though, in this era long before the advent of women's liberation. Clearly, middle-class professional husbands, dedicated to success in their careers, depended very heavily upon their wives providing them with the comforts and security of domesticity. (Marwick 2003, 43-44)[2]

> The immediate post-war decades, far from promoting the role of women in society, had actually worked to drive back such advances as had been made. In both America and the UK ... the war had seen a huge drive to recruit women, giving them the jobs in factories and elsewhere that their men had been forced to forgo. Within months of the war's ending, that trend had been comprehensively reversed.... The whole *leitmotif* for Fifties women was the home, and the 'making' thereof. The media, and especially women's magazines, preached the gospel of conformity, spinning a confectioner's sugary web of unattainable domestic fantasy. (Green 1998, 398)

Peter Hennessy describes the position of women in society as "a dawn-that-never-was" (2007, 123), adding: "This featured remarkably little in the early post-war years apart from the pursuit of equal pay and the ending of marriage bars (...). Class was an immensely more potent issue than gender even as a 25-year old woman inherited the crown on the death of George VI in February 1952" (*Ibidem*). The beginnings, although slow and limited, of modern female emancipation and empowerment, are usually ascribed to the 1960s and the second wave of feminism, and the American influence is noted by David Thomson, to whom "the period saw the emergence and growth in Britain of a vociferous feminist, or 'Women's Liberation' movement, which claimed (...) that, despite the advances which had been won since the days of the suffragettes, women were still subject to widespread discrimination on all walks of life" (1991, 354).

These beginnings were also grounded in the intellectual and militant activities of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), whose seminal book *Le Deuxième Sexe* came out in 1949;[3] in the increase in the number of employed women; on the emergence of a population of young consumers (*teenagers*)[4] with their own cultural values and tastes, experiences alien to the poignant traumas of war and pacifist or hostile feelings towards new conflicts, whether global, regional or local; in the "sexual revolution" (family planning and birth control through the legalisation of the pill, abortion, open relationships...); in the creative reinvention and boost of female fashion and looks (Mary Quant, Vivienne Westwood, Vidal Sassoon...), etc. And yet, despite the increased social and professional visibility of women, they still appeared, irrespective of their fields and activities, often associated with male companions, whether husbands, boyfriends, brothers or bosses.

In this framework of consumer and capitalist societies revitalised by the purchase of goods and services beyond those strictly associated with primary needs, a possible risk and effect of enhanced female attention to their own looks and image (clothing, bags, shoes, hair, nails and make-up, jewellery...) could be, then as now, the "commodification" of women. As Janice Winship puts it, "Femininity is recuperated by the capitalist form: the exchange between the commodity and 'woman' in the ad establishes her as a commodity too (...). A woman is nothing more than the commodities she wears: the lipstick, the tights, the clothes and so on are 'woman'" (1984, 218).

Some forms of male gazing at/viewing of women as almost ornamental "objects", "trophies" or "dolls" have spilt into language (*doll, dolly bird, Barbie*) and music. This is

already patent in "Paper Doll", a song originally interpreted by The Mills Brothers in the 1940s and, later on, by Frank Sinatra:

> I'm gonna **buy** a **paper doll** that I can call **my own**
> A **doll** that other fellows cannot **steal**.
> And then the flirty, flirty guys, with their flirty, flirty eyes
> Will have to flirt with **dollies that are real**.
>
> When I come home at night, **she will be waiting**.
> She'll be **the truest doll** in all the world.
> I'd rather have **a paper doll** to call **my own**
> Than have **a fickle-minded real live girl**. (The Mills Brothers, 0:00-0:58; my emphasis)[5]

As Nicola Lane recalls:

> The important thing to remember about the '60s is that it was totally male-dominated. You had to be an awful lot of things: you had to be sexy, you had to be game for anything (...). Looks were very important. Looks were of primary importance. What really filled me with fear and loathing were these little hippie girls in long frocks, tiny little things (...) wisping around the room. The dolly bird is definitely a hippie motif as well as a Carnaby Street one. Hippie dollies wore different clothes to Biba dollies, but they were still dollies. They just wore long dresses instead of little ones. (qtd. in Green 1998, 400)

In her introductory chapter to *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, entitled "Dolls", Natasha Walter dwells on a process of "dollification" which she considers to be still underway in the 21st century, associated with a hypersexualized culture and allegedly validated by biological determinism. The author argues that despite its frequent connection with female empowerment, this hypersexualization of doll-like women does, in fact, signal a setback in the history and cause of feminism since the 1960s (see, for instance, 2013, 6 and 10). Whether or not one subscribes to this view, such phenomena like the Spice Girls, Kylie Minogue, Britney Spears and, lately, Taylor Swift seem to illustrate the visual subsistence of dollification in pop music, something that Annie Lennox, for example, rebelled against: "Before Eurythmics became established, I wanted to present myself as a

woman that was not of the girlish, girly ilk, with little mini-skirts and legs, a sexy cutesy-pie dolly-bird type person. Which I'm not" (qtd in Myra MacDonald 2003, 217).

If, irrespective of gender, the exposure of a beautiful body can inspire attraction and desire, this neither implies nor legitimates any form of sexual violence and harassment, be it physical, verbal, visual, psychological, or any other. Additionally, one should mention the metaphorical transference to the rituals and procedures of seduction – often called or known as "the love game", in both senses of the word "game" – of predatory words somehow connected with war, hunting, and food.

Bearing all this in mind, this paper puts up for a brief cultural comment some videoclips of Anglo-American songs from the 1950s and the 1960s,[6] which, while displaying, in strictly binary terms, the visual centrality of women and the unequivocal beauty of the female body, also perform and (re)produce stereotyped gender images, as well as overt or implicit macho assumptions and prejudices. Music videos can indeed be viewed, read, and studied as culturally encoded productions that play a part in constructing, reinforcing, but also challenging prevailing gender stereotypes and expectations,[7] to say nothing of their formative or educational impact:

> Male address videos draw fundamentally on the connection between male adolescent license and adult male rule by activating textual signs of patriarchal discourse. Reproducing coded images of the female body, conventionally positioning girls and women as objects of male voyeurism, are effective strategies for associating male adolescent desire and male dominance. (Lewis 1998, 135)

Taking then, as we do, these musical videos as cultural codifiers and conveyors of meaning implies paying attention to the lyrics themselves, body language, clothes, shooting angles and frames, scenery, etc., thus involving semiotic methodologies, qualifications, and abilities beyond our reach. The selection below is, therefore, illustrative and subjective, but it may nevertheless inspire larger multidisciplinary projects focused on the verbal, visual, and corporal representations of women in the artistic, media, and marketing scenes of the mid-20th century. Myra MacDonald's *Representing Women. Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (2003, particularly chapters 6 and 7), may prove useful here, but, for the time being, this essay will focus strictly on music videos and leave

out any other forms or vehicles of artistic and/or commercial representation and communication, like films, theatre, ads, etc.

Our corpus begins with a woman who, for all her glittering charisma and iconicity, may arguably be considered not only a victim of her own turbulent love life but also of her public image and exposure,[8] namely to male viewers whose coeval ideals and canons of sensuality and physical beauty she literally "embodied",[9] Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962), whose song "Diamonds are a girl's best friends" features in the film *Gentlemen prefer blondes* (1953).[10]

Although the video displays, from the very beginning, an image of female power, rule, and even "sovereignty" – after all, Marilyn repeatedly rejects and refuses the hearts that her dozen or so male suitors (or "subjects") offer her; she slaps them liberally with her fan and they still kneel before her, obey her commands, attend to her whims, carry her in their arms and lift her high above them –, the encoding/decoding of diamonds (and jewels in general) as a symbol of safety and stability, when affairs end or are at risk, has, however, a possible drawback: that of allowing the extension to the entire female gender of the traits of vanity, superficiality, futility, and material greed pertaining to the stock character played by Marilyn.[11] She (the character, not Marilyn!) is by no means a "dumb blonde"; on the contrary, she has no illusions; she knows that old age will inevitably come, "men grow cold", and old girls may be discarded; hence the need for material security and financial independence.

So can this song be read as a sound, sensible, and realistic advice to all females? The reader will judge for him(her)self. However, the rejection of the hearts at the outset, coupled with the character's obsessive craving for riches, may help build up, as suggested, a massified and biased male image of (all) women as "heartless", selfish, cynical, and cold-blooded schemers, a generalisation that must be resisted at all costs.

Speaking of generalizations, Myra MacDonald notes that "if food is reputedly the route to the male heart, shopping, preferably on an unlimited budget, is the imagined pathway to a woman's" (2003, 73). This stereotyped view is taken up in another videoclip, produced after our set timespan, but whose choreography is extremely similar to Marilyn's, although the swing of the 1950s has now given way to Madonna's pop: "Material Girl" (1984).

The visual and verbal messages at the beginning and the end of this clip (the non-musical "paratexts", so to speak), add, however, an ambiguous twist, because although the character acknowledges that "we are living in a material world / and I am a material girl" (Madonna, 1:28-1:41), she starts by telling a friend, over the phone: "Yeah, he's still after me. He just gave me a necklace. (...) Yeah, he thinks he can impress by giving me expensive gifts. It's nice though" (Madonna, 0:44-0:57). This is actually overheard by the male gazer of 0:00-0:32, who accordingly drops the present in a dustbin. At the end of the clip, she happily accepts a simple bunch of daisies (not diamonds, jewels or necklaces) and is carried away by her suitor in a farmer's or tradesman's pick-up truck, rather than a Rolls Royce limousine (Madonna, 4:17-4:40). The final images of love and romance seem therefore to deconstruct, and eventually dispel the stereotyped characterization of this "material girl".

As Janice Winship argues, "To make yourself (...) attractive is, by the mid 1960s, to make yourself *sexually* attractive and *available*: as if (...) the act of beautifying yourself is *already* to engage in sexual relations – (...) not just the promise of it" (1984, 219). The following videoclip – Neil Sedaka's "Calendar Girl" (1961) –, much in the spirit and tradition of the American music-hall, recalls the pin-ups of *Playboy*, founded by Hugh Hefner in 1953 and whose first issue featured Marilyn Monroe on the cover; see the Easter "bunny", standing for April (Sedaka, 0:33-0:38), and, for December, a flesh and blood "doll", wrapped up in the guise of a Christmas present (Sedaka, 2:08-2:12). Thus, apart from the sexualization, or sexual objectification, of women, this video blatantly enacts and performs an overall image of females as commodities. Besides the fact that, irrespective of the months, all these calendar girls are implicitly presented as "available" and "easy to get" all year round, the very word "little" can be read as derogatory (a way of "belittling" them, so to speak), rather than as an affectionate term. Finally, the very calendar numbers at the back suggest a lotto or a lottery, as if these young women were nothing but (a) game...

Jealousy and spite are not really signs of love between individuals made equal, in terms of status and dignity, by a common human condition; this should be strongly emphasized, considering the rate of different sorts of crimes, often described and presented as "passional", broadcast and almost "normalized" by some media. Nevertheless, the lyrics of songs composed by two of the greatest British bands of the Sixties – The Beatles and The Rolling Stones – sometimes voice and display an acquisitive or possessive

view of the female addressees, as well as a prescriptive and authoritarian attitude towards them. Some examples will be provided below, but this is ironical, considering not just the recurrence of "Love, love, love" as a discursive *leitmotif* and a mental "structure of feeling"[12] so mythically omnipresent throughout the decade,[13] but also the display of mass "idolatry" and "hysteria" inspired by both bands in the girls and young women who chased them around the streets and outside airports and studios, cramming halls, theatres, and sporting grounds:

> (...) what in the nature of their [The Beatles'] musical address attracted the adoration of so many young girls in the early years of Beatlemania? As Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs observe, 'Beatlemania was the first mass outburst of the Sixties to feature (...) girls, who would not reach full adulthood until the Seventies... In its intensity, as well as its scale, Beatlemania surpassed all previous outbreaks of star-centered hysteria' (...). In short, the girls were the pursuers. (Whiteley 2006, 55-56)

Starting with The Beatles, Ian MacDonald highlights, not mincing words, "The paranoid possessiveness of YOU CAN'T DO THAT ..." (108), released in 1964, and the same might be said of The Rolling Stones' "The Last Time" (1965). The lyrics of both songs cannot (and indeed need not) be quoted here in full, but the first lines already reveal possessive and authoritarian male stances, whether dictated by jealousy, hurt pride, or a sense of "ownership":

> Well, I've got something to say
> That might cause you pain
> But **if I catch you talking**
> **To that boy again,**
> **I'm gonna let you down** (let you down)
> **And leave you flat** (gonna let you down and leave you flat)
> Because I told you before, oh,
> **You can't do that**. (The Beatles, 0:00-0:33; my emphasis)
>
> Well, I've told you once and I've told you twice
> But **you never listen to my advice**.
> You don't try very hard **to please me**.
> With what you know it should be easy. (The Rolling Stones, 0:00-0:32; my emphasis)

These examples from a decade traditionally regarded as permissive,[14] liberal and liberating (perhaps also libertarian and libertine, according to some...) may surprise us, due to the echoes and hints, subliminal and blatant, of relational views, practices, and values defined and validated by (and for) the male gender. To Arthur Marwick, incidentally, "The British scene (...) was highly male-dominated: songs by male groups were often sexually extremely aggressive; songs by the relatively few female performers tended to be submissive in the traditional way" (1994, 96) and Mark Donnelly takes up the point:

> (...) despite the social and cultural changes that transformed so much in Britain (...), the sixties remained male-dominated. (...) Icons of popular culture tended to be male. (...) of the twenty top-selling artists in the UK music charts of the sixties only three – Cilla Black, Dusty Springfield, The Supremes – were female. Films overwhelmingly dealt with male-centred narratives, viewing women on screen through the "male gaze" of a camera lens that was almost always directed by men. (2005, 158)

Besides noting down the absence in this list of such names as Petula Clark and Lulu, I would suggest an attentive reading of the lyrics of Sandie Shaw's winning song in the 1967 Eurovision Contest, significantly entitled "Puppet on a String". Relationships and states of mind – just like swings – have their "ups and downs", and the female character performed by Shaw is perfectly aware of that ("One day I'm feeling down on the ground /Then I'm up in the air", 0:36-0:42), but she is still too expectant and too passive, as attested by the lines "I wonder if one day that / You show that you care" (0:09-0:13), "Are you leading me on? / Tomorrow will you be gone?" (0:43-0:53) or "In or out, there is never a doubt / Just who's pulling the string. / I'm all tied up in you / But where's it leading me to?" (1:21-1:39).[15] The character is also too gullible ("If you say you love me madly / I'll gladly be there", 0:14-0:18). Or is she trying precisely to warn other women against the danger or possibility of ever becoming (female) puppets on (male) strings? Once again the reader will decide for him(her)self.

As far as love is concerned, the picture left by the 1950s, and especially the 1960s, is therefore ambiguous: despite male acknowledgement and celebration of female beauty, sensuality, and, ultimately, sexuality, both decades were still strongly marked by signs of "patriarchal" power and female subordination and passiveness. In order to counterbalance

this somewhat bleak picture, we will therefore end up suggesting the viewing of two later and very different examples, which highlight the importance of women's independence, resilience, assertiveness, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Gloria Gaynor, "I Will Survive", 1978), as well as of men's recognition and gratitude (John Lennon, "Woman", 1980). Although we will not be commenting upon these songs, whose dates of composition transcend our chronological boundaries, the underlying messages allow us to hope for a more egalitarian world, gender-wise and otherwise. What better conclusion can one ask or wish for?

END NOTES

[1] For Britain and the decades under scrutiny, see, for example, Marwick's *The Penguin Social History* 1-147, Donnelly's *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics,* Hennessy's *Having It So Good* and *Winds of Change*, and Sandbrook's *Never had It So Good* and *White Heat*, as well as earlier books by Thomson and Bartlett. Although not limited to the Anglo-American cultural scene, see also Marwick, *The Sixties*.

[2] See also the chapter "Desperate Housewives" (Sandbrook 2007, 687-704).

[3] Regarding the production of feminist theory and criticism in English, the impact of Germaine Greer (1939-), Elaine Showalter (1941-), Gayatri Spivak (1942-) Sheila Rowbotham (1943-) and Judith Butler (1956-), to name but a few, only came to be felt from the 1970s onwards.

[4] Although focused, as borne out by the title, in the "pre-history" of this age group, see Savage.

[5] See also Cliff Richard's "Living Doll" (1959).

[6] See, out of curiosity, "Poupée de cire, poupée de son", sung by France Gall, the winner of the Eurovision Song Contest for Luxembourg (1965). The lexical and semantic evolution from *poupée* to "puppet" would also be worth considering.

[7] According to Oberiri Destiny Apukes and Lingbuin Goodness Jigem, "Sexuality in music has become more intense and more frequent (...), and women face a constant bombardment of images constituting who they should be, what they need to look like, and how they are expected to balance their lives (...). Thus, the issue of women's objectification and portrayal in the media has attracted a growing body of research and this sexual objectification has been described as an experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (2019, 160-161)

[8] Both these circumstances would invite a comparison with *Lady* Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales (1961-1997), who also died at 36 years of age.

[9] "It is not the body, but the codifying of the body into structures of appearance, that culturally shapes and moulds what it means to be 'feminine'. (...) it is not the body as a functioning or dysfunctioning system that has been culturally related to female identity,

but those aspects of the female body that are attractive to men" (Myra MacDonald 2003, 194)

[10] The original version, by Carol Channing, dates from 1949. Diamond rings are also mentioned by The Beatles in, for instance, "Can't Buy Me Love" and "I Feel Fine" from 1964.

[11] The alleged volubility of women is pointed out in the aria "La donna è mobile" of *Rigoletto* (1851), by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901).

[12] "The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life (...) at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the (...) activities combined into a way of thinking and living. (...) The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. And it is in this respect that the arts of a period (...) are of major importance" (Williams 1980, 63-65 *passim*).

[13] Suffice it to recall here two facts from 1967: the song "All You Need is Love" by The Beatles and the "Summer of Love".

[14] See more about this in Donnelly (2005, 116-123) and the introduction of Marcus Collins (2007, 1-40); the latter argues that "Permissiveness was neither a catastrophe nor a canard, but a significant if contested liberalisation of behaviour and beliefs that began well before the 1960s and continues to this day" (2).

[15] Gloria Gaynor's song seems to meet and respond to Shaw's doubts, insecurities, and anxieties.

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