

INTERLUDE



Music video still from *JUDAS*, Lady Gaga, 00:00:49,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wagn8Wrmzuc>



Combating Gender Norms with a Lipstick-Gun

Lady Gaga's JUDAS

Keywords

Pop Music, Gender Norms, Religious Symbols, Criticism, Lady Gaga, Judas

Biography

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Lady Gaga was born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta in 1986 in New York. Ever since her breakthrough in 2008 with the album *The Fame*, she has been an international pop star and a vital part of the music scene. "Judas", a track on her album *Born This Way*, released in 2011,¹ has attracted attention not only in popular media but also amongst scholars.² Many questions were raised, including whether the message of the song is critical of religion and whether "Judas" is blasphemous.³

As Fritz Stolz has argued, following Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a "system of symbols",⁴ religious symbols have a communicative role.⁵ In this example, communication takes place within popular media, specifically within a pop song. The song "Judas" deals with the biblical story of Jesus of Nazareth and his disciple Judas Iscariot, who identified Jesus for his ene-

1 *Born This Way* (Lady Gaga, US 2011, Interscope Records).

2 Hawkins 2014.

3 Sun 2011.

4 Geertz 1985.

5 Stolz 2004.



Fig. 1: Lady Gaga pointing a pistol at Judas. Music video still from *JUDAS*, Lady Gaga, 00:03:36.



Fig. 2: Lady Gaga crying after she has painted Judas's lips. Music video still from *JUDAS*, Lady Gaga, 00:03:36.

mies with a kiss. In the video, Lady Gaga is shown as Jesus's companion in various situations, while the lyrics reveal her love for Judas.⁶ She seems to have an opportunity to kill Judas before his betrayal of Jesus, but instead of

6 *JUDAS* (Lady Gaga and Laurieann Gibson, US 2011).



Fig. 3: Jesus kissing Lady Gaga on the forehead. Music video still from JUDAS, Lady Gaga, 00:04:53.



Fig. 4: Lady Gaga's stoning, video still. Music video still from JUDAS, Lady Gaga, 00:05:08.

shooting Judas, she paints his lips red with lipstick that sticks out of her gun. At the end of the video Lady Gaga, wearing a wedding dress, is stoned to death for her betrayal.

JUDAS stages Lady Gaga as a woman torn between two men – Jesus and Judas – who traditionally embody good and evil. Alongside the inner personal

conflict evident in the song, we can also identify, as I explore here, criticism of society's normative gender values. Lady Gaga is represented in JUDAS as an inconsistent and contradictory woman. On the one hand, she appears strong and independent, unwavering in her faith in Jesus. On the other hand, she seems desperate and insecure, hesitant and doubtful when it comes to deciding about Judas. The pistol scene shows this opposition very well (fig. 1 and fig. 2).

This scene illustrates her inability to choose between Jesus and Judas. She tries to accept both sides of her feelings and her personality but struggles to overcome an inner conflict. At the end of the video, Jesus appears to forgive Lady Gaga (fig. 3), yet she is still punished for her behavior and dies by being stoned (fig. 4).

On one level we can identify a retelling of a biblical story as criticism of religion and the Catholic Church.⁷ The Bible recounts the use of execution by stoning as punishment for prostitution,⁸ and the depiction in the video appears to challenge religious judgement of women's sexuality. But on another level, we find criticism of prevailing gender concepts. JUDAS portrays only the death of Lady Gaga and not the crucifixion of Jesus. The woman is made the scapegoat: her unfaithfulness to Jesus is the point of conflict, not Judas's betrayal. The video thus portrays the demonization of women, with Lady Gaga deliberately criticizing the normative expectations of the female role. The religious symbols are used only to contextualize the message of JUDAS, to show that religion is significant in Lady Gaga's life. The target of its criticism is society – symbolized by the angry mob that executes Lady Gaga in the end – and its insistence on women's conformity to normative conventions. The religious symbols in JUDAS are a medium for the communication of a critical message and are aesthetic and illustrative elements in the story. The song and the video are a platform on which the artist negotiates specific political and personal values.

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7 Daily Mail 2011.

8 See John 8:3–5.

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Filmography

- JUDAS (Lady Gaga and Laurieann Gibson, US 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wagn8Wrmzuc> [accessed 24 May 2020].

Discography

- Born This Way* (Lady Gaga, US 2011, Interscope Records).