Karen Carpenter: 
Multidimensional Object Cause of Desire

The perfect is the enemy of the good (Voltaire)

The life of 1970s pop icon, Karen Carpenter (hereon Karen), plays out as a cautionary tale against the pursuit of impossible jouissance. As formulated by Jacques Lacan, when one’s pursuit of their object cause of desire (objet petit a) moves beyond the constraints of the pleasure and reality principles, this can lead to passage à l’acte (passage to the act), in which the subject relates directly with the objet petit a. Karen served as both external and internal objet petit a. For millions of fans around the world, Karen provided a safe object of fantasy within the limits of the pleasure principle. Internally, it was Karen’s idealized (ever thinner) body which became her ultimate fetish; that is, she lived-out the radically interiorized and deadly narcissistic indulgence of becoming her own objet petit a.

The Carpenters: An Ideal Confluence of Time, Place and Mental Conceptions

What is worst about the Carpenters' music, in other words, may also be what is best about it; in so fully giving form to one wing of the culture industry of its time, the group might be said to have "produced the concept" (à la Althusser) of turn-of-the/seventies Southern California unfreedom (Eric Lott, 224)

Phil Spector’s “Wall of Sound” style of musical production, which emerged in the USA in the early 1960s (Harrison; Spector), opened the space for the Carpenters’ “industrially manufactured sound” (Lott, ibid., 219) in pop music. The liberatory potential of Spector’s influence, combined with nostalgia for “a simpler time” and a celebration of the (superficially) mellow, chilled-out Southern California lifestyle of the late 1960s and early 1970s all served the Carpenters to perfection.

One often-downplayed element of the Carpenters’ music is its versatility. Unlike a band such as ABBA, who first and foremost evoke the dance floor, the Carpenters provide a perfect companion to a drive along a SoCal freeway on a warm hazy day, a wedding or a recline with some herbal tea (closing one’s eyes and letting Karen’s soothing contralto take them away). In short, there is something amazingly "comfortable" about Karen Carpenter’s (hereon Karen) vocal presence...so much so that enjoying her work borders on voyeuristic eeriness. This familiarity was something Adorno was very much in tune with as he argued that familiarity has replaced “liking” or “disliking” for the music listener (Briccetti). Perhaps it was the Carpenters’ inherent relatability (as well the aforementioned perfect storm of cultural factors in their favor) which made success virtually inevitable for them. Punk rock, in its embryonic stages, had no such “benefit of the familiar,” as there were no real antecedents by which such music could be framed. Punk rock simply was punk rock; it had to be taken completely on its own terms. This lack of familiarity and relatability...
severely limited punk’s early commercial success. As an example of early struggles for punk rock to gain widespread acceptance in the U.S., no top 40 single between 1976 and 1979 was from the punk genre (Top 40 Weekly).³

An Unlikely (Eventual) Supporter

The Carpenters were never cool (George McKay, 3)⁷

While I surely heard the Carpenters on the radio growing up in Southern California in their heyday of the 1970s, I never really paid them much heed. Bands like Led Zeppelin, Ted Nugent and the Sex Pistols grabbed my attention and devotion. Musical groups such as The Carpenters, Chicago and REO Speedwagon were simply seen as profoundly uncool and not worthy of a listen under any circumstances. Thus, one can imagine my surprise when a (casual) friend from high school (one I had not seen in a few years, and a guy who was generally considered "cool" by his peers), gave me a Carpenter's tape in 1985 and simply said, “you have to listen to this.” The Carpenters were not a band one declared publicly being a fan of unless they wanted to be labeled an absolute dweeb and submitted to steady verbal (and possibly physical) abuse (it would have been tantamount to confessing to watching the Lawrence Welk Show with one's Grandparents); so, I was intrigued that this gent was so unabashedly a supporter. I snuck the tape home, put it in my Sony Walkman, reclined, pressed “play” and closed my eyes. My immediate reaction was %*#! @&$*!!! I could not believe what I was hearing. The luminescence, silky smoothness, haunting and heart-wrenching resonance of Karen's vocals were almost too much to take. I was completely unprepared for the emotive response it stirred in me and felt my reaction was somehow unique (the passage of time has shown me how wrong I was!). A quotation from McKay (2018, ibid., 12) regarding the work of Morris⁸, “For Morris, listening to Karen's voice is a compelling experience of sentimentality,” expressed in words what I was having difficulty articulating. Heller⁹ captured the spirit of the quotation immediately above - and my first encounter with a close listen to Karen’s vocal stylings - with a more comprehensive declaration:

There was something truly personal about Karen’s voice. Hearing her, you felt like she was singing to you, not just at you. She was able to tap into melancholic and profound emotions because behind her little smile lay deep and unresolved sorrow. Listening to her sing infuses you with some sort of feel-good sadness

The first time I really listened to Karen was a bit like the first time I saw Montgomery Clift on screen: I knew I had encountered something hypnotic, precious and transcendent, as the ethos of each artist, mediated through their craft, triggered responses in me far beyond the imaginary order. There was no going back. There is something otherworldly about Monty and Karen (although in Karen this trait is paradoxical, as her public persona remains as the wholesome, humble, relatable "girl next door").
Capitalism’s Role in KC’s Fame, Riches and Ultimate Tragedy

I know your image of me is what I hope to be
(line from the Carpenters’ “A song for you,” 1972)

Karen’s voice is addictive in the same way capitalism writ large creates an addiction towards the pursuit of impossible jouissance (McGowan; Zizek). Just as the more one consumes Coca-Cola, the thirstier they become - that is, the more they desire it - Zizek (ibid.), the more one listens to Karen’s voice, the more they desire it.

In a talk given at the Institute for Experimental Arts, David Graeber provokes his audience with the following question “...a basic principle of the relationship between art and finance: who’s scamming who?” This question is particularly salient for the Carpenters, as the band was exploited (particularly in their early years) by their record label, A&M Records, to tour constantly so as to harvest the money fans around the world were so ready to part ways with. Furthermore, to maximize the Carpenters’ financial value, A&M Records “...was careful to market the group only in terms that conformed to the public’s perception of them as bland and square” (Lott, ibid., 221). Conversely, the Carpenters took advantage of the market research on which 1970’s easy listening radio formats were built and often wrote to a formula (Lott, ibid.). Thus, the Carpenters’ overcalculation and standardization could be viewed as designed to meet the masses at their point of desire. Desideri (iv) describes the strategic positioning of the Carpenters as follows: “By marketing to middle-class audiences, producers promoted only the cultivated images and middlebrow narratives they wanted people to see.” Perhaps the Carpenter’s emphasis on mass marketing of their art is what Oingo Boingo had in mind in the chorus of their self-reflexive, “Capitalism” (1981): “There’s nothing wrong with capitalism!”

Capitalism played the role of both enabler and destroyer of Karen. The Carpenters’ early commercial success provided the opportunity for untold financial rewards yet created a pressure to keep chasing bank notes so as not to “leave money on the table” in the fickle and mercurial music industry. Besides the pressure to overwork in the studio and maintain a grueling international touring schedule, what Karen perceived as the “need” to maintain a slim figure to look the part on stage ultimately proved fatal. In Capitalism and Desire, McGowan (ibid.) captures the fool’s errand of seeking the ultimately satisfying object which capitalism promises, but can never deliver:

Capitalist accumulation envisions obtaining the object that would provide the ultimate satisfaction for the desiring subject, the object that would quench the subject’s desire and allow it to put an end to the relentless yearning to accumulate. In this sense, an image of the end of capitalism is implicit in its structure, and the key to capitalism’s staying power lies in the fact that this ultimately satisfying object doesn’t exist (McGowan, ibid., 21).
One could substitute the word *decumulation* (in reference to Karen’s damaging loss of body mass) for *accumulation* used above, but the result remains the same: a deadly pursuit of impossible *jouissance*.

**Remove the (perceived) Obstacle to Perfection and Remove the Object Itself**

*We cannot find satisfaction in our satisfaction (Peter Rollins)*

Karen Carpenter’s obsession with shrinking her body mass plays out as the perfect embodiment of Slavoj Zizek’s assertion that “when you remove what you perceive to be the obstacle to perfection, you remove the object itself.” What Karen (wrongly) perceived as surplus poundage when she was a healthy and sleek (approximately) 120 pounds on a 5’4” frame - one may refer to the Carpenters’ *Live at Budokan* performance from May, 1974 or their album cover for *Horizons* from June, 1975 as reference points - was an obstacle whose removal proved to have deadly consequences.

Paradoxically, while Karen’s obsession with perfection in her work has led to a legacy which will last as long as civilization itself, when applied to control over her body, this perfectionism was her undoing. While the quotation attributed to Voltaire, “Perfection is the enemy of the good” could not apply more fittingly to Karen’s bodily shrinkage, the phrase is not a universal truism applicable in all circumstances. Karen would have been far better living within the constraints of the pleasure principle in her own desires and actions and basking in the glow of serving as the object cause of desire for millions of admirers around the globe; but this would have been “too easy.” Karen’s obsession with overwork and perfection ultimately meant she was overwhelmed by her own greatness.

**Subtle Subversiveness and Commonalities, Divergences in Acting-out the Death Drive: Karen vis-à-vis Montgomery Clift (hereon Monty)**

*I love you, but because inexplicably I love in you something more than you - the objet petit a - I mutilate you (Jacques Lacan)*

While the word “subversive” is far more likely to be used to describe Monty (as American Cinema’s *primum* “rebel male”) than Karen, both stars played a subversive role in their respective media. For Monty, his subversiveness was demonstrated in challenging conventional notions of how an American leading man was supposed to behave (both on and off screen). For Karen’s band, the Carpenters, the subversiveness has become clearer with the passage of time. In their heyday, the Carpenters were very much seen as part of “the establishment,” commercial, mainstream and “square.” However, their subversiveness was played out in the way they “gambled on themselves”
by truly “making their own kind of music.” When they first burst on the scene in 1969, acid and hard rock and folk music were the dominant, progressive music genres, and the Carpenters clearly fit into neither of these categories. By the mid-1970s, disco, glam and punk rock were on a rapid ascendancy, but the Carpenters remained steadfast in their identity, as they continued to crank out “easy listening” pop hits. Desideri (ibid., 45) summed-up the Carpenters brand of subversiveness as follows: “The Carpenters were the response to the counterculture of the late 1960s and the early 1970s.” Like a boxer enjoying success against a classic counterpuncher, the Carpenters “countered the counter” to perfection.

There are surprising parallels between Monty and Karen. Both artists were solidly middle class WASPs, very thin, dark, spellbinding aesthetically and obsessive devotees to their respective crafts. They were also tragic figures who committed "slow suicides." There is a haunting quality to the work of both artists, partly because of the artistic expressions they chose and partly because of our knowledge of their tragic ends. While comparisons between Monty and Karen may appear as conceptual stretching at first blush, this is not the first time Monty drew comparisons with a popular figure from the music industry, Chaplin (2013) demonstrates a multitude of commonalities between Monty and the doomed Sex Pistol’s Bassist, Sid Vicious. Furthermore, Monty has twice been celebrated by immensely popular bands, The Clash, “The Right Profile” (1979) and R.E.M., “Monty Got a Raw Deal” (1992).

Monty had a public persona consisting of aloofness, ascetic tastes, nonconformity, edginess, a cosmopolitan ethos and a novel acting style that placed huge demands on his audience to appreciate the fullness of the range of emotions he could stir within them. Monty offers a much more complex public persona than Karen does, yet his demise was a more straightforward acting-out of the death drive (catalyzed by external forces - a debilitating car crash in 1956 which severely damaged his looks, pressures from the public and movie industry to conform to the concept of the traditional American leading man). For Karen, her public persona was more straightforward: Whitebread, bland, middle class, relatable, conformist and undemanding of her audience. However, Karen’s demise exemplified a more nuanced and interiorized example of moving beyond the pleasure principle. Ironically, the more the drive to impossible jouissance appears attainable, the greater the potential dangers it presents (competitive bodybuilders, drug addicts, extreme sport competitors). In contrast, holding up American movie stars from the 1920s and 1930s as one's object cause of desire does not carry the same risks, as there are no feasible on-ramps to the "death drive highway" in such fantasy construction.

Kirshner (2005) positions the pursuit of objet petit a within Almodovar’s astonishing Hable con Ella (Talk to Her), 2002. Within the film, an eerie parallel to Karen’s drive toward impossible jouissance is played out in a film-within-the-film, Shrinking Lover. In this (silent) film, the suitor of a female scientist drinks her new (untested) weight loss potion, shrinking to Tom Thumb size. Through a convoluted set of circumstances, the suitor’s dramatic shrinkage affords him the opportunity to be at one eternally with his object.
cause of desire. While in the film the fantasy of jouissance is attained, films are
what they say on the jar: fantasy. Karen’s drive towards impossible jouissance
through bodily reduction simply ended in tragedy.

The closer Karen moved, internally, to impossible jouissance (through
excessive weight loss) the less she retained the characteristics of an external
object cause of desire. Despite being far too thin between the fall of 1975 and
1978, she was still beautiful and lively; it was not until she appeared on Bruce
Forsyth’s U.K. show in December, 1978\(^{26}\) that she took on the skeletal look of a
recently liberated concentration camp survivor. Once she tipped over from
merely being “too thin” and reached the skeletal stage, her "classic bedroom
eyes" took on a dull, sad, ominous appearance...more prone to inspire pity in
her admirers than draw them in.

It was external forces exerting a deadly influence on Monty that carried-
over into his performances on film. In "A Place in the Sun (1951)\(^{27}\), it was
passage à l’acte (passage to the act) toward impossible jouissance which
ultimately led to the subject's destruction. With Monty’s character (George
Eastman), this pursuit was externally motivated in the form of Elizabeth Taylor
serving as objet petit a; for Karen, this drive was turned inward, with deadly
consequences.

Not in Vain

In Karen’s death, her body became the literal inscription of martyrdom - a saint
killed by a grotesque material culture that continues to assault generations of
young women who die for its collective sins
(Peggy J. Bowers and Stephanie Houston Grey)\(^{28}\)

In Karen’s tragic demise from anorexia nervosa at the age of 32, she left
behind two powerful legacies. As the first public figure whose death was
attributed to anorexia, Karen raised awareness of the disease and is the poster
child for eating disorders (she battled bulimia coterminously with her struggle
with anorexia). Secondly, the Carpenters set a standard for musical excellence
that has only grown in stature with each passing decade.

While the circumstances of Karen’s death in 1983 temporarily
overshadowed the Carpenters’ musical achievements, the passage of time has
allowed for a concretization of both the cautionary tale of Karen’s anorexia and
the Carpenters’ place as global popular music legends. Regarding Karen’s
anorexia, Harvey\(^{29}\) argues that Karen started a public conversation about eating
disorders and, “Since Karen’s time, many celebrities have spoken publicly
about their own eating disorders, bravely showing the world that it can happen
to anyone, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Holmes\(^{30}\) (2021, 19), however,
questions the emphasis on the eating disorders of celebrities such as Karen
Carpenter or Princess Diana - over what might be considered less desirable
subjects - with the following statement (contrasting Karen with the serial killer,
Beverley Allitt):
What does it mean to have remembered Karen Carpenter - a narrative through which anorexia is yoked to discourses of success, attractiveness, and a stifling middle-class family context (Saukko, 2008\(^1\)) - rather than the working-class nurse diagnosed with Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSBP) and charged with multiple counts of murder?

While Karen Carpenter’s death from anorexia is one of the saddest cases of a doomed superstar the world has experienced, she continues to provide incredible joy for music lovers and serve as a totemistic figure for eating disorders. Karen clearly struggled to find inner peace in her personal life, yet she ironically passed joy on to others with ease. While she had no role models to guide her against the dangers of eating disorders, her inner torment in this area provided succor to millions around the world struggling with such afflictions.

Although I was not a fan of the Carpenters during their heyday, Karen’s death had (and continues to have) a profound effect on me. There is something powerful in Karen’s ethos that drives those indifferent to her work when she was at the apex of fame to mourn her death at such a visceral level. Beyond being merely indifferent to the Carpenters’ tunes, the music critic for the *Los Angeles Times* during the Carpenters ascension and through to 2005, Robert Hilburn (who once dismissed the Carpenters’ sound as “audio wallpaper”), had this to say at the time of Karen’s passing (Hilburn, 1983\(^2\)):

But I was unsettled by my sadness last week when I learned about Karen Carpenter’s death on February 4...my sense of loss was genuine. The reason I was surprised by the reaction was that I wasn’t, as a critic, someone you could even remotely list as a supporter of the Carpenters.

Ultimately, Robert Hilburn and I learned a valuable lesson at Karen’s passing: one can run, but they cannot hide from the potent emotive response Karen’s vocal stylings are sure to evoke (Hilburn’s original article from 1983 is titled, “A Lesson in Art of Emotion: Karen Carpenter’s intimate vocals disarm a critic”). I would advise Robert Hilburn, and others, not to dwell on the private hellscape Karen inhabited between 1975 and 1983 and her heart-wrenching demise. Rather, find comfort in riding the satin wave of Karen’s magnificent voice to what Heller (ibid.) refers to as “some sort of feel-good sadness.” She can always be found; all one needs to do is press “play.”