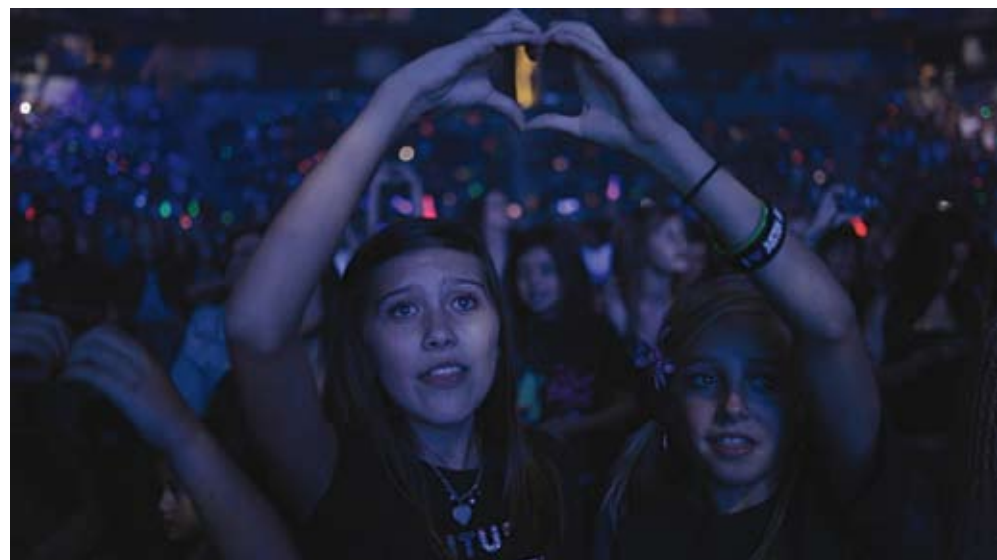




LOOK, IT'S ME!

As a product of the most unprejudiced of mass media, the first youth idol of the new millennium JUSTIN BIEBER is the kid next door—embodying a universal archetype of adolescence primed for the projections, identifications, and “likes” and “dislikes” of Beliebers and Non-Beliebers all.

words by
FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO



Justin Bieber is the first real youth idol of the new millennium. His rise to the pop music Olympus began when his mother first records him in 2006 at age 12 in homespun karaokes, which she uploads onto YouTube. From neighborhood singing contests to major stage appearances at prestigious venues, Justin's success comes, first and foremost, from the popularity that these amateur videos garner through the Internet.

Among the millions who sit up and takes note, there is Scooter Braun, an Atlanta talent scout, and Usher, the well-known R&B singer. Once they get Bieber a contract with Island Records, they put together a team of specialists in charge of his education, his vocal training, and his public image.

It is 2008, and Bieber is a lively fourteen-year-old kid. His physiognomy is androgynous and he smiles a lot. He has undoubted vocal gifts, a passion for soul music, and a *savoir faire* that people much older than him would do well to learn from. Despite recent signs of teen rebellion against his team of image-managers, for the past three years he has been following all of their advice.

E-ELVIS

The effects of the Bieber phenomenon are well-known. Drove of screaming “Beliebers” follow him everywhere, swooning and threatening his presumed fiancée-of-the-day. His public appearances throw bodyguards and the police into a panic; his concerts are sold out within minutes. He has performed in first-rate venues, released five albums in one year, and even been the subject of a film. Awards have followed, along with TV cameo roles, guest appearances on talk shows, charity work, advertising campaigns, and the covers of dozens of lifestyle magazines and hundreds of teen-zines.

What sets Bieber apart from previous teen-idols (Elvis, The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Take That, etc.) is that he is a product of the Internet age. Since pop culture is homologous to mass communication, its development is affected by shifts in its means of dissemination. Pop culture is a combination of signs and messages generated through public consensus, with the aim to entertain or sell products. Pop phenomena depend on the media that spreads them to such a degree that they are often mistaken for them.

Michael Jackson, for instance, depended on the television, and when we think of him, we immediately think about the *Thriller* music video. Similarly, Elvis depended on records and the radio, and thinking of him, a static image of his face pops up—a publicity photo or a record cover—while scratchy recorded music plays on the background.

Today's Bieber phenomenon, then, cannot be viewed apart from the public acclaim he achieved through the Internet and online social networks, interactive media that allow users to affect the content they interact with. MJ was accepted by his public as given from above, untouchable both on screen and on stage. Bieber, on the other hand, is the kid next door who bring his fans on stage through his continuous tweets, and whose behavior and choices are deeply influenced by their feedback.

POP ABOUT POP

The 2011 film *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never* is certainly not the first documentary about a pop idol's rise to stardom, but, like the dozens of books and articles narrating his every move, it insists on the success of this *enfant prodige* as inextricable from the means that made it possible (namely, public acclaim achieved through the Internet). His career therefore provides an interesting opportunity for examining how the mass media dictate the rules of entertainment—a meta-language used by pop to speak about pop.

“The world knew about Justin and his talent and charisma before record companies and managers did,” writes one of his biographers, Marc Shapiro. In recognition of this, when Braun eventually discovered Bieber, he made the strategic decision to give the boy maximum exposure on the Internet, shooting other amateur videos before moving on to costly productions.

Braun's adroitness lay in stressing the media potential of the Bieber phenomenon. Bieber's shift from amateurship to professionalism, indeed, implies a shift of its public from a bunch of enthusiastic listeners to a specific, targeted group of consumers. Clicking on “like” or “dislike” on a Youtube video helps Braun and his team to collect data on their next marketing step.

Now his videos have the most “like” clicks on YouTube, but they also have the highest number of “dislikes.” This means that the teenagers who look at Bieber's videos, unaware of the commercial side of this exchange, have a different expectation than just responding to a product. They need him to define their own media identity by expressing their opinion, whether or not they like him.

BIO

JUSTIN BIEBER (b. 1994) was born in Stratford, Canada. His debut record, *My World*, released in 2009, was certified platinum in the United States. The 3-D documentary/concert film, *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*, was released worldwide in early 2011.

AUTHOR

FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO is a visual artist and art theorist. He has taken part in exhibitions and events at Viafarini in Milano, MAMbo in Bologna, and Deitch Projects, e-flux, and The Hole in New York. Currently Adjunct Professor at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, RI, he is a regular contributor to *Kaleidoscope*, *Flash Art*, *Artlab*, *LINK*, and *L'Uomo Vogue*. His book *Experiencing Hypnotism* was published by Atomic Activity Books (an imprint of *This is a magazine*) in 2009. He lives and works in New York.

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Justin Bieber: Never Say Never,
film still, 2010
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LOOK, IT'S ME!

In “The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” published in a 1976 issue of the journal *October*, Rosalind Krauss ponders the beginnings of video art, referring to works by the likes of Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Lynda Benglis. According to Krauss, the specificity of video as a medium is its simultaneity: it allows you to see what you’re filming there and then as you film it. Similarly, users of Twitter can update their position or state of mind in real time through tweets.

Indeed, the way social network users relate to their own media image is not so different from Vito Acconci pointing toward the center of the camera lens in *Centers* (1971), a point which also happens to be the center of the screen, slipping endlessly between subject and object, producer and product.

In the same way, Facebook users draw from preset options, borrowed from real life, to build a profile in the virtual community—seeking, like Acconci, to center their real selves, but never succeeding. They construct an ideal image of themselves, with “like” and “dislike” emerging as crucial vehicles to construct this virtual identity, as the preferences we use in configuring our software or the trajectories we follow surfing online.

PICTURES OF PICTURES

To fully understand Justin Bieber as the ultimate pop star, one can consider him in the context of the history of Pop in contemporary art. The first reference that comes in mind, then, is to one of the first iconic works of Pop art, Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*, addressed by



Arthur Danto as a model of mimesis between art and everyday reality, a reality made of mass products for which consumer acceptance, encouraged by advertising, becomes definitive and unquestioned. It seems that all Warhol’s work is about replication. The way he deals with “celebrity,” for instance—turning his pals from the Factory and his own persona into “superstars”—has to do with the desire to create an “alternative” reality, borrowing the language from the film industry (i.e., Hollywood vs. underground cinema). However, he doesn’t explicitly address the structure of the means of this replication.

The structure of the means of this replication is explicitly addressed in the 1980s by the artists of the Pictures Generation, from Jack Goldstein to Richard Prince and Sarah Charlesworth. As Douglas Crimp writes about some of them, in the catalogue essay for his 1977 exhibition “Pictures” at Artists Space, which has become a manifesto for the whole generation, the Pictures artists “are not in search of sources of origins, but of structures of signification: underneath a picture there is always another picture.”

In the hands of these artists, images taken from mass media become tools to ponder the power of entertainment to create stereotypes to which we, often unawares, end up relating. For example, Cindy Sherman and Prince prove how familiar “pictures” from cinema and advertising are in fact complex devices of introspection and projection.

Prince addresses youthful celebrity in one of his most publically debated works, *Spiritual America* (1983), in which Brooke Shields as a child poses naked in a bathroom illuminated by a light as gothic as it is theatrical. (This is to say nothing of the photographs of young teen idols that he avidly collects, and onto which he copies their autographs—like a fetish-seeking fan whose behavior borders on the obsessive-compulsive.)

THE RETURN OF DISBELIEF

Works like these help us better understand the Bieber phenomenon. Here, too, reality replicates itself. Behind the images of Bieber lurk other images, in which millions of adolescents all over the world seek their temporary identity as no longer children, but not yet adults. Adolescence, like fame, is transitory. For Bieber to succeed as a pop star, he must represent a universal type of adolescence.

This is why many thought it unwise for Bieber to have taken a stance against abortion in a recent interview in *Rolling Stone*, because it is precisely when teen idols make pronouncements on real-life political and ethical decisions, that the suspension of disbelief is in danger of collapse. Indeed, as Jon Caramanica noted in a recent article in *The New York Times*, “Those Beliebers, now in their early teens or younger, may someday be facing their own tough choices about pregnancy, and Mr. Bieber’s opinions on the matter may not match their own, or suit their needs.”

Bieber’s secret consists in representing a universal model in which all adolescents can see themselves, but it is not one that will remain intact forever. His voice is beginning to break, and statements such as the one made to *Rolling Stone* hint that adulthood is just around the corner. It doesn’t mean that Bieber’s success is on the wane, but at some point, the spell behind the myth will be broken and “Biliebers” will turn into “Disbeliebers.”

A DISPERSED AIDORU

One last consideration in this analysis of Justin Bieber as the quintessence of pop regards the boundless spread of his image, disseminated through the infosphere like a virus—or a meme, as we would’ve called it a few years ago. It is by means of this viral, dispersed image that Bieber turns into a kind of avatar for anyone aged 12 to 17.

This avatar, however, doesn’t come from the drawing board of a Disney’s studio or from a TV talent show, in which he would have been selected as “the best” according to certain technical standards. Rather, he emerges from a process of “democratic” selection through the most unprejudiced of mass media, the Internet.

Justin Bieber is assuredly not the “best,” but he is so perfect for the part that he seems supernatural, like certain Japanese *aidoru*, media personalities in their teens, often represented in science fiction as virtual persona. Creamy Mami, the *Interstella 5555* band of aliens, Rei Toei, from a William Gibson’s novel, or Hatsune Miku, mascot of synthesizer music software, are often generated by normal kids as projections of themselves (projections that usually disappear when they grow up).

Like an *aidoru*, Justin Bieber embodies a universal, fictionalized archetype of adolescence. Yet at the same time, having succeeding through digital consensus, he represents a perfect model of contemporary economy-by-demand. He works both ways because he stands in the balance between fiction and reality. His image bears the status of crisis of contemporary “pictures,” working as representation on one hand and showing how representation works on the other, like a *Brillo Box* removed from the pedestal of the museum and replaced on a supermarket shelf. ◇