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ABSTRACT

Students in communication classes find it useful to study Madonna because she is a fascinating and prolific cultural figure whose merit and intentions are matters of great controversy. As the quintessential music-video star, she is also perhaps the medium's most significant auteur. In the areas of women's roles, motherhood, sexuality, race and religion, Madonna critiques and challenges widespread beliefs while at the same time reinforcing some of them. In her video "Like a Virgin," Madonna carries her trashiness to an extreme as she both mocks what the female is "supposed to do" as a bride and seductress and at the same time usurps the aggressiveness that is "supposed to" be the male's prerogative. She is in a sense, both male and female. According to Rosemary Kowalski, Madonna has provided a useful corrective to the feminism of the 1970s in her suggestion that it is all right for women to dress like women. In almost every video, there is at least one sequence in which Madonna writhes on the floor or ground, crawling, or assuming an otherwise prone position. Further, in the area of race, Madonna, unlike other rock stars, makes her interracial themes so explicit that the viewer cannot overlook them. This forces the viewer to accept or reject her images--although because of her radical critique of religion, viewers may reject them on the grounds of "blasphemy" when in fact they may be responding to her portrayal of African-Americans. (Contains 19 notes.) (TB)

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Madonna: Like a Dichotomy

Gary Burns and Elizabeth Kizer

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Madonna: Like a Dichotomy

"I'm not really into . . . Post-Modernism."--Madonna[1]

In the 1960s, a minor debate raged over the question whether a white man could sing the blues. In many ways this was a silly question, but it raised interesting issues about authenticity, which seems so often suspect in commercialized music, and about what we should call the music that results when white men try to sing the blues. From our more linguistically enlightened vantage point, we can now easily see that the question's focus on white men suppressed gender issues at the same time it highlighted race as a possible key to the proper creation or identification of "blues."

Janis Joplin would be an obvious test case in considering whether a white woman could sing the blues, but when we think of Joplin today, we think not so much of blues and race, but about rock and gender. Any lack of authenticity in her blues singing is overcome by the tragedy that engulfed her as a female pioneer in the male-dominated enterprise that was already acquiring the moniker "cock rock."[2]

There is another kind of authenticity worth considering, namely authentic feminism. With this as our focus, an interesting question is whether a feminist can sing rock. Or is all rock, at some level, cock rock? Now is the right time to ask this question. As the 1960s spawned hundreds of white would-be blues musicians, the 1980s were a time during which more female rock/pop musicians became more successful than ever before. Are they really feminists? Is their music clearly distinct from "cock rock"? The answers are hardly clear-cut for any of the major female rock stars of the past few years--Heart, Pat Benatar, Tina Turner, Stevie Nicks, Donna Summer, Martha Davis of the Motels, Wendy O. Williams, Exposé, Paula Abdul, Cyndi Lauper, Joan Jett, Belinda Carlisle, etc.

The most interesting case of all is Madonna, and it is through a case study of her videos and overall image that we would like to address the subject of contradiction and ambiguity as textual strategies in fitting "big" topics (such as sexuality) into rock "discourse." Madonna uses these strategies often, especially in her videos, and it is for this reason that her work is not only

notorious and controversial, but also important in ways that Pat Benatar's, for example, is not.

Madonna herself reportedly stated "there are about a million opposites living inside of me."[3] As American Film pointed out about three of her videos, "Madonna is intercut as slut and lady, gamine and glamour queen, goldbricker [sic] and romantic, decadent and innocent. 'It has to be both,' she insists. 'It can't be one or the other.' Double or nothing, she lets you eat your cake and diet, too."[4]

Madonna's fascination, notoriety, and success all result from this combination of opposites, from the bringing together of things that are not supposed to be joined. Nor does she confine herself to trivial apples-and-oranges dialectics. Instead, she strikes at the very things that are most important to people--sexuality, racial and ethnic identity, religion, generation.

Sexuality

Madonna's sexual allure is undoubtedly the main ingredient in her image. It is also part of the point in practically every case when we may think we are being affected by some other message in her video texts. For example, in Like a Prayer, race and religion are prominent concerns, but the video's real punch comes from combining them with sex (Madonna's skimpy attire and kissing the black saint). If proof is needed, one has only to look at the "Like a Prayer" Pepsi commercial, which also has racial and religious themes (as well as a generational angle), plus the same basic soundtrack as the video--but no sex. The commercial's message is that blacks and whites can live together harmoniously (and a child can grow up to be a star) through church, dancing, and Pepsi. The video substitutes sex for Pepsi, with explosive effect.

Madonna's initial renown came from her sexual display--the "Boy Toy" belt, her suggestive dancing and poses, her underwear and scantily clad-ness, a song about virginity (which was not entirely novel--male precedents included Rod Stewart's "Tonight's the Night," complete with cooing female, and Foreigner's "Feels Like the First Time," complete with simile). What made Madonna different

was her juxtapositional use of symbols, especially virgin/whore and sacred/profane. The Boy Toy buckle came along with a wedding dress. Underwear and navel contrasted with crucifix jewelry and the singer's name.

As Bad Women go, Madonna is fairly tame, in contrast with Wendy Williams and Patti Smith, for example. The badness only seems so bad because of the not-quite-contemptuous mocking of the good. Whereas Wendy Williams is obviously a lost cause, Madonna hints that, just maybe, she is a good Catholic girl at heart. She sometimes makes fun of weddings and virginity and religious iconography, occasionally to the verge of ridicule--yet she idealized her marriage to Sean Penn (whom she often referred to as "my husband") and claims to pray regularly.[5]

Much analysis has focused on whether Madonna is really the "material girl" depicted (ambiguously) in the video of the same name.[6] While she is obviously rich, she has claimed that she never slept with anyone to get that way and that what she really longs for is love.[7] Dave Marsh has defended her on the grounds that her critics use a double standard in criticizing Madonna's sexual presentation as compared with that of male stars such as Mick Jagger and David Bowie.[8] We could carry the point a step further by noting the example of John Lennon as another star who courted controversy with regard to both sex and religion. He is, of course, a special case in numerous ways, but it is still worth pondering what the difference is between Madonna in a wedding dress singing "Like a Virgin" and John Lennon nude on the album cover of Two Virgins. What is the difference between Madonna's stigmata in Like a Prayer and Lennon's "more popular than Christ" statement and "gonna crucify me" lyric?

The provocative thing about Madonna is not that she is sexual, but the way she is sexual. In her early videos, she is tough and trashy, a ballsy chick, aggressive and flirtatious as she says she is in real life. In Like a Virgin, the trashiness is carried to an extreme and intercut with an equally hyperbolic bride (Madonna plays both parts). She both mocks what the female is "supposed to do" as a bride or seductress and usurps the aggressiveness that is "supposed to" be the male's prerogative. She is, in a sense, both male and female.

This combination recurs in several other videos, most notably in Express Yourself, in which Madonna dresses both as a male and as a female sex kitten. Supporters such as Rosemary Kowalski say Madonna has provided a useful corrective to the women's movement of the early 1970s, which supposedly led women to give up some of their femininity in order to compete in a male-dominated world.[9] Part of Madonna's appeal, according to this reasoning, is that she has made it once again all right for women to dress like women, even as they become more sexually aggressive. This does not tell the whole story, however. In almost every Madonna video, there is at least one sequence in which we find her writhing on the floor or ground, crawling, or otherwise in a prone position. This submissiveness distinguishes Madonna from Heart, Annie Lennox, Tina Turner, etc., and softens her androgyny. At the same time, Madonna's lyrics and videos often involve struggles with males for control. She usually wins, both lyrically and in the videos (Borderline, Papa Don't Preach, Like a Prayer), and musically her unusual use of male choruses ("Material Girl," "Express Yourself") further establishes her dominance. Her blend of good and bad, dominance and submission, control and vulnerability (nicely combined in Papa Don't Preach), independence and dependence (combined in Express Yourself), and stereotypical masculinity and femininity is rich and thought-provoking (and even more so if we take into account other "texts" such as her movie roles and her relationship with Sean Penn). Madonna would be one of the more interesting rock stars even if her symbolic audacity were only sexual--but of course there is much more.

Race/Ethnicity, Religion, and Generation

Madonna's first successes as a rock star were dance tunes that became hits before her visual image was highly developed and circulated. These songs were hits on black radio stations, and Madonna's vocal style at the time was similar to that of Deniece Williams or vintage Diana Ross. Apparently many listeners thought she was black.

Madonna has frequently collaborated with blacks in her music (Prince, Steve Bray), and most of her videos include blacks as dancers, musicians, or cast

members. In interviews, she has stated that she feels great affinity with black people and black music.[10]

Rock music has always been a key arena in which racial difference has been celebrated, defused, and polemicized. The debate over whites singing the blues is one of the less important manifestations of a larger discourse that also concerns such matters as white cover recordings of black songs; failure to pay royalties to black musicians and songwriters; segregation of music charts, radio stations, and performance venues; the paucity of integrated bands; and the lack of nonwhites in positions of authority in the music industry (with notable exceptions such as Motown).[11]

Music video has become a major site of racial contestation and articulation. Does MTV's rotation of videos reflect a bias against black artists, or did it at one time? Are there enough, and the right kind of, black VJs? What is the appropriate response to the alleged racism by members of Guns n' Roses and Public Enemy? Are block programming such as Yo: MTV Raps and a separate black network such as BET merely a perpetuation of the type of segregation long practiced in the music industry?

Interracial content in music videos is an obvious way to fight the segregationist tendency and has been quite common since at least the mid 1980s. However, much of this content is mild and even less-progressive-than-it-looks. Sun City's interraciality, for example, is achieved mainly through editing--blacks and whites are seldom together at the same place and time. The suggestion of interracial sex is tantalizing for those who would accept it, yet muted sufficiently for those who would rather not see it, in videos such as Romancing the Stone, Smooth Operator, and Just Another Night.

Madonna deserves credit for making the interracial theme of Like a Prayer so explicit that the viewer cannot overlook it. This forces the viewer to accept or reject the image--although, perhaps unfortunately, there is ample reason to reject the video as a whole on grounds of "blasphemy" without specifically engaging the racial question. As Dave Marsh implies, people who say they reject the video for religious reasons may actually be doing so because they are

scandalized by Madonna sensually kissing a black man.[12] The fact that this man is also depicted as a saint (apparently Saint Martin de Porres, according to Andrew Greeley[13]), and possibly as a Christ-figure, makes it impossible to separate race from religion from sex as points of controversy. One can reject the video for any one of the three reasons independently, or because one objects to their conflation. To accept the video, one must accept both the conflation and Madonna's scandalous behavior in each of the three domains. Rejection is probably a more or less automatic process--the video offends me, therefore I reject it. Acceptance would seem to require more give-and-take--despite my open-mindedness, can I tolerate this shocking imagery? Is it gratuitous? Do I care? Yes, maybe, and no.

Although it is much less dramatic, we should not overlook Madonna's concern with race and ethnicity in her other videos. Her Italian ancestry is a point in Like a Virgin (Venice location), Papa Don't Preach ("Italians do it better" T-shirt), and Open Your Heart (Italian subtitles). La Isla Bonita has a Spanish/Latin motif. Black church culture is celebrated in the "Like a Prayer" Pepsi commercial (as well as in the video). White domination over blacks is briefly critiqued in Express Yourself in the scene where the white magnate controls a caged group of musicians, at least some of whom are black (Ramona Curry sees this as a critique of the music industry[14]). Further, Express Yourself can be read as a critique of Germany, or at least of Nazism and fascism.

One final point about race is worth mentioning. In both Open Your Heart and Cherish, a child figures prominently in the action. In each case, the child is of indeterminate race, apparently somewhere "between" black and white. In each case, Madonna is possibly or probably the mother. This is noteworthy because it implies that Madonna has previously had interracial sex, and because it depicts a mother/child relationship at all. Parenthood is conspicuously absent from music video as a whole, even from those clips played on VH-1 for nesting yuppies. Sex is omnipresent in rock music and music video, yet pregnancy and parenthood are taboo. In a sense, Madonna is trying to make it once again all right for women to be mothers. Here as usual she is controversial,

especially in Papa Don't Preach, which a Night Flight announcer referred to as a "pro-life anthem," and in Open Your Heart, which shows Junior waiting around at an adult peep show where Mom is the main attraction. The boy falls asleep while waiting, and Madonna wakes him with a big kiss on the lips, suggesting pedophilia and raising the disturbing possibility that Mom's peep-show act was his dream.

This scandalous mixture of generations is only the most hard-edged example of Madonna's habitual concern with childhood, parenthood, and growing up. Children appear in several of Madonna's videos (including Borderline, True Blue, and Who's That Girl in addition to those already mentioned). Her costume has at times included hair ribbons and other little-girl trappings. Her early image, which led to the Wanna-Be imitation fad among adolescent and preadolescent girls, presented Madonna as an immature person, despite all the sex. She sang in a squeaky voice about boys, girls, and virginity. Then she fell in love in real life and sang in a deeper voice about more adult concerns (the True Blue album seems to mark the transition point). On the Like a Prayer album her image is finally that of a fully grown woman whose youthful, naive optimism has been shattered by divorce ("Cherish" is an anomaly, a sort of throwback to "True Blue").

Over the course of this image development, glimpses emerge of Madonna as mother and daughter (another dichotomy). As a mother, Madonna raises Oedipal and pedophiliac issues in Open Your Heart (and possibly in Cherish) and the religious/moral issue of abortion in Papa Don't Preach. As a daughter, Madonna battles her father in Papa Don't Preach and in "Oh Father" in a way that apparently parallels her real-life relationship with her father. Despite her new adult image, there is the ever-present possibility of slipping back into childlike discourse, as she does in "Oh Father." Of course, "Father" may also be read as God or priest, returning us to the religious sphere that is also never far away in Madonna's work.

The Pepsi commercial is an interesting attempt to have synthesis without any clash in three of Madonna's customary registers--race, religion, and

generation. The generational domain is stressed, probably because it connects with Pepsi's ad campaign slogan--"Pepsi: a generation ahead." Adult Madonna, in color, sits in her living room watching what is supposed to be home-movie footage. A handheld sign in the monochrome "home movie" identifies the footage as "Madonna's eighth birthday party." Magically, 8-year-old Madonna and 30-year-old Madonna change places and explore each other's worlds.

The monochrome world is a joyous, interracial church and school environment filled with dancing and singing. Thirty-year-old Madonna immediately becomes something of a Pied Piper in this world. Meanwhile, 8-year-old Madonna roams in awe, and in color, through 30-year-old Madonna's luxurious home. There are no other people in this world, but that does not bother 8-year-old Madonna. "Like a Prayer" wails triumphantly in both worlds. Suddenly the music stops, each Madonna is back in her proper world, and 30-year-old Madonna, sipping a Pepsi and addressing 8-year-old Madonna and us, instructs us: "Go ahead. Make a wish." A graphic and male voice-over deliver the Pepsi slogan.

This commercial, expensively produced and itself promoted in advance by other commercials, was aired only once before being withdrawn by Pepsi in response to pressure from groups offended by the Like a Prayer video.[15] The commercial's "world premiere" (and unanticipated swansong) took place during that sitcom oasis of racial and generational harmony, The Cosby Show.

Pepsi's textual strategy is clear--identify itself with racial harmony, religion, and the timeless unfolding of "new" generations. Just as laxative makers try to "have it both ways" by calling their product "gentle yet effective," Pepsi seeks to present itself as old yet new, black yet white, religious yet sexy. The formula for obtaining this unity in your own life is simple: make a wish.

The Like a Prayer video carries unity a dangerous step further, beyond the bounds of home-movie narcissism and doctor-lawyer, both-black family sitcom. It also suggests the necessity to act, rather than just wish. As innocuous or enlightened or muddle-headed as the video may appear to some viewers, Pepsi could not endorse it, even indirectly by allowing the commercial to be replayed. Thus

the unity of rock music and corporate culture is not fully realized. We should, at least for this reason, thank Madonna for making the video, even while lamenting that she made the commercial. Pepsi apparently hoped she was controversial yet safe, but discovered that she is only the former.

The depicted means of generational articulation in the commercial is the magic screen, a common device in music video. Thirty-year-old Madonna watches 8-year-old Madonna, and vice versa. The rapport between the two suggests a mother-daughter relationship. Madonna is both adult and child, mother and daughter (as in Papa Don't Preach, which also includes supposed home-movie footage of Madonna as a child).

And to end at what is actually the beginning, the generational, religious, and sexual tension Madonna's image expresses is summed up in her name. Madonna is the Holy Mother, yet by using only her first name, she presents herself as a child. Madonna is the Virgin Mary, yet Mary is also Mary Magdalene the whore. And, according to Kowalski, "Madonna," in Italian, originally meant simply "woman."[16]

No wonder Madonna Ciccone should grow up to become such a "site of semiotic struggle."[17] No wonder she should be an important artist in music video, a medium which supposedly "attracts meaning, the way a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts."[18] And no wonder her defender Dave Marsh should call Madonna herself a "lightning rod" for detractors (whom he calls "assholes").[19] Marsh, railing against critics of Like a Prayer, is of course drawn to the lightning rod himself, to engage in the semiotic struggle.

Students in communication classes find it useful to study Madonna because she is a fascinating and prolific cultural figure whose merit and intentions are matters of great controversy. As the quintessential music-video star, she is also perhaps the medium's most significant auteur.

In order to understand the workings of this new medium and the prevalence of its aesthetic in American culture since the early 1980s, it is necessary to analyze the works of artists such as Madonna who so skillfully play with cultural

taboos and boundaries. In addition to being vital cultural documents, Madonna's videos are provocative pedagogical tools.

Notes

[1] Madonna, interviewed in Harry Dean Stanton, "Madonna," Interview, December 1985, p. 63.

[2] "Cock Rock: Men Always Seem to End Up on Top," Rat, October 29-November 18, 1970, pp. 16-17, 26.

[3] Madonna, quoted in New York Daily News, quoted in Lynn Phillips, "Who's That Girl?", American Film, July/August 1987, p. 20.

[4] Ibid., p. 22.

[5] Liner notes, True Blue album; Becky Johnston, "Confession of a Catholic Girl," Interview, May 1989, p. 60.

[6] Mary Ellen Brown and John Fiske, "Romancing the Rock: Romance and Representation in Popular Music Videos," One Two Three Four, No. 5 (Spring 1987), 61-73; Judith Williamson, "The Making of a Material Girl," New Socialist, October 1985, pp. 46-47; E. Ann Kaplan, Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 116-127.

[7] Dave Marsh, "Girls Can't Do What the Guys Do: Madonna's Physical Attraction," The First Rock and Roll Confidential Report (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 162; and David Keeps, "Madonna," in The Rock Yearbook 1986, ed. Ian Cranna (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 69.

[8] Marsh, "Girls Can't Do What the Guys Do," pp. 162, 164.

[9] Rosemary Kowalski, "Madonna: Woman Is the Message," One Two Three Four, No. 3 (Autumn 1986), 67-68.

[10] Mark Bego, Madonna! (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1985), passim.

[11] See Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Pay (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), esp. pp. 231-267.

[12] Dave Marsh, "Acts of Contrition," Rock & Roll Confidential, May 1989, pp. 1-2.

[13] Andrew M. Greeley, "Like a Catholic: Madonna's Challenge to Her Church," America, May 13, 1989, pp. 447-449.

[14] Ramona Curry, "Madonna from Marilyn to Marlene--Pastiche and/or Parody?", Journal of Film and Video, in press.

[15] See Marsh, "Acts of Contrition."

[16] Kowalski, "Madonna: Woman Is the Message," 59.

[17] John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 272.

[18] Roland Barthes, referring to the Eiffel Tower, quoted and applied to music video by Charles Acland, "'Look What They're Doing on TV!': Towards an Appreciation of the Complexity of Music Video," Wide Angle, 10, No. 2 (1988), 4.

[19] Marsh, "Acts of Contrition," p. 1.