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### **Transgressive eroticism in the music videos of Madonna, Rihanna and Lady Gaga**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*Since the inception of film the thrilling potential of horror has featured prominently, almost always treading a fine line between the erotic and the macabre. Whilst these powerfully entwined forces have been explored on many levels within the realm of moving image, it is perhaps within the genre of music video that we see this conjoined aesthetic so actively envisaged. Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance* and *Paparazzi*, and Rihanna's *Disturbia* follow Madonna's *Justify My Love* and *What it Feels Like for A Girl* in their disturbing/captivating expression of aggressive sexuality and brutality through a series of fabricated personas. Drawing the ire of some for what is perceived as vacuous and dangerous exhibitionism, these concerns echo in unfavorable critique. Conversely, reading into these videos primarily by means of objective analysis disregards the pointed layering of themes and stylistic devices that operate as both forceful rupturing and heightened of codes of allurements, power and female sexuality, and active re-configuration of normative states of being. Framing discussions around the videos detailed above, this paper considers if the appeal of spectacle could be argued as significant for the powerful responses it engenders (attraction and repulsion – including moral disapproval) and the cultural anxieties and prejudices relating to gender and sexuality this response consequently brings to the fore.*

#### **KEYWORDS**

music videos  
Lady Gaga  
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The seemingly opposing but powerfully entwined forces of the erotic, perverse, macabre and violent have been explored on many levels within the history of art, and particularly through the medium of film. It is perhaps within the music video genre however, that we see these conjoined aesthetics so actively envisaged. While there are several videos that could be identified as fitting into this somewhat controversial category, perhaps the most relevant and well known are select clips created by and featuring Madonna, Rihanna and Lady Gaga. Lady

Gaga's *Bad Romance* and *Paparazzi*, and Rihanna's *Disturbia* for example, follow Madonna's *Justify My Love* and *What it Feels Like for A Girl* in their captivating, disturbing and even comical depictions of transgressive sexuality and deviant behavior. Each video, mediated through a series of fabricated personas informed by a surrealistic fusion of overt stylistic references, traversing multiple 'levels' of visual culture, from experimental cinema, to B-grade and horror movies, pornography, S&M couture, high fashion, fashion photography and conceptual video art. It is these videos that will be the focus of this paper, which will go on to address some of the anxieties they provoke from an ideological and artistic perspective, and in doing so, argue for a more multifaceted way they can also be critiqued.

The earliest produced video of those selected is Madonna's *Justify My Love*<sup>1</sup>, released in 1990 and directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino. In this high key black and white film-noir inspired clip, Madonna is seen somewhat fatigued walking along a hotel hallway. Pausing to lean against the wall and writhing erotically to reveal suspenders and stockings under her dress, she is promptly seduced by a man who appears from a nearby room. In the next scene an androgynous looking woman joins them in one of the hotel rooms, and together they engage in a *ménage à trois*. A series of *mise-en-scènes* show more imagery of Madonna, the man and woman and other characters in other rooms, involved in sensual, sexual and sexualised acts. All wear distinctly erotic and S&M themed outfits – Madonna in lace underwear, a woman in tightly laced corset and another in suspenders and cap, à la Charlotte Rampling in *The Night Porter*, for example. Collectively by virtue of the actors 'clothing and styling as well as their actions and interaction, the video references themes of brutality, sadomasochism, voyeurism and bisexuality.

Madonna's *What it Feels Like for A Girl*<sup>2</sup> was released a decade after *Justify My Love*, and was directed by her then husband Guy Ritchie. In the clip Madonna picks up an old lady, and driving a pimped out yellow Camaro, proceeds to wreak havoc on the streets. This includes purposefully crashing into a car full of young men, Tasering a man and taking his money, faux shooting a cop and mowing down some roller hockey players with her car. After stealing another car and blowing up a gas station, in a *Thelma and Louise*-esque ending Madonna smashes the car into a pole in an apparent murder/suicide. The scene is fantastically filmed in action-film/video art slow mo.

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<sup>1</sup>Madonna's full music video, *Justify My Love* can be viewed on Youtube at:

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np\\_Y740aReI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np_Y740aReI)>

<sup>2</sup>Madonna's full music video, *What It Feels Like For A Girl*, can be viewed on Youtube at:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYwgG2oyUbA>>

Rihanna's *Disturbia*<sup>3</sup> (2008) was co-directed by the artist and Anthony Mandler. The video set is a surrealistic ghost train-like torture chamber. The artist is accompanied by a selection of characters that look like they just walked off the set of a Trent Reznor video. Throughout the clip, Rihanna is presented in different outfits, and in different states of victimization or torture. In intermittent scenes, Rihanna and accompanying dancers perform a suitably frenetic Thriller-esque routine. In one scene we see her imprisoned, her eyes rolling back in her head as if in some voodoo trance, as two men watch from the side. Other scenes include Rihanna being held in front of a gas chamber, tied to a bed frame and holding a column as fire burns around her (as if being burnt at the stake). Towards the end of the clip, Rihanna sits struggling with her hands and legs tied to the ground. Throughout the video her costumes change from dramatic headdress, to an assortment of leather bondage gear. In one scene a tarantula appears on her arm to match her spider web inspired one-piece. Her outfits purposefully signify bondage and incarceration. Her accompanying make up is suitably dramatic, dark and in one scene (Rihanna with blackened nails and fingers) verging on necrotic.

In Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi*<sup>4</sup> (2009) directed by Jonas Åkerlund, the cultural references come thick and fast. The clip is presented as a short movie complete with 1940s themed credits and Hitchcock's *Vertigo* inspired visuals. The storyline, which follows doomed starlet Lady Gaga, is dripping with glamour horror. Pushed off the balcony of her Hollywood mansion by her lover (played by *True Blood*'s Alexander Skarsgård) once she twigs he has tipped the paparazzi off about her, she lies splattered on the pavement surrounded by blood and pearls. Paparazzi encircle her, snapping away. She returns, fetishistic ally bound in a *Metropolis*<sup>5</sup> inspired metal mini-dress complete with wheel chair and crutches, and promptly seeks her revenge on her lover by poisoning him. Peppered throughout the video are stills of beautiful dead women à la the brutally sumptuous photographs of Guy Bourdin or Helmut Newton. Even the maid gets it. Has Lady Gaga killed these women as well as her lover?

The premise of *Bad Romance*<sup>6</sup> (2009) directed by Francis Lawrence, is that of Lady Gaga getting kidnapped by a group of supermodels who drug her and sell her off to the Russian mafia. In the clip, Lady Gaga and a handful of dancers rise from streamlined white

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<sup>3</sup>Rihanna's full music video, *Disturbia* can be viewed on Youtube at:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1mU6h4Xdxo>>

<sup>4</sup>Lady Gaga's full music video, *Paparazzi* can be viewed on Youtube at:

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2smz\\_1L2\\_0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2smz_1L2_0)>

<sup>5</sup>The robot Maria from Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*.

<sup>6</sup>Lady Gaga's full music video, *Bad Romance* can be viewed on Youtube at:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeylOI>>

coffins and proceed with a clawy dance wearing tight white PVC outfits. This is spliced with surrealistic scenes of the artist with digitally enlarged eyes, doll-like and vulnerable in a bath, forced to drink a glass of vodka. The camera reveals that Lady Gaga and her dancers are performing for a selection of attractive but sinister looking men (her kidnappers). Each man is either shirtless, wearing Bane-like masks or metal face pieces, or covered in tattoos – dangerously sexy. She is the object of their attention as they bid for her via a series of computers. In the next scene, a Matrix 360-degree camera pan-around captures Lady Gaga standing motionless in black Agent Provocateur underwear as the men sit circled around her. Raining down on her is a shower of crystals, captured in freeze-frame like a frozen metaphoric money shot. In one scene, Lady Gaga appears wearing a turtleneck bubble dress and leggings to match a pair of snub-nosed Alexander McQueen shoes. A simple nod to her fashion in-the-know, or perhaps her value and status? Towards the end of the clip Lady Gaga, wearing a white bear cape, walks seductively towards the man who has clearly won the bid. He sits expectantly on a large bed in a sparse white room (strongly referencing Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Unfortunately for him however, he goes the way of her lover in *Paparazzi*. The bed goes up in flames and she is then seen lying next to his charred corpse, a little sooty, smoking a fag and wearing a rather amusing, intermittently sparking bra.

For many popular music artists, the video clip is a visceral medium to exploit the theatrics of spectacle. For many women artists, it is also a vehicle to address issues of body politics – questions of representation, sexuality and identity. Here, the video clip presents the opportunity for the subversive re-configuration of gender archetypes. Moreover, it offers the chance to explore 'dangerous' representations of femininity and similarly difficult subjects, particularly from a conservative feminist perspective. In the videos described here for example, self-objectification, aggressive sexuality, sado-masochism, violence, horror and so on are all seen to beat play. It is precisely for these reasons, that this particular approach to self-presentation, and representation of women in general – the aestheticisation and sexualisation of the macabre or perverse if you will – is a highly divisive area of visual culture. For some, these videos are merely shallow exhibition is too reliant on appropriation and shock tactics. For others, they can be seen as effective and even humorous in their entertainment objectives, captivating in their depiction of deviant sexuality and provocative subject matter, shrewdly mediated through dramatic use of cultural reference, fashion and style.

As Madonna, Lady Gaga and Rihanna operate within the very system of semiotics that contributes to two-dimensional reified representations of women however – representations or modes of which these artists are ultimately aiming to reclaim, subvert or re-

interpret – it can become difficult to fully locate their subversive success. As writer and curator Jo Anna Isaak notes when discussing Irigaray's take on mimesis, in a classic 'Lacanian double-bind' these representations can equally be read as 'functioning either as a form of complicity with, or refusal of, patriarchal sexual relations' (1996: 196). For this reason, from a feminist perspective such representation can be even more divisive. Without reducing such politically oriented response to a clear dichotomy, it can nevertheless be contended that it triggers reactions that arc across two extremes. To one extreme are those who perceive such cultural output as dangerous narcissism that fails to curtail the sexual objectification of the female body. To the other extreme are those who in more of a third-wave feminist sense, identify this particular form of self-representation as an empowered approach to personal agency. Further recognizing such artistic output as creativity is effective in its strategic convergence of symbolic cultural references, and subversively successful in the gender and social critique it offers by means of this politically tactical stratagem. From an artistic perspective also, despite an appreciation of postmodernity's increased folding in of popular media, the creative industries and conceptual art, there still remains apprehension that the video clip is situated within popular culture as somehow lesser to art. Even then, as Neal Benezra and Olga M Viso suggest in their introductory essay for the book *Regarding Beauty* (1999), there exists an issue with any art where surface veneer dominates, that can render it easily dismissible as shallow or unsubstantial.

It could be argued that most interested audiences are well aware of the difference facets to these arguments. Whichever way one looks at the debate however, it does not prevent the visual rhetoric of the works to be considered through the prism of multiple readings. Instead of drawing a line between successful/not successful for instance, perhaps these videos can instead be considered as operating, to paraphrase Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon (1994), as both a legitimization and subversion of that which they address, collectively mediated through the captivating affect of effective spectacle. Homage, parody and unapologetic depictions of overt eroticism, as well as authentic reflections on the darker side of female sexuality and deviant fantasy can be identified as operating concurrently, creating both a refracting and layering of visual theatricality and conceptual commentary.

Hutcheon's elucidation on this particular state of legitimization and subversion is further formulated in her take on the notion of irony. Hutcheon's theory proves useful in interpreting this particular dual artistic approaches both an underscoring and critique of that which it examines, where multiple messages may be at play. Unlike the traditional understanding of irony i.e., saying the opposite of what one means, in her book *Irony's Edge*,

The Theory and Politics of Irony, Hutcheon formulates an alternate understanding of the term; one where it can operate ‘as a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings – and doing so with an evaluative edge’ (Hutcheon 1994: 89). Hutcheon’s argument is that this process of differentiation and relation sees a fluctuation between alternate meanings that are linked but distinct. Denotation and connotation cannot be seen simultaneously, but are also inextricable from each other. In other words, visual signifiers may connect to, but not politically align with what is being implied. Such ‘trans ideology’ (Hutcheon 1994: 34) consequently, can be both affirming and negating. It is however, reliant on the viewer to enter into this ‘semantically complex process’ of interpretation and double meaning (Hutcheon 1994: 89). Specifically, it calls for viewers to consider (or re-consider) more deeply, artistic intent, context and their own personal frame of reference.

On a very general level, we can observe this affirming and negating quality in the videos discussed here, by means of the fact that each woman operates concurrently as artist, object and subject, disrupting somewhat traditional power dynamics of image construction and ensuring a level of self-actualisation on behalf of the artist. At the same time, certain ‘problematic’ modes of representing women still remain perpetuated. More specifically, if we apply Hutcheon’s theory of trans ideological irony to Rihanna’s *Disturbia*, her bondage and incarceration frames her as a passive victim in the context of the narrative. Nevertheless, what it can also be seen to connote, is a possible psychological state of imprisonment, mental frustration or even masochistic desires. As Rihanna is a woman of Guyanese and West Indian descent, the bondage and incarceration theme to *Disturbia*, with its distinct echoes of Antebellum slavery and voodoo imagery, adds another layer of complexity. This combined with her own history as the victim of domestic violence, further complicates the reading of the works. The process of creating purposeful visual parallels is however (importantly) both self-reflexive, and a valid means of regaining control over narrative. Thus, it may conceivably operate a symbolic reclaiming of power. Similarly, whilst the violence in Madonna’s *What it feels like for a girl* may be a blatant display or even celebration of decidedly amoral behaviour, it also triggers more personal self-reflection. Each and every person experiences the undeniable desire to break from the confines of culturally inscribed civil behaviour – a state of neurosis Freud devoted *Civilization and its Discontents* to addressing (2000). In a sense, Lady Gaga’s *Paparazzi*, whilst depicting imagery of celebrity Hollywood excess and glamorized horror, can also be seen to be exploring themes of victimization as retaliation;

murder as revenge. Moreover, Lady Gaga's personal experience of the pressures of real-life celebrity in effect is being 'worked through' in the alternate realm of creativity.

From an audience's perspective Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance* presents a form of self-objectification on the artist's behalf, evidently for the benefit of the male gaze. In applying the concept of trans ideology however, instead of reading this as a one-way prescriptive engagement it can simultaneously be formulated as an expression of erotic will on behalf of the artist as subject. Lady Gaga's sexual appeal certainly solicits the male gaze. Such an approach however, concurrently draws people's attention to the subjective pleasure of exhibitionism, sexual empowerment and gender orientation, in addition to the complex body politics associated with woman as a sexualised object. So too, such an approach submits itself to a possible queer reading and heterosexual women's pleasure at viewing other women – thus resisting certain heteronormative assumptions. This is an important point because it also draws in to the equation the complex question of women's sexual pleasure and the visual. In responding to the question of heterosexual women's visual pleasure for example, Laura Mulvey in a 1981 follow up essay to *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, put forward two options. Either a slippage of identification transvestism occurs, or women engage in masochistic identification with the female object (Mulvey 1981). More recent concepts relating to the gaze however, suggest that viewers (men and women of all sexual orientations) can shift in and out of subjective vantage points, thus the gaze is not constructed as a male projection against a (lacking) female other. Theorist Bracha Ettinger for example puts forward a detailed hypothesis of this trans-subjective "matrixal gaze" in her book *The Matrixal Gaze* (2006).

For many women, there also exists distinct pleasure (in addition to the political significance) that can be found in the re-claiming of character and gender types rendered through modes of dress, and also the spectacularly fantastical formulation of new ones. This re-writing of certain symbolic representations is also entwined in the non-essentialist desire to shift experientially in and out of characters and personal fantasies. The erotic or outlandishly glamorous ensembles seen in the videos discussed here certainly may function to sexualise the performers and add theatrical flair to the videos. Nevertheless, in-line with Hutcheon's take on irony and in Roland Barthes' terms, modes of dress can also operate as signifying social objects through which multiple ideologies can be communicated (Barthes 2006: 10). Aligning with de-essentializing theories of masquerade and femininity as performance (Riviera 1929) and drawing on Judith Butler's formulation of identity as a "performative" process constructed within a broader system of semiotics (1999), fashion theorist Valerie Steele often

argues that fashion constitutes a staged performance. Self-presentation is thus a series of theatrically performed acts (Steele 2008). Thus understood, the strategic use of fashion and styling within the videos of Madonna, Rihanna and Lady Gaga operates on more than one level. Pointed use of clothing and style functions as either symbols of embodied sexuality, to visually seduce the audience through creative excess and/or convey certain character types and values. Dress in these videos also operates ultimately as a symbol of a deeper desire for control over shifting subjectivity, personal transformation and the resistance of hegemony.

In referring back to concern over the superficial aspect of spectacle, theories formulated by academic Elizabeth Grosz in her 2008 work *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* can be useful for framing this subject in more constructive terms. In her book, Grosz suggests that art can be a spectacle that facilitates, provokes and elaborates upon configurations of bodies and forces that were previously unimagined (2008). This definition allows art to be identified outside of its traditional parameters, and highlights the relevance of creative output from across the arc of conceptual art, high fashion and mainstream popular culture. Furthermore, it gives credence to the practice of co-opting the skills and talent of directors, stylists, and fashion designers to contribute to a singular creative vision.<sup>7</sup> Grosz's further understanding of art's workings suggests that, "artworks are not so much to be read, interpreted, deciphered as responded to, touched, engaged, intensified" (2008: 79). Ultimately, our response to the excessive depiction of bodies, textures, colours, movement and sound is first and foremost a visceral, corporeal response of the senses. This does not elevate spectacle above concept. It can however be applied to an appreciation of the creative configuration of bodies seen in the videos discussed in this paper; characters that are constructed out of, modified by and manifest through the stylistic fusing of the erotic, glamorous, sadomasochistic, violent, surrealistic, horrific and so on.

The cognitive dissonance that results from the oscillation between visceral attraction and possible shock, moral objection or even humor, can thus be identified as a multi-layered creative strategy (Grunenberg 2009: 220). Firstly it secures our (the audience) attention, then triggering us to question our reaction to the subjects explored. From there, we are offered the chance to more closely examine the moral, ethical and political implications of our critical response. It is the dynamic tension resulting from the pushing of conventional boundaries of

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<sup>7</sup>It is undeniable that in the realization of the videos discussed here the artists have relied heavily on creative contribution of other. While this is the case, it is important to note that it is the artist's considered conceptual vision that draws the most suitable creative practitioners together to facilitate the conception and production of the videos in their entirety.

socially acceptable behavior and sexual proclivities therefore that aids in us questioning our attitudes and assumptions towards them. Certainly the videos discussed here draw heavily on cultural references, and actively apply well-known stylistic vernaculars from within popular culture. They do so however, with purpose, creative rigour and technical excellence; a potent combination that collectively contributes to the video's forceful and transportive affect. As feminist critic Gaylyn Studlar (1992) suggests in her writings on the cinematic gaze, we can choose to be overwhelmed by the cinematic image and actively find scopophilic pleasure in succumbing to such viewing. At the same time, we can also be aware of inherent contradictions. While some viewers might err distinctly on one side of the debates surrounding the artistic integrity of the videos discussed here, or the success of their neo-feminist message, it is hard to deny their inevitable allure. To quote critic Dave Hickey in his discussions on the notion of transgressive beauty, at the very least these videos do manage to "[show] us something of which we may not approve of, in such a way that we cannot resist" (Hickey 1993: 16-17, as cited in Gumpert 1995: 103).

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