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Reading Katy Perry

BY MICHELLE CHIHARA IN POP CULTURE | JUNE 20, 2013

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At the dinner table, my four-year-old girl sings out: “There’s a stranger in my bed! There’s a pounding in my head! Last Friday night!” And I am so busted.

“Oh, we don’t listen to that song anymore...” I say, sheepishly. My husband is not convinced.

My daughter adores Katy Perry, she of the blue eyes, porcelain skin, and titillating hits like “You’re So Gay.” Serious rock criticism, such as it is, tends to take female pop stars less than seriously. Art that is strongly identified with people like me and my daughter gets dismissed, **aggressively**. If we are the ones expressing enthusiasm, whether as young girls screaming at a concert or as feminine readers of Jonathan Franzen, then the art itself must be trivial. This bothers me. So this is me, reading Katy Perry, for my daughter.

Katy Perry burst into nationwide fame with “I Kissed A Girl.” Her next massive hit was the inspirational power ballad “Firework.” She is also famous for her brief marriage to comedian Russell Brand, and for shooting pink whipped cream out of nipple-guns in the video for “California Girls.” If I want to take her seriously, it’s partly because she doesn’t take herself too seriously. Katy Perry has a cat named Kitty Purry. She is a minister’s daughter, the good girl who can’t quite get over the idea that she gets to say this stuff out loud and wear these outfits out of the house.

In “Wide Awake,” Katy Perry’s black hair is streaked with purple and she wears one fingerless glove and a gauzy black cape. My daughter thinks she is a dark princess in a maze. We discuss the video.

Me: “Do you remember what the little girl does?”

My daughter: “Yeah, she stomps and she makes the men with horns disappear.”

“Why do you think she’s so strong?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because she did lots of exercises.”

I am now occasionally called upon to sing “Firework” as a lullaby. That song was not meant to be a lullaby.

The obvious reservations one might have about Katy Perry include that she titillates for the sake of titillation, and that her pop is unoriginal. But what if instead of dismissing her as derivative, we start to unpack the references she’s making? Katy Perry, with her glossy black bangs, echoes the current fad for burlesque. Like burlesque, she uses an imagined innocence from the past to reclaim striptease in the name of feminine control.

What if “Teenage Dream,” a la Judith Halberstam, is both appealing to actual teenagers and deliberately engaging in a kind of temporal drag? Bear with me. *You make me feel like I’m living a teenage dream.* She puts her hands up into golden California air, at a beach party, one with the young people. But the video is shot in a grainy Hipstamatic fade, awash in nostalgia for empty backroads and old convertibles. Is this a celebration of being young and getting it on, or is this about longing for the impossible, because it’s impossible? Adolescence is always already a lost golden state. For just one song, she lets you taste teenaged freedom, in part by making that freedom seem so elusive.

“I Kissed A Girl” plays into the standard heterosexual male pornographic fantasy of a threesome. *I hope my boyfriend don’t mind it* is a disingenuous line, delivered with a finger to the lip. Titillation. Also, camp: Katy Perry performs this number as a torch song. In her **bio pic**, she wears a floor-length dress slit up to her crotch to call attention to her long, long legs. She slows the song down and drops her vocal register. She exaggerates her choreographed movements. Her lyrics say she did it on a lark, but her affect telegraphs longing and loss. Alone on stage, in front of a dressing room mirror, clutching a lavish feather boa and holding a glittering rainbow mic, she is nothing if not a drag queen. On the one hand, she sings about a lesbian act for a male gaze, as in—*Do you want me to kiss her again?* On the other, she shows herself to be in control of the whole performance and queers the whole thing, makes gender itself part of the act.

Katy Perry plays at the edges of her girl-next-door cherry-pie gestalt. Every time she sings about *the taste of her cherry ChapStick*, some part of the thrill is that we imagine the minister watching. She’s not as transgressive as Lady Gaga, and she does not raise money for homeless LGBTQ teens at her concerts, as Gaga does. Katy’s charity issue is bullying. Her persona is always still in the process of trying to stop trying to please everyone. This is compelling in its own way. She is always still a little bit the precocious golden child, in the process of breaking that image so that she can finally grow up and move on.

Let us not forget Russell Brand. “Wide Awake” is a break-up song, and so is “Part of Me,” which is also the title of her movie. The heartbreaker in question happens to write smart, **thoughtful essays** for *The Guardian*, and is, in a fey British way, something of a gender-bending presence himself. I know he broke her heart, and that she has since dated John Mayer, who seems like a frat boy and a **questionable choice**. But Perry will always get extra credit in my book for imagining Russell Brand as prince charming.

We live inside a deep vat of celebrity worship, Hollywood our own vexed Olympus. So much of that culture is toxic, drenched in over-shared, over-sexed information (think of the Kardashians). Katy Perry seems to me like the old brand of studio-system movie star, someone trying, if not always succeeding, to cultivate, edit, and control the larger-than-life narrative about herself that branches across her songs, videos, concerts, tweets, interviews, and bio pics. Compared with the Kardashians, she shares less, thinks more, and made the movie herself. That narrative, part truth and part fiction, moves people. True pop stars, like movie stars of old, are “charismatic, indelibly idiosyncratic people, who transcend celebrity and mean something emotionally powerful to the audience” (as David Denby has it in “Fallen Idols” for *The New Yorker*). Pop stars change hair and styles and songs, but, like Cary Grant and Marilyn Monroe, they always play themselves.

Now more than ever, with the music industry in upheaval, record labels need the sheer media-and-genre-crossing power of fame like Katy Perry’s. The labels need us, Katy Perry’s fans, to buy a persona that goes beyond individual songs: her movie, her concert tickets, her **Halloween costumes**.

My daughter keys into this mythic Katy Perry in a pre-verbal way, as an archetype, a **dark princess**. She longs for Katy Perry-ness:

Can we go visit Katy Perry?

Can she babysit me?

Can Katy Perry be my mama? No, not instead of you. *With you*.

I used to be my daughter’s favorite juke box. In the car, she requested Blondie’s “Dreaming” about every other day. But now that she says, “Mama, is it OK if only the radio sings?”, it is Katy Perry who has made her a fan. Katy is, in some meaningful way, my daughter’s first expression of musical taste. I have to accept that I can lead her to Lady Gaga, but I can’t make her a Little Monster if she isn’t that drawn to it. I can only be grateful she didn’t choose **Taylor Nation**.

Given that Katy Perry is my daughter’s first step away from a world centered at home, her first assertion of taste as a reflection of her own individual longing, I appreciate Katy Perry’s celebration of girlie-ness. I find myself singing “The One That Got Away” in the shower. I think of all the pop stars wound into my DNA with every mix tape, Madonna, Tori Amos, the Indigo Girls, Sarah McLachlan, Tracy Chapman, Liz Phair. I hope my daughter has her own version of all of these. But so many of my favorite musical ladies sang their suffering. Their pain helped me with my own, and yet, thank goodness for “La Isla Bonita.” I’m grateful that even at her most sentimental, Katy Perry seems like she’s hosting a party, and everyone is invited.

Katy Perry’s hair is always a different color of the rainbow: sky blue, purple, cotton candy pink. She also appears, again and again, in a stocking cap—worn under a wig to keep real hair out of sight. Perhaps this is her most drag queen move, this dedication to showing her wig’s underwear. It allows her fans behind-the-scenes. It’s a bit of an affectation, a grab for reality television authenticity. And yet, it is also a camp move: *I know that you know that this is an act*, she winks.

What are the repercussions of this wink? When Katy sings about getting kicked out of the bar “Last Friday Night,” we don’t quite believe her. On the one hand, she can’t quite shake her wholesome aura. On the other hand, that wink sustains Katy’s bottom-line sense of being in control, of being her own self. When Katy Perry, in the “Part of Me” video, catches her man cheating, she is conventionally devastated. But then she joins the Marines. She doesn’t lash out at the other woman, she doesn’t slut-shame (ahem, Taylor Swift). She cuts her hair off in a gas station bathroom and bandages up those C-cups. It’s an imperialist fantasy, to imagine foreign wars as a canvas for working out personal heartbreak, yes. But in basic training, Perry links arms with a bunch of other strong women and lies down in the surf. She does nationalistic, FTM drag, but how many American men since Hemingway have used soldiering to access some irreducible part of themselves? Her All-American bravado conflates personal and national threats and makes me uncomfortable, at the same time that I’m utterly taken in by her *semper fidelis* sisterhood.

Now, as the mother of a second baby daughter, I tell my eldest that Katy Perry’s actual sister is her actual manager. I like that Katy Perry is in the business of taking girls seriously. So I let us watch “Wide Awake” over and over. A prince on a white horse rides up. Katy punches him in the nose. She is helped by a little girl who turns out to be her younger self in Mary Janes, riding a two-wheeler with ribbons on the handlebars.

The older goth Katy knows that her fairy tale dreams have led her astray. She wears witchy black to show her experience. Still, she finds in her own pink girlhood neither a virginal moral highground nor a weakness to disavow. For Katy Perry, girlishness is something you call upon when you’re in trouble, a source of enduring strength. The sparklers that burst out of her chest, in this video as in “Firework,” are cheesy and on-the-nose and a little bit wonderful. *After a hurricane, comes a rainbow*. Fun is serious

business, my girls. Let's go dance.

Michelle Chihara once sold everything she owned and moved to Rio de Janeiro, but that was a long time ago. She now teaches creative writing and literature at Whittier College. She lives in Los Angeles.

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