



**Do You Want
the Truth or
Something
Beautiful?**

**Critical reflections on music
videos at the start of the 21st century**
Roban Marius Sandemo Fernando

Master thesis, Department of Musicology, University of Oslo, Spring semester 2010

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Prelude: Times are a-changing

*It's the time of the turning and there's something stirring outside
If you stop for a moment you can feel it all slipping away
It's the time of the turning and the old world's falling
Nothing you can do can stop the next emerging
Time of the turning and we better learn to say our goodbyes*

(Excerpts from "The time of the turning / The weaver's reel" by Peter Gabriel)

The spectacular Millennium Dome was raised on the Greenwich Peninsula in London as a major exhibition celebrating the beginning of the third millennium. The exhibition opened to the public on January 1st 2000, and was initiated by a spectacular multimedia show entitled "OVO" created specifically for the occasion by designer Mark Fisher and composer Peter Gabriel. The show narrated a story of a fictional set of beings that throughout time had transitioned from agriculture to industry while segregating different races. In a key scene of the show, vocalist Alison Goldfrapp was featured in the role of a narrating and contemplating weaver, performing a musical monologue that reflected the rapid shifts and turns of a fictional world named "OVO". As a backdrop for my thesis, these lines, which are quoted above, have been circling my mind throughout the process of producing this study. Even though "OVO" is a fictional space, and the story about its citizens dwells on industrial development, the arbitrary reflections on change within the lyrics of the weaver's monologue seem a natural prelude to this study.

I remember very well the advent of the recent millennium. It seemed the whole world was anticipating a New Year's celebration that resembled nothing they had ever seen before. Expectations, dreams, hopes and, lest we forget, fears of what was to come were poured into newspapers, journals, literature, movies and so on. Many feared a total collapse of technology; others hoped for peace, dissolution of political conflict, or made a resolution to achieve an even slimmer waistline. Diversions aside, in the late 1990's the world awaited and expected some kind of important shift of life. And, looking back on my years as a 'citizen of the world', even over a modestly short period of time, a lot has changed. The Millennium Dome and the "OVO" show is one of numerous spectacular symbols and examples of the common anticipation of the passing of a milestone in history. They represent hopes, dreams, fears and predictions of a new beginning. However, one might ask whether these changes are finalized or still ongoing, and, whether such changes have unified the world, or if they have blurred our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. Perhaps, for some, January 2000 would have proved a disappointment in that it

did not necessarily provide such a drastic shift towards something new, but, despite the lack of pyrotechnical effects and a total collapse of technology, to argue that we live in a time of stability would be deceptive. Undoubtedly, times are changing and the world as we know it differs drastically from the reality of our ancestors. However, as I hope to elucidate more accurately with this study, rather than coming to a full turn, the world has reached a point of transformational confusion and contradiction. The millennium shift did perhaps not mark either the dystopian predictions of a collapse of technology or the utopian dreams of world peace and unity, but it did mark a beginning of the collapse of a most important conventional social paradigm: the way we define and understand ourselves and others in terms of subjectivity.

Before I address the research questions for this thesis, I want to back-track to the advent of the year 2000. I was just a teenager then, but I can clearly remember the emergence of britpop bands in the 1990's and the summer I bought the commercially successful album "Park Life" by the British band Blur in particular. The whole album would become my anthem for that summer, with its style and witty songs accompanying the halcyon days of the summer break. Little did I know, then, that my favourite track of that album would become my choice of introducing my master thesis sixteen years forward in time. Revisiting Blur, but now in an academic sense, I experience the very same enthusiasm I did that summer, only this time having a better understanding of the lyrics, and more importantly what is written between the lines.

The lyrics of Blur's major hit "Girls & Boys" of 1994, cunningly crafted, narrate a comedy on teenage lust, love and sex in the 1990's. The protagonist follows the herd of teenage contemporaries and leaves the cold and rain of Britain for sunny beaches, umbrella coated long drinks and wild parties that last until the break of dawn. The teenage hormonal state combined with a diverse pool of alcoholic infusions, drugs and sunny weather evokes a carefree – even primitive – lust. At three in the morning, it does not seem to matter which person you are holding, kissing or sleeping with, just as long as there is someone there to give into your need. The wordsmiths, Blur, addressed this 'Ibiza' state of mind' through a parody, describing these persons and the trend of carefree 1990's love in the catchy chorus as "girls who are boys who like boys to be girls who do boys like they're girls who do girls like they're boys". Stan Hawkins has described the song as "[...] a hedonistic celebration of pansexuality and party culture in the UK [...]" (Hawkins, 2009, p.98), for the song was one of many commercial pop hits that addressed the liberal attitudes towards sex and promiscuity that started to arise in the 1990's. Many of these resembled the catty remarks on British youth flocking to beaches of southern Europe on display in "Girls & Boys". The song itself is a jolly and carefree tune, with a positive and energetic sense to it, and paired with the lyrics, quite joyously presents a satire on youth culture by thematizing gender neutrality and the

arbitrariness of sexual categorization (ibid). Nevertheless, with britpop, the era of irony came to an end. Out of the carelessness of the 1990's, a tendency to highlight sincere imagery started to spread within the realm of cultural expressions.¹ While the 1980's and the 1990's could be seen as 'the ironic turn', the 2000's turned out to be an 'ironic u-turn'.

Comedy and irony aside, Blur's song did manage, albeit exaggerated for its time, to capture a trend in the 1990's. Sixteen years on, such a role or category of preference might not seem all that ironic or deviant as the real comedy of the song relies on. Not wishing to go further into an analysis of Blur, my point is that a decade into the 3rd millennium, our understandings and definitions of conventional gender roles have been blurred, and as a consequence of this, many large debates, struggles and confusions have arisen. Recent years have shown an emergence and a growing acceptance towards deviances of the conventional definition of what makes and defines either the male or the female gender. An intense and dramatic fight for justification and de-stigmatization of sexual minorities has eventually led to legal acceptance in most parts of the western world. Compared to only a few years ago, homosexuals have indeed been met with less scepticism and hatred, and have managed to establish a category of identification that only one hundred years ago generally was looked upon as a medical, moral and psychological deviance. Yet, one cannot overlook that at the same time, homophobic views are still held by many individuals and religious constitutions today. Stressing that my query does not exclusively focus on gay and lesbian behaviour, it is important to note that we have similarly seen new attitudes towards the definition of male and female in the heteronormative realm, in many countries in the western world, as well as my own country, Norway. Even though such norm-defying identities still face scepticism, conditions have shifted towards a general acceptance for categories such as tomboys, metrosexuals, soft men, hard men, femmes, butches, the androgynous and so on. In a similar fashion, the biological boundaries that define the two sexes have been problematized and questioned after the development of gender reassignment surgery.

Of course, there are many examples within the plethora of new definitions and behavioural patterns still not mentioned, and apart from the major categories pointed out, there are many 'in-betweens'. In 2010, these categories of identification find themselves in a state of limbo. Whilst in most cases their value and justification are legally, and to a certain degree morally protected, they still cause opposing reactions from their peers. In terms of gender, the ways we perceive, understand, project and express gender issues are indeed varied and complex. Thus, as a globally accepted set of social truths, the division between only female and male categories still presents a problem when describing the current state of gender contradictions.

¹ This tendency became even more apparent after the '9/11' terror attacks in the USA.

Questioning the possibilities of a decomposition of gender definition relates to questions of a postmodern society: a rejection of objective truth and global cultural narratives that defies sharp classifications. Semiotician Umberto Eco cunningly described the characteristics of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a woman, but knows he cannot proclaim ‘I love you madly’ “[...] because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland” (Eco, 1984, p.530-531). Popular music and popular music videos in particular have been described as being the ultimate incarnation of a postmodern state, as their representations extract, remodel and transform traditions and material from earlier texts² to create a product that narrates pastiche and blank parody (Hawkins, 2002, p.17; Jameson, 1983, p.114).³ In this study, I will look into the idea that gender and gender roles have been redefined in recent times, by studying a medium reputed to revolve around the same ideas of fragmentation.

Introduction

Hypothesis

As I am curious about popular culture at the start of the 21st century, this study will consider how gender affects popular culture and its expressions by approaching pop videos. My thesis builds upon three main research questions:

- How does gender and subjectivity function within selected pop videos from the start of the 21st century, and what does this tell us about the current state of affairs?
- In which ways can we apply musicological theory and method in an interdisciplinary way to carry out such an investigation?
- What do music videos at the start of the 21st century tell us about the construction of gender in relationship to mainstream pop aesthetics?

These questions cover a vast range of considerations and generate a wealth of other subsequent related topics and questions. Given the overwhelming variety of music videos, how is it possible to approach such an enquiry? How is it possible to take into account all cultural aspects of gender views and conventions on a global scale? Of course, my aim here is not to offer an answer that deduces a statement of generally applicable truths. Rather, I wish to create a discursive dialogue that illuminates gender issues in popular culture. Thus, I have no intention of basing my argument on an essential hypothesis as any such attempt will be redundant. I do however hope that my discursion into gender issues in a pool of case studies prompting different aspects of the research questions might elucidate and inspire new perspectives on gender representation and perception, not only with the texts I present in this study, but also in any cultural expression of both past, present and future.

² Please note that the term ‘text’ should not be misunderstood as meaning words, but as a notion on a textual methodological approach towards cultural expressions. I will explain these terms in the following section.

³ Also see Kellner (1995).

In terms of my hypothesis, there are certain writers and scholars that have opened the doors for gender queries in musical texts, and I have fortunately had the possibility to draw on a rich interdisciplinary array of useful perspectives from popular music studies, popular musicology, genders studies and media studies to make a theoretical frame for my work. Because the amount of various apparatuses and angles I have incorporated from these four disciplines are of a considerable amount, I have found it best to introduce the theories and works of my references alongside the analyses. Nevertheless, the questions I pursue in this thesis cluster into a number of distinct groups within the four disciplines mentioned above, and it seems useful to outline them for the sake of clarifying my theoretical position as well as shaping a constructive methodology. Before I present these considerations, a final clarification is needed in terms of my terminology. Throughout this thesis I will often use the terms *text* and *reading*. It is important to note that these terms should not be misunderstood as literary terms.⁴ Stemming from textual analysis, the term *musical text* or *audiovisual text* implies that it is an object in which a certain dimension of content or meaning can be extracted. The term *reading* thus notes on the analytical act in which content can be located within the *text* in question. The reason for this utilization of these terms is first and foremost to emphasize my analytical approach to popular music expressions; as Philip Tagg explains, to locate *what* is being communicated and *how* (Tagg, 1982, p.65). I will now move on to the four interdisciplinary areas of exploration my research questions addresses.

Contextualizing Popular Music Studies

As mentioned above, my research questions connect the music video medium to issues of social structures, which relates my queries to the ideologies of popular music studies. From a sociological perspective, there are two particular aspects that gain much attention within this category.

1. (Re-)Connecting music and society

In popular music studies, the common ideological stance is positing context as the main arena in which negotiations of musical meaning and meaningful experience take place. This view therefore critiques the usefulness of a musical analysis that favours essentialism. Robert Walser clarifies this stance by arguing:

You only have the problem of connecting music and society if you've separated them in the first place. When analysts discuss musical texts, what usually goes unremarked is the tremendous cultural work that is required to textualize musical practices. What is patently a mode of human interaction that is enabled by particular histories and cultural ground is remade into an object with 'internal' properties. Texts are talismans of a lost provenance, the contest of desires and dialogue that made their existence possible and meaningful. If that context is understood, a text can be analyzed as a kind of human utterance, in dialogue with other utterances (Walser, 2003, p.27).

4 However, on the occasions that I actually do refer to semantic expressions, I clarify this by using the terms 'lyrics' or plainly, 'words'.

In my study, the cultural value of music is a cornerstone of my theoretical and methodological position. Connecting society and music in my analyses will allow me to argue that musical expressions form rituals through which participants explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identity. As Christopher Small emphasizes, music should be regarded as something one does, rather than a secluded dimension of essential meaning: “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (Small, 1998, p.9 [typography modified]).

My research questions thus demand an investigation into how music is socially contextualized in terms of performance and experience. In my analyses, these issues will be addressed by a discussion of the referential conditions of interpretation in relation to the various case studies.

2. *Music as a space for negotiating identity*

Another issue that undeniably intersects with the connection between music and society is the negotiation of a ‘musical identity’. Susan McClary addressed reflexivity in music by noting that, as an art form, it does not only mirror social mechanisms, but is also a flexible component in the construction of identity. McClary states: “[...] [music] serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated” (McClary, 1991, p.8). The view that music offers a space for the shaping and negotiation of identity has been followed up by a number of researchers who have clarified these mechanisms from various perspectives. In his *Musikk og Identitet* (1997), Even Ruud proposed that processes of musical identification are definable through four categories: the *personal space*, in which music takes on the role of a metaphor for our diverse feelings and sensations (Ruud, 1997, p.67-105); the *social space* in which music, connected to social and cultural spaces, constructs lines to other musical and cultural worlds (ibid, p.106); *the space of time and place* where music is employed as marker of personal historiographies (ibid, p.146); and finally the *transpersonal space* in which music allows for expressing and identifying how we experience ourselves as a part of a wider holistic entity (ibid, p.175-194).⁵ A similar approach to identity works in music was provided by Simon Frith, who insisted that the constructions of musical identity takes the shape of ritual as they describe one’s place in a dramatised pattern of relationships (Frith 1996, p.275). By a removal of essentialism, the flexibility of a contextual approach enables for insight into negotiations of subjectivity within both performance and experience; both of which are crucial to my discussions of how gender function within audiovisual expressions.

⁵ See Hawkins (2002) for an application of Ruud’s *transpersonal space* in a theorization of popular music (p.14-19)

An application of popular musicology

Popular musicology is primarily concerned with criticism and the analysis of music, but this does not mean it ignores social and cultural context (Scott, 2009, p.2). Investigating the music video, many issues arise in discussing how musical parameters operate in dialogue with projection and reception. Summed up, the popular musicological issues I will illuminate in my study of the music video medium can be summed up in three overarching concerns:

1. Analytical bifocality

In the article “Popular Music: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances”, Robert Walser (2003) presented a set of detailed heuristic apothegms that has proven useful as a map of appropriating musical analysis into a cultural context. Noting many crucial considerations needed to balance formalistic models of music analysis and contextual discussions, Walser argued for

[...]a more anthropological conception of culture in popular music studies, a stronger sense of history [...], and a conception of analysis that is self-reflexive about method and goals, tactical rather than absolute, less interested in describing or legitimating than in understanding how music works and why people care about it (Walser, 2003, p.38).

In this, Walser calls for a certain bifocality of perspective in shaping and structuring analyses of popular music and its expressions. Maintaining a bifocal analytical perspective has been a very important consideration in my dissertation mainly for two reasons: first, the music video as an object of investigation demands deconstruction of not only musical parameters, but also imagery and semantics. Second, the articulation of my research questions requires that the findings of such a complex deconstruction must be tactically discussed to shed light on social structures, and on what these can tell us about the culture in which the music video in question is created, experienced and interpreted. Acknowledging this need, applying models and theories of contemporary popular musicology has proven very helpful as it draws on various theoretical models from anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, postcolonial studies, feminism, gender studies and queer studies. As Scott reveals in his account of the development of popular musicology since the early 90's, “[...] there is no party line to popular musicology; indeed, it may be thought of as a post-disciplinary field in the breadth of its theoretical formulations and its objects of study” (Scott, 2009, p.2). Thus, the discussion of how to adapt and adjust music analysis to best elucidate the way the music video communicates is one of the main concerns I take up in my analyses.

2. Locating identity in musical performance

It is important to note that even though I will try to avoid musical essentialism and argue the social value of music, I have similarly needed to avoid giving social influence too much room in my analyses. Frith addresses this problem: “The academic study of popular music has been limited by the assumption that the sounds somehow reflect or present ‘a people’” (Frith, 1996, p.269).

Sceptical towards the idea that music mirrors society through “[...] a form of ideological expression” (ibid), he presents the following consideration: “The point is not how a piece of music, a text, ‘reflects’ popular values, but how – in performance – it produces them” (ibid, p.270). In investigating the representations of gender in popular music videos, I have thus needed to draw lines between performativity and identity representations and argue that it is in the audiovisual performance of the music that the music video medium reflects notions of identity.⁶ This issue is also closely related to the Butlerian theory of gender performativity which I will clarify below. Drawing on the popular music studies of in particular Frith, Hawkins, McClary, Whiteley and Walser, I will enter into the debate around performativity, and try to provide analytical perspectives that both detail musical parameters as well as social context of the performance.

3. Musical parameters and symbolical associations

In light of the two issues presented above, framing performativity and bifocality as a theoretical and methodological apparatus requires a clarification of the symbolic value of musical parameters. Of course, the discussion of semiology is indisputably vast and multifaceted, and reaches over an array of academic fields. Nevertheless, I have seen the need to bring up certain aspects of semiology in relation to how the various musical parameters can create associations through interpretation. Aware of the many pitfalls of semiotic deciphering, I will all alongside all my readings provide critical reflections on my own hermeneutical deductions and thus account for the contextual conditions that shape my set of references – or, in other words, the ‘code’ through which the signs within the text have been decoded.

A second issue concerning the symbolic value of music is that, in music, other aspects than the address of lyrics can provide us with associations and connotations in our experience. In fact, on more than one occasion, I will argue that lyrics in many ways tend to demand far less attention than the musical backdrop and perhaps too often gain undue attention in the analyses of music videos. Thus, in my analyses, I wish to elucidate the importance of parameters such as melody, harmony, orchestration, timbre (both vocal and instrumental), pulse and rhythm in the totality of interpretation, and to this end my perspectives are inspired by a wide range of musicological approaches.⁷

⁶ Here, it seems important to clarify that in the music video, I do regard the visual side as part of the musical performance. In most videos, the artist will lipsync to the lyrics, or move to the rhythm of the music. Also, in videos that do not portray an ‘immediate’ performance of the actual song, the image is still representing the music. In comparison to cinema, the music of music videos is the initial expression. The image (with few exceptions) is crafted to suit the music. For further reading on this matter, see Vernallis (2004, p.17-24).

⁷ Among the researchers whose contributions to my theoretical apparatus cannot be bypassed are David Brackett, Robert Walser, Stan Hawkins, Richard Middleton and Allan F. Moore.

Framing gender studies

The term ‘gender’ undeniably holds many problematic aspects to it. For the term has many valid definitions, and is a set of characteristics that are seen to distinguish between male and female entities, extending from the medical and biological aspects of one’s sex to social dimensions of identity, behavior and norms. Frequently, gender is approached as interrelated, even interchangeable, to the term sex. I am of course aware of this interrelation and do not deny that gender is predicated on the medical differences of the two sexes. However, it is crucial to straighten out that my use of the term is to be understood academically as regarding social constructions, and not to be misinterpreted as concerning strict medical taxonomies. In her amount of work on gender, Judith Butler has drawn a distinct line between gender and sex by comparing the differences to resemble the difference between verbs and nouns. One of Butler’s main arguments was that a man or woman is not something one *is*, but something one *does* – thus introducing the idea that gender is performed whilst sex is genetically determined (Butler, 1999 [1990], p.9, 15). In line with Butler’s distinctions between gender and sex, my perspective is primarily concerned with how the social constructs of gender (roles, norms, behavior and attributes) are performed within pop videos of recent time, and how they reflect the shifts and turns of our views, definitions and experience of gender a decade into 21st century society.

Subjectivity is another term that will be addressed many times throughout this study and demands clarification. I have applied the term in two different ways: first, subjectivity points to the subjective performances – or better, narratives – of gender in the music videos I discuss in my analyses. Second, and perhaps more importantly, subjectivity also points to how such narratives are perceived and interpreted under subjective conditions. In other words, one of the main inquiries I make in this thesis is how gender narratives in pop videos are consequently experienced by contextual conditions of the subject.

My primary concern with gender in my study, clearly stated in my research questions, is to posit music as a gendered discourse. As mentioned above, one of my main areas of exploration in popular music will be the projection of identity through music – and, undoubtedly, gender is a major component in the constitution of the way we define and understand ourselves and others. In her disputed book *Feminine endings*, Susan McClary (1991) opened up the discussion of gender aspects in musical narratives. She insisted on viewing gender as an important consideration in both musical structures, and in the way music is perceived. In my analyses, and in my general discussions, I will pursue McClary’s task of illuminating that gender indeed is commented on, projected and read in musical discourses. This task can be categorized as four important areas of gender exploration:

1. Representation politics and the projection of gender

Even though McClary's study is primarily directed to classical music, her arguments are applicable to popular music and popular music expressions.⁸ In more recent times, many writers have built on McClary's theories in relation to pop, framing representation politics as the area in which aspects of gender can be traced. Concerned with how characteristics of identity can be translated into audiovisual representations, Hawkins notes:

Wide ranges of political positions emerge from the shared experience of social groups. But rather than emphasizing ideology or group affiliation, my focus will fall on the liberation of a specific constituency marginalized within a broad context. When linked to performance practices, representation politics provide ways of understanding personal and group distinctiveness (Hawkins, 2009, p.32).

Hawkins argues that the mediated nature of popular music produces audiovisual images of identity through the constitution of a star aesthetics. Taking up a similar approach to representation politics, I will look into how these can be deconstructed in order to grasp how they project narratives and meanings on an axis of gender.

2. Performing and constructing gender

The second issue worth addressing in terms of gender is the notion of construction. As previously mentioned, I adopt the Butlerian perspective on gender, defining it as a set of qualities that are socially constructed in opposition to the clinical category of sex. In other words, gender is flexible, whereas sex is understood as a constant state. From various perspectives, I will address the flexibility of the gender illusion, noting its malleability and the many ways it can be used as a masquerade.⁹ This issue thus relates directly to my questions of social change and a possible shift and decomposition of the ruling gender conventions at the turn of the century.

An inseparable aspect of gender constructs is how these constructions are embedded in artistic performance.¹⁰ In my analyses I will therefore reflect on how gender as a construction is projected in terms of image, music and semantics. This task thus demands critical questioning of deception and masquerade in mainstream pop.

3. Applying queer theory

All the characters presented in my selection of videos do in one way or the other challenge conventional expectations of heteronormativity, which brings in the aspect of queer representation.

8 It should be noted that Chapter 7 in McClary's book *Feminine endings* (1991, p.148-169) deals specifically with the music of Madonna.

9 In doing so, I have drawn inspiration from a number of contemporary researchers within popular music studies and popular musicology, in particular McClary (1991; 2000), Whiteley (2000), Whiteley and Rycenga (2006), Walser (1993), Hawkins (2002; 2006; 2007; 2009), Steinskog (2008; 2008 [URL]) and Bradby (1993).

10 This is argued extensively in the studies by Hawkins (2002; 2009), Whiteley (2000), and in the anthologies edited by Whiteley and Rycenga (2006), and Jarman-Ivens (2007).

Not to be mistaken for gay and lesbian studies which generally focus on behaviour within homosexual categories, queer studies can be understood as an expanded focus on sexuality that encompasses any kind of activity of normative, deviant or perverted categories. Applying queer theory thus allows for discussing fluid representations that are problematic to categorize as expressing either heterosexuality or homosexuality. As Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga argued in their jointly edited book *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006), the term queer achieves a certain fluidity that refuses gender-based constructions: “In short, *queer* becomes a taboo-breaker” (Whiteley and Rycenga, 2006, p.xiv). A recurring discussion in my thesis will thus regard how queer theory is a most important tool in understanding representations that challenge the conventional, and that queer expressions (despite their obvious associations) do not always imply homosexual categorization.

Closely related to this issue lies a wish to neutralize the negative etymological associations with the word ‘queer’ itself. Noted by Erik Steinskog, the word *queer* can bear a certain negative association that often is understood as defying what is acceptable (Steinskog, 2008, p.159-160). However, he notes, *queer theory* is a field of study that aims to de-exoticize alternative gender categories in a way that critiques the homology in the conventional gendered hegemonies of society. In line with Steinskog and a number of other contemporary writers on gender, I wish to show how *queer* can work as a neutral theoretical apparatus that instead of connoting deviance of moral or normativity, on the contrary critically challenges essential ideas of normality.

4. Politicizing gender representations in popular culture expressions

A final issue I want to address in relation to gender is how the music video can provide information about the political dimensions within conventional definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity. I will thus see the findings of my analyses in relation to political and social structures, asking what each video can tell us of the current state of affairs. Having acknowledged that power is a concept that historically has been far from gender neutral, I will continue exploring feminist debates in relation to the selected videos.¹¹ Returning to the idea of a significant change of gender roles and expectations at the turn of the century, all of my discussions will revolve around the question of social change. Thus, an overarching theme of this thesis is to ask if we, in a postmodern society in which gender roles and sexual identities have started to decompose, truly in political terms have abandoned patriarchy by looking at how gender is articulated in the symbolic language of popular music.

11 Discussing the political aspects of the patriarchal gender divides in metaphors of power, I have been very inspired by - and drawn on - the feminist theories of, among others, Creed (1993), Bayton (1997), Halberstam (2006) and Kristeva (1982).

Conceptual approaches to music video analysis

Studying the music video is alone a task that demands interdisciplinary considerations. As a final theme within my research questions, my study aims to present analytical models that deal with the music video medium in its own right. My mission is thus to bring together perspectives that often only have been discussed in isolation. Combining cultural, technical, narrative and musical aspects, this task articulates three final considerations:

1. Accounting for and equating various media within the music video

The task of tackling the message of music videos requires a critical consideration of the medium's multifaceted nature. In his critique of Kaplan's *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*¹², Robert Walser underlined common general problematic issues in many studies of music television.¹³ He detects:

[...] the most serious shortcoming of Kaplan's book is the almost total neglect of the *music* of music video. [...] Though musical discourses are invisible, they are nonetheless susceptible to analysis, and musical analysis is crucial for music video analysis because aural texts are indisputably primary: they exist prior to videos and independently of them, and fans' comments make it clear that it is the music of music videos that carries the primary affective charge (Walser, 1993, p.112-113).

As Walser remarks, the main challenge of music video analysis thus crystallizes in "[...] interpreting and accounting for *both* musical and visual discourses, simultaneous but differently articulated and assuming a variety of relations" (Walser, 1993, p.113). Studying popular music, treating the music video medium on its own terms – as multimedia, and not as cinema (in which the image is diegetically superior of music) – has been an important consideration in my approach. My discussions are underpinned by the central concept that experiencing music video representations results in a multifaceted process of decipherment that does not necessarily fix image as the sole signifier. Thus, in discussing representations and how they project aspects of subjectivity, my questions are directed to the music and the lyrics as much as the image. I have drawn on many recent contributions to music video studies that argue for this approach, and I will present and extract from their theoretic apparatuses alongside the analyses.

2. Addressing narrativity

The disagreement that the image is the main signifier of music video inevitably calls for a redefinition of the medium's narrative hierarchy. In her study *Experiencing music video: aesthetics and cultural context*, Carol Vernallis insisted that music and image are to be treated as equal in terms of providing narratives; however, she also underlines that these may not always correlate

12 Kaplan (1987).

13 The same neglect is apparent in Lennard Højberg's *Fortælle teori 2 – Musikkvideo og reklamefilm* (2000), and to a certain extent Even Ruud's *Musikk for øyet. Om musikkvideo* (1988).

(Vernallis, 2004, p.14). By defying fully drawn causal narrative structures, she defines music videos as non-narrative by nature. Her view of non-narrativity does not imply that videos are anti-narrative – for she does acknowledge that some videos do tell stories, but the narration alone is only suggested through the language of symbols and metaphors – urging the viewer to decipher the story through their interpretative experience of the work. In other words: narrativity works within the non-narrative medium. The issue of multimedia narratives thus gains much attention in my thesis, and seems unavoidable when trying to unveil how subjectivity is portrayed and projected through parameters of music, imagery and semantics. The notion of narrative structure is a major component in my model of analysis, and is addressed in every case study.

3. Interpretation of multimedia

A way into understanding the address of music video was offered in Michel Chion's (1994) theories of *added value*. Noting that our senses are inseparable in the process of deciphering expressions, he argues that they stand in a mutual affect. To clarify: what we hear affects and changes the way we see, and vice versa (Chion, 1994, p.xxvi). As my analyses are hermeneutically approached through my own personal readings, they are intended to provide critical reflections on my own interpretation, which has been necessary in order to avoid essentialism. Addressing issues of media congruence and difference, Nicholas Cook detects a common problem: "In art it is not the absolute relationships that are decisive, but those arbitrary relationships within a system of images dictated by the particular work of art" (Cook, 1998, p.52).¹⁴ With this in mind, my aim is therefore not to argue any semantic truths into the selected videos, but to address how gender and subjectivity operate within them and are defined and read symbolically through personal interpretation. Thus, even though I turn to the theoretical apparatus of *added value* in my model of analysis, I will alongside this also question the incorporation of subjective references in the interpretation process.

In relation to my focus on gender, the question of interpretation intersects with the aspect of subjectivity. I have pinned subjectivity as an area of investigation in my main research goal. First, subjectivity points to the subjective performances – or better, narratives – of gender in the music videos I discuss in my analyses. Second, and perhaps more importantly, subjectivity also points to how such narratives are perceived and interpreted under subjective conditions. In other words, one of the main inquiries I make in this thesis is how gender narratives in pop videos are consequently experienced by contextual conditions of the subject.

With the hypothesis stated and clarified, I will now move on to the methodological frame for my analyses.

¹⁴ Also, see Hawkins (2002, p.14-19) for a similar discussion of subjectivity in relation to the interpretation of pop texts.

Methodological considerations

Model of analysis

In their article “Remodeling Britney: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation”, Stan Hawkins and John Richardson (2007) have offered an analytical approach that identifies semiotics and intertextuality as a means for extracting the potential for meaning from music videos. In their introduction, they explain their approach as follows:

By advocating a systematic approach to understanding the construction of the relationship between the visual strata of a video and the music, our purpose is to deal with how pictures open up new meaning for songs. [...] our consideration of the role of music is directed to the transference of one set of references onto the other, and how this constitutes the primary function of the visual text (Hawkins and Richardson, 2007, p.605-606).

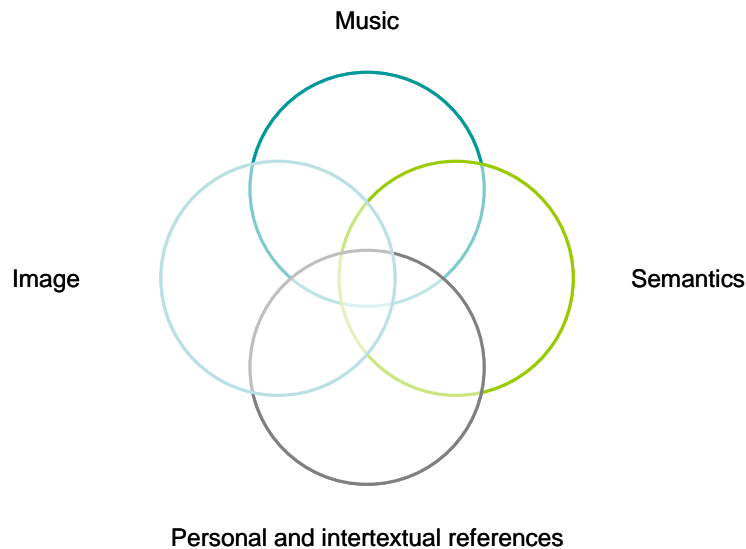
Richardson and Hawkins explore this analytical direction in their anthology *Essays on Sound and Vision* (2007). By investigating a variety of audiovisual case studies, the intertextual approach displays strategic possibilities of encoding and decoding audiovisual texts. Reflecting on these possibilities, they write:

[...] textual allusion is dependent on a currency of knowledge that assembles units of information. [...] Intertextuality is [...] the state by which it becomes possible for a text to become a text through a network of relations that define it as text (Richardson and Hawkins, 2007, p.17).

From this, it becomes clear that music videos operate symbolically and are approachable through semiotic deconstruction.¹⁵ Allusions are interpreted contextually; they are given meaning through a personal, referential set of knowledge and values. In music videos, returning to Vernallis’ argument of non-narrativity, the information we are given in terms of music, semantics and image seldom provides denotative information; the causal gaps are bridged through interpretation of their connotations. Thus, in my thesis that concerns how narratives of gender operate, an intertextual approach towards the music video encompasses all the critical consideration that lies within my research questions.

As certain analyses will be structured quite freely in this thesis in order to elucidate the most interesting aspects of each selected video, others are discussed more systematically, and as a means to illustrate how my approach is undertaken, I will now present the basic analytical model that has made the frame for my analytical structure:

¹⁵ Also, see Lacasse (2000) and Middleton (2000) for further reading on intertextual method in relation to music.



I will first separate music, image and semantics (lyrics) as individual categories of expression. Each of these will undergo a semiotic deconstruction through which I will try to pin the signs and symbols that operate within the separated expressions. As the three categories address our senses in very different ways, I have similarly chosen to approach music, image and lyrics differently from one another. Musical parameters will be decoded with help from musicological theory, image will be regarded through ideas and apparatuses extracted from media and film studies, and the lyrics will be approached through literary analysis. However, I must underline that I will try to avoid structuring the analyses as entirely clinical tables of deduction. Instead, I will pursue a flowing discussion that brings forth the most interesting aspects of each of the three different mediators.

In terms of how the different media are experienced as a unified temporal entity, the signs must then be discussed in terms of their mutual relation. How do they relate to one another, and will the symbolical material become re-contextualized in this combination? Last, but not least, in order to grasp how the symbolic material within the video can be decoded as ‘meaning’, reflection on the interpretation process is necessary. Therefore, I will ask what personal and intertextual references have influenced my understanding of the video’s separate expressions, as well as in the understanding of the three expressions combined.

The choice of case studies – empirical reflections

I want to underline that my research questions imply that an all-encompassing answer to gender functions within any pop video of the 21st century will be impossible to achieve. Thus, my aim is to provide reflections and a methodological map of considerations that crystallize how such queries can be approached scientifically in particular cases. I have chosen to base my thesis around individual case studies, each offering a different angle into questions of gender performance and perception. Approaching this task discursively through analytical readings as a means to avoid non-

benefitting offerings of essentialism posits my method close to hermeneutic ideas as well as post-modern philosophies. By doing so, I follow the majority of researchers within the field of popular music studies and popular musicology, and my approach has in particular been inspired by the studies of Hawkins, Richardson, Walser, McClary, Whiteley, Moore and Middleton. Even though I have chosen particular videos for my study, my interest is to illuminate the communicational and socio-political processes in performance and interpretation of gender in music videos in general. Therefore I have deliberately avoided interviews with specific informants. This choice is also supported by acknowledging that the task of gathering a group of individuals that all posit a relationship to all my case studies (of which some would be quite unknown to a mainstream audience) seemed difficult and unnecessary. I have however found it interesting at times to include quotations from various informal forums to shed light on important aspects of some of the case studies - in particular in my discussion of Fiona Apple's video "Criminal" in chapter 2. It should be noted that I have not personally engaged or invited the quoted persons to share their views on the case studies, rather these are all publicly available comments, and thus they are in no way shaped or guided by the research questions or myself as researcher. As I have provided these comments merely as examples of interpretative approaches to gender constructions, they have not been treated as qualitative material – rather, they should be understood as a part of the encompassing dimensions of the particular case studies and their designated concern with gender issues.

I have chosen to present quite a diverse range of case studies instead of focusing on the works of one specific artist as a means to show the multifaceted nature of gender constructs. It is also necessary to remark that none of the selected videos have gained much exposure on television, and that this selection has been made by careful consideration as a means to elucidate aspects of conventional music videos. Therefore, what is unique in this study is that I move away from conventional pop videos into a domain that challenges the aesthetics of the mainstream, thus providing new perspectives on the expectations, boundaries and definitions of conventional gender representations in pop.

All of the case studies in this thesis are works that I am personally familiar with. They all have, and still do, provoke and create reactions in me. Most importantly, they have all made me aware of my own reactions when experiencing them – my dialogical relation to each and every one of them is in fact an example of the very processes emphasized in the research question of this thesis. I have thus not included any thorough biographies for the artists apart from in the cases it would contribute to unveiling and clarifying the processes of performance and interpretation. I have also taken into consideration that popular music as genre is a vast category both in terms of musical and visual aesthetics, and I have tried to pick out a selection of artists and videos that provides a similarly wide perspective on the matter by selecting cases from a variety of genres, locations and

to a certain degree temporally separated aesthetics and musical trends from the late 1990's up until the recent day.

A final and most important consideration in choosing the case studies is the fact that, while a lot of literature has been produced on male representation, female representation is a relatively neglected area in popular music studies. As a reaction to this neglect, my study is predominantly a study of female gender constructions (with the exception of my discussion of the metrosexual male character in chapter 5, which albeit being a male category of identification, is very much defined by notions of femininity). Nevertheless, my overarching questions and arguments deal with both male and female representations, and, lest we forget, those in between. Hence, I have carefully picked out case studies which raise questions concerning specific female representations in each video, and also shed light on gendered issues in general. All of the videos I discuss are available online, and the URL for each video can be found in the videography section of my literature list at the end of the thesis.¹⁶

Thesis structure

The organization of my thesis builds upon various case studies in which gender comes to play a crucial role. To clarify the investigation of my research questions, I have divided and categorized the various case studies into chapters that deal with different aspects of gender issues in pop. Each chapter starts with an analysis of a designated case study. At the end of each chapter I discuss my findings in relation to the chapter's theme. Many of the themes I bring up in the various chapters are interrelated, and even though the analyses are separated, I emphasize these connections with references and comparisons. The final chapter is intended to sum up my findings and reflect on them in relation to the overarching research questions. I will end this introduction by giving a brief preview of the chapters to follow and their designated thematic focus:

Chapter 1, *Gender gazing*, revolves around issues of spectatorship, where I discuss the idea of gendered *gaze*. Here, I explore the arbitrary nature of gender representation in popular music texts by analyzing two music videos that, while oppositional in terms of genre and style, revolve around the same representations. In Fiona Apple's "Criminal", I argue that symbolic representations of gender are socially constructed, and, to a high degree, their construction is easily malleable by trends and shifts of society. By comparing comments from a debate taken from the video's website on YouTube, I bring up the aspect of time in this part of my analysis, seeking to discover why the video renders different readings today than it did at the time of its release 10 years ago. My

¹⁶ I am of course aware that websites such as YouTube and DailyMotion often remove videos from their websites. If the URL provided in the videography section has been modified or deleted, I recommend the reader of this thesis to try the video-search utility that can be found on the search engine "Google" ([URL] < www.google.com >).

conclusion is that this is a consequence of the video being presented stylistically through a patriarchal *male gaze*. Moving 10 years on in time to Beyoncé and Lady Gaga's "Video Phone", a video that at first seems to comment on - and critique - the misogynist hierarchies that the *male gaze* offers, I argue that in contemporary music videos, alternative gender categories come into play in the interpretation process in ways that can blur gender divides.

Chapter 2 entitled *The natural as abject* deals with the fetishism of physical perfection in gender representations in popular culture. Over the years, this trend has expanded to idealize physical constructs that border on the unnatural – or even, supernatural – causing hysterics or a revolt against the natural. Many researchers have investigated the 'supernatural' aspect of airbrushed star constructions, so as a means to look at this phenomenon from a different angle, I have chosen to investigate the flipside of such an ideal: how the natural body has come to signify abjection in popular culture, which is a far less discussed topic. However, in my view, this aspect is perhaps the most critical and frightening consequence of such a fetishism. My discussion, which incorporates elements from film theory, psychoanalytical theory and not least feminist theory, will be split in two separate music video readings. The first is an analysis of Australian singer Sia's music video "Buttons" that grotesquely portrays the singer as monstrous. In the second part of the chapter, I will look further into the hyperembodied constructions of female beauty in a reading of the very interesting metafictional video "Do you want the truth or something beautiful" by British singer Paloma Faith. In my reading of the video, which deals with the fear of not living up to the expectations of others through a symbolic narration of a 1950's cabaret singer, I will raise questions of deception and fantasy, and note on the symbolic values of stardom and star idolization.

In Chapter 3, *Fearless Women*, I attempt to discover how gender hierarchies in society are mirrored in the symbolic language of popular music texts. Here, I provide a reading of the Norwegian electronica band Bermuda Triangle's music video "Fearless" where conventional gender hierarchies are turned around. The video, telling a story of three female dominatrices of the corporate realm, is discussed in relation to Freudian theories of gender and empowerment. In my conclusion I see this in relation to the political issue of gender inequality, asking if the video informs us about the current state of power hierarchies. My aim is to show that political issues directly relating to gender are mirrored, commented on and serve as semiotic material in expressions of popular culture. Moving into chapter 4, *New male anxieties? Oh, so 'sick'...*, my concerns are directed towards the phenomenon of the metrosexual male and how this category of masculine identity, albeit problematic, provided a new ideal with which the male sex might identify. In an analysis of the music video "Sick" by the British electronica band Sneaker Pimps, I explore the crises that can arise

in the redefinition of self in a postmodern society, and conclude with a critical reflection on the constructions of gender expectations. Finally, in chapter 5, *Final reflections*, I sum up the findings of my thesis, and discuss them in relation to my overarching research questions. Conclusively, I return to my idea of social change at the turn of the century, reflecting on the current state of affairs.

Chapter 1: Gender gazing

Music videos present us with all sorts of characters. Clusters of identities are portrayed in a vast variety of settings, instances and situations. Through musical, lyrical and visual expressions, the music video is a dynamic medium that delivers a complex and dense set of information, demanding attention on both conscious and subconscious levels. In this chapter, I have set out to shed light on the dialogical relation between medium and interpreter. I do this by exploring up an important aspect of interpretation: spectatorship. By making use of the theory of *the gaze* my aim is to investigate how the interpreter's reflection on his or her subjective position in relation to the media's thematic concern affects the reading of the particular text in question. I also aim to demonstrate that this is a highly complex and unpredictable process. I will argue that in relation to deciphering representations of gender and gender roles, the role of the spectator is easily influenced by temporal implications, and will similarly argue that gender symbolism and its values are loosely defined often perceived in arbitrary ways. A second agenda of this chapter is to elaborate on the implications of the (non-)narrativity of the music video media, briefly mentioned in my methodological considerations above, and to argue why a consideration of narrative technique is crucial in unveiling interpretative dialogues.

The two videos I will present in this chapter have been selected because they not only reveal how spectatorship plays a role in how they are received; they also, albeit in highly different ways, objectify *the male gaze* as a main narrative component, and thus seem to remark and possibly even critique the way the female star has been conventionally constructed as an object of male desire. Separated by 10 years, and coming from two distinctly separated musical genres, such a selection and juxtaposition will provide a broad perspective on spectatorship, pleasure and interpretation.

One video, 1168 readings?

[...] from the beginning, Apple has presented herself as a sexually abused child--a disturbing concept when combined with the impact of the visual images of Apple's "Criminal" video (Zeltner, 2001 [URL])

I was just about speechless the first time I saw this. Those eyes...that voice...those lips...those legs...and the POV shot where she's between yours while you're in the tub. If the water was freezing, her presence would make it a hot tub! [sic] (KeepMyMusicAlive [Username], 2008 [URL])

The first time I watched Fiona Apple's video "Criminal" was in 1999 while aimlessly watching MTV. I can clearly remember that after just a couple of seconds, it caught my full attention, which I did not expect, after having been fed quite a large number of dull videos during that day. What first caught my eye were the saturated colours, the finesse of the camera movements and the generally skilful editing that seemed to be a part of the music itself. It did not take long before I recognized the video as seductive, with a sensuous, eroticized showcasing of the artist, presented in the sexual

and erotic settings inside a house decorated in a 1970's style, occupied with half-naked, sleeping people. Seemingly, the setting portrays the aftermath of a wild party. Even though seduction is nothing unusual in music videos, this was the first time I had perceived it as a somewhat disturbing experience. It was as if I had unwillingly observed something that I was not supposed to see; as if the video was addressing the title "Criminal" to me as spectator based on of the subtle hints of voyeurism (I shall get back to this point throughout the analysis). I thus became surprised with how much "Criminal" managed to capture my attention, invoking a reaction that made me reflect on the message of the video. Notably, it also made me reflect on how I positioned myself as the observer in correlation to the video, and most importantly, how I positioned myself as the observer in relation to the video's distinct representation of a female protagonist.

When the internet based video sharing database YouTube¹⁷ was launched, every video was accompanied by a field where viewers could post commentaries and discuss the videos in question. The second quote at the beginning of this section is taken from the commentary field of the "Criminal" music video on YouTube, showing a noteworthy contrast to the first quote, taken from an article on Apple's video, written by Mark Zeltner (2001 [URL]). As of May 3rd 2008, the commentary field on YouTube had 1168 comments.¹⁸ I have chosen to base my discussion on "Criminal" on views expressed on the video's YouTube site for the following two reasons; first of all, YouTube has become an important source for watching music videos, and the commentaries on each video display opinions from a vast selection of viewers from all over the world. Second of all, YouTube and similar databases are not dependent on ready-made playlists that make up the framework of music television. This means that while TV channels such as MTV first of all base their playlists on record sales, YouTube is a search engine that allows the viewer to choose which video to watch, and at what time to watch it. In the case of the commentaries mentioned in my analysis of "Criminal", the comments (and consequently the readings of them) have been made in recent times, some even being posted almost 10 years after the videos release date. I will get back to this crucial point of the time aspect in the interpretation process later in this analysis. I will now take a closer look on the commentaries posted on YouTube.

A fair amount of the comments on the YouTube site for "Criminal" were of an interpretative nature, stating the commentators' own readings of the video. In general, there were two representative types of views: the first view regarded the video as a feminist statement concerning how society has made female sexuality something of a taboo (similar to Zeltner's view); the second view did not recognize or verify the relation to feminist criticism, understanding the video as a

17 See [URL] < <http://www.youtube.com> >

18 Unfortunately, this video (and thus the discussion forum) has now been removed by the user who uploaded it.

sensual showcasing of the star.¹⁹ The fact that a video which, at first sight, appears to be of a non-narrative nature, renders such contrasting readings is interesting. This raises many questions about the communicative qualities of music videos in general. With the quotations from the discussion forum in mind, I will investigate if there are connections between the two opposing ways of reading the video and its internal (non-)narrative structure by performing an objective analysis.

The key questions that will make an interesting frame for these close readings are;

a) How is “Criminal” narrated? Does the narrative technique of the video affect the way we perceive it?

b) How is sexuality staged in the video and how does this relate to the contradictive views in the video's commentary field on YouTube, and finally

c) Can the opposing readings of the video be understood as a consequence of how the spectators position themselves as observers? The last point will be discussed with support from the theory of *the gaze*, which will be theorized alongside the analysis.

Fiona Apple and *the riot grrls* of the 90's

Looking back on the history of women in rock in the 1990s is like walking into your living room the morning after a serious party. Scan the space and you'll see the remnants of discussions so intense that those engaged left behind unfinished drinks, snacks, cigarettes; indentations on pillows in the corners where new lovers played with each others' limits; furniture disrupted by a tussle or two – and stacked on top of the stereo, a fistful of CDs that still sound great during the day's inevitable cleanup (Powers, 2005, p.195).

Following the wave of the punk inspired feminist underground musical movement in America (most commonly referred to as *riot grrls*²⁰), Apple's lyrics and melodies coupled with an admirable talent for playing the piano got the attention of Sony Music, who signed her at the age of 17, releasing her first album “Tidal” in 1996. Musically and politically, Apple positioned herself in the periphery of the aggressive approach of the early 1990's *riot grrls movement* (Powers, 2005, p.195-201), not addressing the heterosexual man to the extent of most of her predecessors' attempts; rather, her lyrics mostly concerned the feelings and anxiety of a woman scorned, sometimes taking the lyrical shape of anger, but nevertheless appearing more passive-aggressive in approach than the significant direct aggression of bands such as Bikini Kill (ibid, p.158). As her popularity grew, the press latched on to the fact that Fiona had openly talked about her own eating disorders, depressions and the aftermath of experiencing rape.²¹ Thus, Powers, among others, compared Apple's first album to the thematic of the blues, only set for a “post-feminist” age (ibid). To elaborate: at the imagined party described in the quotation above, Apple was not seen by the press as the one disrupting the

19 Some of these comments were tributes on Apple's general physics, not necessarily related to the video.

20 For more information on the *riot grrls* movement in the early 1990's, see Powers (2005), Whiteley and Rycenga (2006), and Whiteley (2000).

21 Apple was raped at the age of 12, and later developed an eating disorder because, as Apple has stated herself in a variety of interviews; she “[...]wanted to get rid of the bait that was her body” (Heath, 1998 [URL]).

furniture, she was the one that sat down on the broken couch and wrote songs about how uncomfortable it was to sit on, and how it angry it made her feel. The lyrics of “Criminal” evidentially fit into Powers’ reading of the album, and, as I will show in my analysis, it is hard to mistake it for anything other than a passive-aggressive ‘post-feminist’ statement. However, in the video, directed by the well-known director Mark Romanek²², the feminist statement of the lyrics becomes blurred. I will attempt to deconstruct the video's components in order to find out how and why the combination of audio and image allows for the oppositional readings we have seen in the commentary field on the video's YouTube page and in Zeltner’s article.

Video me



²² In 1997, Romanek became the first filmmaker to receive the VMA Video Vanguard Award for his contribution to the medium of music video. Two of Romanek's music videos, “Closer” by Nine Inch Nails, and “Bedtime Story” by Madonna, have been made part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Markromanek, 2008 [URL]).



Figure 1: Snapshots from “Criminal” in chronological order of appearance.

“Criminal” is a *tableaux*²³ video that presents Apple in various settings with no logical transitions between them. Additionally, no clues are given as to why she appears alone in the various settings. The illogical shifts of setting, and the arbitrary nature of Apple's visual actions (devoted to single processes with unexplained agencies, for example; taking a picture, squeezing a detergent bottle) portrays, as Vernallis has written on the *tableaux* video, “events or settings [that] simply fall one after another” (Vernallis, 2004, p.20), emphasizing that the visual form alone does not inhabit the shape of a story.

Nevertheless, a narrative character hierarchy is suggested through the visuals: Apple is the only person throughout the video whose face is shown, and to a certain degree (with just a couple exceptions) the only one in the video *doing* anything at all. The other characters are mostly decapitated by the editing frame (which insistently centres Apple in the shot), their faces are never shown, and quite often only a limb of their bodies is visual within the frame²⁴, lying perfectly still, most of the time, as if sleeping. This, coupled with the fact that Apple is lip-syncing to the lyrics, distinguishes her as the visual protagonist of the video. In this sense, she becomes the main link between the different spaces of the *tableaux*. The different settings of the video are also linked through repeating visual elements, such as the green carpet or the hardwood panels appearing in many of the shots. The repetition of these elements creates the illusion that the different spaces in the video are in fact within the same house. In addition to the repetition of the carpet, the interior of the different rooms has clear references to the general interior trends of the 1970's, building up the illusion of connected spaces. Vernallis calls this the principle of contagion: “[...] an element in one of the strands seeps into another – it might be a colour, a particular prop, a way of feeling or moving” (ibid, p.21). The camera movements in “Criminal”, especially at the end of the video, slowly slide away from the initial focus in a strict straight line, a movement repeated in the following shifts of setting, which also must be considered to be a visual rhyme that connects the different scenes.

²³ Vernallis (2004, p.20).

²⁴ See picture no.5, 6 and 9, figure 1 above.

Another example of a more abstract contagion is the diegetic role of lighting: in the first shot of the video we see Apple taking a photograph. In this scene, the light around Apple appears to be 'natural' room-lighting, but in the next scene, the light is set up to resemble the halo of light a camera (or video camera) would produce in a dark room. Picture no.2 above can thus be understood as what Apple sees through her camera: the teddy bear, the chair. The feeling of seeing something through Apple's eyes or through her camera is nevertheless soon disturbed in the shift to the above-shot of Fiona on the floor as this shot still uses the 'camera-lightning' effect. Who is holding the camera now? Even though the illusion of the camera lightning is abstract, it is an illusion that links the various scenes in the video.

Another important point about the lighting is the connotations drawn to homemade amateur videos, which are highlighted by the red reflection in Apple's eyes. In most music videos, blemishes are airbrushed in the editing process and the high-tech professional camera equipment removes the red reflections that so often occur with cheaper, low quality cameras²⁵ – the redness of Apple's eyes is not subtle in any way. And with the semi-erotic situations that occur throughout the video (stripping, caressing a man's leg in the tub) I would dare to draw the lines to a certain resemblance to amateur pornography, or even (connoted by the interior designs of the different settings) vintage 1970s pornography²⁶ and the general sexual liberation that arose in that period.²⁷ Similarly, Zeltner critically notes on the associations of voyeurism in the video: “[...] this little camera trick is quite effective in increasing the low-rent, creepy feeling of the video” (Zeltner, 2001 [URL]). Zeltner argues that recognizing this use of lightning technique will in some way force the audience to position themselves as observers, and, in connection with lyrical and musical signs, as *voyeurs* (ibid). In light of this, another subtle, but indeed effective hint that makes the observer watch the video through the ‘eyes’ of a voyeur filming Apple, is the reflection of the camera's light that can be seen in the glass table in the scene where Apple is filmed from above, lying on the floor.²⁸ The de-anonymization of the camera can then be understood as a narrative suggestion; through the signs within the choice of light one can read a story about someone being taped, observed, exposed, and last but not least, an object of another's *gaze* of pleasure.

25 I am of course aware that most amateur cameras today are of relatively high standard, and cameras like the *Canon Ixus* series have ‘red-eye removal’ functions. However, red-eye reflections are the most common blemish of amateur photography, thus most observers would get the idea.

26 With vintage and homemade pornography in mind, an interesting note is that during the bridge, we even get to see a television that plays a low quality tape of an almost nude Apple in what appears to be a bed (See picture no.10, figure 1 above). It should also be noted that vintage pornography did not have the same possibilities of editing as we see in contemporary pornography. In other words, vintage pornography in general appears more ‘home-made’ than the standard quality of pornography today, or even in the 1990's.

27 For further reading on the sexual liberation of the 1960's and the 1970's, see Allyn (2001).

28 See picture no. 5, figure 1.

“A bad, bad girl”

As the previous section has shown, the visual suggestions of narrative remain arbitrary. How is it, then, that Zeltner and many of the commentators understood the video as a feminist comment on female sexuality? I argue that they do this by filling the gaps of the visual suggestions through the connection of the music and lyrics of the video. Nevertheless, it should be noted that one could not infer the missing parts of the visual narrative from the music or the lyrics by itself. The music video is a simultaneous experience of different expressions, and unless we press the mute button or close our eyes, music will become a part of the visuals, or vice versa (Vernallis, 2004, p.175-198; Chion, 1994). I will in the following section treat the music and the lyrics of “Criminal” in light of the suggestive visual narratives described in the section above. Prior to discussing the verses and the chorus, I would like to briefly review the title of the video. As an adjective, the word 'criminal' is usually defined as following:

(adj.) condemnable, criminal, deplorable, reprehensible, vicious (bringing or deserving severe rebuke or censure) “a criminal waste of talent”; “a deplorable act of violence”; “adultery is as reprehensible for a husband as for a wife” (Wordnet, 2008 [dictionary] [URL]).

The title must be regarded as concerning the general topic of all the addressing expressions in the video, alone as well as combined. By this I mean that, as the title “Criminal” regards the music video as a whole, it is as much the title for the visuals, as for the music or for the lyrics, insinuating that they all portray a potentially condemnable act. The title in this sense serves as sign for understanding the theme of the video. I will now take a look at the body of the lyrics, with the title in mind.

Transcription of lyrics

Verse 1

I've been a bad, bad girl
I've been careless with a delicate man
And it's a sad, sad world
When a girl will break a boy
Just because she can
Don't you tell me to deny it
I've done wrong and I want to
Suffer for my sins
I've come to you, 'cause I need guidance to be true
And I just don't know where I can begin

Chorus

What I need is a good defense

'cause I'm feelin' like a criminal

And I need to be redeemed to the one I've sinned
against

Because he's all I ever knew of love

Verse 2

Heaven help me for the way I am

Save from these evil deeds before I get them done

I know tomorrow brings the consequence at hand

But I keep living this day like the next will never come

Oh help me, but don't tell me to deny it

I've got to cleanse myself of all these lies 'till I'm good
enough for him

I've got a lot to lose and I'm bettin' high, so I'm
beggin' you

Before it ends, just tell me where to begin

Chorus

Bridge

Let me know the way, before there's hell to pay

Give me room to lay the law and let me go

I've got to make a play to make my lover stay

So what would an angel say, the devil wants to know

Chorus

The first verse starts with the lyrical protagonist stating that she has been a “bad, bad girl”, because of her careless treatment of a delicate man. These phrases suggest characters, as well as an initial situation. Apple, however, moves out of the diegesis in the next phrase, into a more introverted reflection in saying “it's a sad, sad world, when a girl can break a boy just because she can”. This reflection might be a view on the past tense situation of Apple's carelessness with *the delicate man* – but it could also be considered to work as a general view of the world. Whether she is being ironic or not is up to the spectator to decide. In the remainder of the first verse, Apple expresses a wish for redemption, and regards the act of carelessness as a sin. She also introduces a possible third character in the phrase “I've come to you 'cause I need guidance to be true”. The *you* in this phrase could be most anyone; the *delicate man* (asking him how to make up for what she has done); it could be some sort of deity (if understanding the terms of sin and redemption as religious terms); or it could even be an abstract enquiry to the observer. This too is left for the observer to decide. In the chorus, Apple follows the topic of salvation, stating that she feels like a criminal, calling the need for a good defence. This is a play on the legal understanding of the word *criminal*, and how a good defence might lead to freedom and redemption in the legal system, raising questions whether the sin should be understood to be against a larger set of virtues (in society). The last phrase of the chorus might lead us back to the thought of religion in stating: “and I need to be redeemed to the one I've sinned against, because he's all I ever knew of love”. The *one she sinned against* might be the deity; it could also be *the delicate man*, or if regarded as an abstraction: *the delicate man as a part of a society with conventional norms of virtue*. The introduction of the word *love* in the chorus does present some implications of irony: does she really love *him* (whoever she has sinned against), or is the feeling of being sinful a result of not ever knowing any kind of love but his? In this regard, the lyrics take on a dark irony, especially if seen in connection to some of the other songs on the album, which directly refers to Apple's rape.²⁹ It is this supposition that lies at the core of Zeltner's reading of the video.

In the bridge, more fuel is added to the fire of religious connotations. Here, Apple is comparing her doings to that of a devil, desperately asking what an angel would say in her defence “before there's hell to pay”. All in all, the lyrics suggest the initial situation of a narrative: the main character has committed an act of sin that she regrets, and is desperately looking for a way to be

²⁹ This is most evident in the track “Sullen Girl”.

redeemed. Whether she finds a way is not revealed. With the returning chorus, an emphasis is put on an introspective view on the main character's feelings - an introspective commentary on what seems to be an unexplained narration.

The lyrics of a song are indeed of a strange nature, being truly neither a poem nor prosaic. And while one could treat the words alone as introspective qualities of a poem, Frith, referring to Rosselson, argues that

Lyrics [...] let us into songs as stories. All songs are implied narratives. They have a central character, the singer; a character with an attitude, in a situation, talking to someone (if only to herself). This, [...] is one reason why songs aren't poems. The only way they can be introspective is if "the 'I' in the song is a fiction", and the lyrics is about introspection. "Song", in this respect, "is theatre" (Frith, 1996, p.170-171).

The main challenge, as Frith has pointed out, with treating song lyrics as poems is that neither rhetoric nor voice is taken into consideration. Frith follows this notion by pointing to the fact that "Poetry as read is much more 'open' for the reader, in terms of both sound and pace than poetry as heard (whether being read aloud or set to music)" (Frith, 1996, p.178 [typography modified]). With the voice being our biologically most powerful medium of communication, the lyrics will thus be addressed as belonging to Apple's voice when sung, and though her words differ from the Aristotelian causal narratives, she is, as agreed by both Rosselson and Frith, indeed talking to someone. When adding the visuals to the experience of Apple's sung lyrics, we will logically understand the lyrics as the *visual Apple's* voice because of her lip-syncing. This doesn't necessarily mean that we apply the lyrics as a voice to Apple as a person in general; however, it doesn't necessarily mean that we *will not*. This is an important point regarding how Zeltner and many of the YouTube commentators seemed to apply their readings of the video in the context of Apple belonging to the ideology of the 1990's *riot grrls*, while other commentators did not. I will get back to this very point at the end of the analysis.

Musical clues

Music is the last but not least of the signifying components within "Criminal". The song belongs to genres of both pop and rock, using conventional elements of both worlds. As many of the songs on "Tidal", "Criminal" has its accompanying core in the piano part and a synth sounding like an old fashioned small church organ. The bass line along with the drums creates a groovy rhythm in 4/4, with a laidback feeling. Compared to much of the pop music of the period, the melodic line of Apple's vocals in "Criminal" does not feel like the ironic naivety that seemed to be the norm with other contemporary pop artists, the choruses are richly ornamented – especially in the second to last chorus where Apple prolongs the word 'love' over two bars in a polyrhythmic counterpoint to the accompaniment. Distancing herself from the norms of pop, but not taking the full step towards the 1990's rock, one might say that the music of "Criminal" stays within the frame of pop music while

at the same time drawing on some symbols of rock authenticity, playing her own instrument as an example. This being said, and biographically placing Apple among the clan of *riot grrls* certainly points to a genre quality of so called “indie music”³⁰, thus applying more importance to the ideology of the video than one normally would give. As an example, the ideology of a song of the eurodance genre that, as the name of the genre suggests, revolves around being able to make people dance. Deciding genre partly through authenticity codes inclines suggestions of general thematic within the music. In this sense, the musical clues of “Criminal” may apply the feminist ideologies of the genre *riot grrls* to the video's suggested narrative.

There are clues in “Criminal” that suggest the genre in which to place the song, but are there any narrative clues in the music as well? First of all, popular music is built upon a different principle than classical music is. The form of classical music is based on a linear form of tension and release, whereas, in contrast, the form of popular music consists of a cyclic syntax. Bjørnberg describes this syntax in the following matter:

[...] phrases of equal length are combined into symmetrical periods, and on higher structural levels relatively fixed and distinct principles of form dominate (e.g. the alteration of “verse” and “chorus” sections) (Bjørnberg, 1992 [URL]).

As with the lyrics, the musical form of “Criminal” carries suggested constructions of narratives through tension and release, but repetition and sectionalisation undermines the linearity. In this sense, the musical form of “Criminal” is as introspective in representation as its lyrics because of its cyclical form, moving in and out of a diegese. When seen in connection to the lyrics, the instrument of the voice can signify the arbitrary nature of the words. The falling pitch and the lingering raspy texture of Apple's voice when she declares she has been a ‘bad, bad girl’ certainly connote a more erotic understanding of the words than the denotation of having done something wrong.³¹

Certainly, there is a plethora of interesting topics in the music of “Criminal” that are not debated in this section.³² However, the main emphasis here in particular is to give an example of how musical structure and single elements may inhabit important narrative suggestions and clues as to how we might read them. Having stated that neither of the expressive components (visuals, lyrics, music) in “Criminal” alone carries fully drawn causal narratives, I will in the following section focus on how the separate signs re-contextualize each other when experienced simultaneously.

30 Reaching towards an authenticity of rock, it is notable that indie-pop has been regarded to concern more 'real' and heartfelt thematics, emphasizing that authenticity lies as much in 'keeping it real' as keeping it within the musical conventions of the genre.

31 The ‘bad girl’ term is often used to describe a woman who follows on her sexual desires, which in light of my discussion in general is yet another example of polarity of representation of virtues and sin in the video’s thematic.

32 Some will however be debated in connection to lyrics and visuals in the following section.

Bridging the gap - conversations between the senses

As hitherto shown by the analysis, the expressions of music videos convey partially arbitrary signs that only suggest half-drawn narratives that, when isolated, appear illogical. However, if seen in connection with each other, the gaps between these narratives may be bridged. The aforementioned seemingly illogical changes of visual settings can to some extent be explained through the music. In her discussion of music video editing, Vernallis addresses this point, writing that editing “can elucidate aspects of the song, such as rhythmic and timbral features, particular phrases in the lyrics, and especially the song's sectional divisions” (Vernallis, 2004, p.27). In “Criminal”, cuts mainly fall on crotchets, or on the last quaver of a bar. At the beginning of the video, the flash of Apple's camera is synchronized with the opening strike of a suspended cymbal. With the next cymbal strike, a cut is made to a shot of a teddy bear with an enormous snout. Vernallis also makes the point that cuts in the visual can establish their own rhythmical profile, and thus function as a counterpoint to the song's rhythmic structures (ibid). This logically justifies the inconsequent visual emphasis shifting among the eight quavers of the bar, sometimes lingering in a shot, sometimes shifting more rapidly. The connection between rhythm and visual cuts can appear to connect music and image through the experience of the video. For the observer, they present themselves as an entity; the image is part of the music, and the other way around. In other words, the music masks the missing contagion. Other editing techniques that are not as readily recognized may also play a part in this connection, articulated both in camera work and through post-production. An example of this can be seen in the change of the focal plane of the lense(s), making an element in the frame can pop forward (ibid, p.32).

Experiencing the video as an audiovisual entity thus invites the viewer to observe the signs and symbols within the separate expressions in light of each other, a juxtaposition that guides us towards a signified outcome: the *sin* that Apple refers to in the lyrics can be juxtaposed with the visual settings. For an example: in the first verse we hear Apple sing “I've been a bad, bad girl, 'cause I've been careless with a delicate man” while we simultaneously first see Apple smile cunningly at us, just having taken a photograph of the previously mentioned teddy bear with the enormous, almost phallic snout. Then the video immediately cuts to a shot of Apple zipping up her trousers. When experiencing these two symbolic elements, one might argue that the carelessness she is referring to in the lyrics is of a sexual kind. Another example connoting sexual activity can be seen at the end of the video where Apple squeezes a bottle of detergent, making pink blobs of soap float in the air simultaneously as a flute introduces a highly clichéd motif often used in Hollywood films and TV-series in scenes depicting snake charmers (see figure 2 below). The combination of image and music here codify the audiovisual image as representing male ejaculation. However, even though she is mesmerised by the floating pink blobs, Apple does not express any joy, ecstasy

or lust in this particular scene, building further on the ambiguous and dark description of sexuality in the video as a whole.



Figure 2: The snake charmer motif.

Juxtaposing the different expressions within the video will help in bridging the gap of the low-quality suggestions of narratives, by re-contextualizing the separate expressions, giving them new qualities as signifiers through a *conversation* between our senses.

In light of this, I will now take a look at how the staged eroticism in “Criminal” works ambiguously as symbolic guidance for interpretation of narrative suggestions.

The bait that was her body – signifying through eroticism

In 1975, Laura Mulvey published an article where she theorized upon one of the most debated terms regarding gender and queer studies: *the gaze*. Being a film theorist, Mulvey had previously studied gender representation within classic cinema. On *the gaze* within the classic cinema, she coined the term thus:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to *connote to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey, 1989 [1975], p.19).

Mulvey's original text posits that *the gaze* is a *male gaze*, and therefore controls the female object. Over the years, the term has been discussed and redefined, often due to the normalization of presenting the masculine as a spectacle in similar ways of previous representations of the female, as Walser (1993) and Hawkins (2002; 2009) among others have explained.³³

The term *gaze* is today just as often used to investigate perspectives of any gender, sexuality and/or culture, in which the object of *the gaze* is controlled to fit a reading for the viewer's liking. The concept of the two genders has also proved problematic when applied to queer representations, in which the conventional norms of female and male are blurred, sometimes even deconstructed. Queer representations differ from homosexual representations because, as Whiteley and Rycenga have pointed out, they show how same-sex desire can be foregrounded without designating which sex desires/is being desired. “[...] a certain fluidity is achieved that refuses gender-based constructions” (Whiteley and Rycenga, 2006, p.xiv). In the same way, representations and

³³ See also Tasker (1993), McClary (1991; 2000), Whiteley and Rycenga (2006), and Halberstam (2006) for additional examples of modern takes on the *gaze* as a theoretical term.

expressions of ethnicity, race, religion, and even social hierarchies have made it necessary for researchers to go beyond the black and white of female/male representations. Today, the term *gaze* includes endless variations, all of them based on notions of identity.³⁴ Having said this, I would now like to suggest the idea that the *gaze* within “Criminal” can serve as an objectified symbol of context in reading the video as a multi-modality of expressions.

“Criminal” is indisputably sexually suggestive. The suggestion nevertheless is disguised in visual and audible codes, never fully exposed as striking portraits of sexual acts, rather taking the form of subtle sensuality. How is it then that Zeltner, in his article on “Criminal”, read the video as being about a female protagonist feeling like a criminal because of her sexual desires? In my view, one could reason that it is because Zeltner interpreted the video as a blunt ironic play on the conventional *gaze* of female representation in most music videos.

For an example: visually, the video stages a stereotype of eroticism through portraits of conventional seductive acts. Reaching the second verse, we see the visual protagonist performing a striptease, removing item by item and throwing them around herself. Simultaneously, this image (which is a common image used to showcase stars in music videos) is juxtaposed to symbols of sin and regret in the lyrics.³⁵ This polarity is also visually shown in the facial expressions of Apple; in the striptease scene, Apple's face is signifying discomfort, while in the next cut of Apple in the tub, caressing the leg of a man her facial expressions connote sensuality and pleasure. Another key scene deserving a feminist reading is the scene where an anonymous, bare-chested man opens a closet door, exposing a presumably hiding Apple, suggesting that she is indeed hiding, or hiding something, having a scared and sad facial expression as he leaves the door open for *all* (as the lightning technique mentioned earlier suggests) to see.

When the contrasting images of Apple (seductive versus uncomfortable) are seen in connection with how editing techniques position the audience as participating observers, it might lead - and in Zeltner's reading it certainly has - to a truly interesting reading that actually concerns the conventions of the *gaze* itself. In this case, the video is read as addressing how the male *gaze* pacifies the sexuality of women³⁶ through visual conventions of the male *gaze* as concept. This is because these visualized conventions (working as signs) appear as ironic in connection with each other (and/or other signs). To simplify: in Zeltner's reading, the *sin* the character in “Criminal” is talking about is her own sexual desires, and she needs a good defence because these desires have

34 I will look further into the complexity of the *gaze* in chapter 3, where I provide readings of a video in which the male *gaze* is problematic.

35 A most interesting point that will have to remain un-debated is that many of the commentators on YouTube discussed this scene in connection with Apple's previous struggle with anorexia. The scene takes on a completely new signified form when taking into consideration that Apple announced that her anorexia was a consequence of being raped at age 12, in order to “get rid of the bait that was her body” (Heath, 1998 [URL]).

36 Pacification understood as: women are to be observed as sexual objects, not to act on their own sexual desires (see Mulvey's (1989 [1975], p.19) original definition of *the gaze*).

been exposed in a society where women are merely objects to be looked at. In semiotic terms, the reading can thus be expressed in the following matter: signs that usually signify pleasure are deciphered as ironic as a consequence of feminist re-contextualisation.

The flipside of the coin

[...] the tv erection part? ridiculous cool. the little red stuffy in the corner? awesome. but the oranges in the bathtub seal the deal. don't know what they mean but.. just saying 'oranges in the bathtub' sounds nastysexy [sic] (UhardeMan, 2008 [URL])

Even though a political reading of “Criminal” requires a certain referential code, it is still quite interesting that so many observers on YouTube either ignore or do not recognize the obvious polarity of the contrasting signs of pleasure versus discomfort within the video. I would argue that readings of such as *UhardeMan's* and *KeepMyMusicAlive's* comments are as much a consequence of the video's non-narrative nature as Zeltner's reading is a consequence of the very same structures. To elaborate, the signs connote the polarity between pleasure and discomfort through irony, and therefore recognition of irony is needed in order to see the ambiguity of the different expressions. In his discussion of interpreting ironic material, Hawkins has addressed this matter by stating that irony has few guarantees (Hawkins, 2002, p.20). Furthermore, he also points out that recognition of irony is dependent on “[...] the dialogic exchange between the artist and the interpreter, and the latter's attentiveness towards constructs of identity” (ibid, p.22). In other words, being a video of such low narrative quality, the irony of “Criminal” can only exist if the interpreter chooses to acknowledge its possible ironic character, or, more bluntly, if he chooses to flip the coin. In high narrative quality videos, the sense of a logically drawn narration guides³⁷ us both in deciding what elements should be regarded as signs, and to a certain degree, what (ideological or contextual) way to decipher them, whereas in low narrative quality videos, there are less hints as to what elements to foreground and how to contextualize them. In light of Hawkins discussion of how we interpret irony, and understanding that ironic signification works by undermining the signs' conventional denotation, it becomes quite clear that the non-narrative structure of “Criminal” can produce two highly opposing readings, especially because the irony is played upon an erotic representation of the female gender in popular culture that we have become very accustomed to.

Furthermore, the aspect of time will play a considerably important role in the context of the experience. In the 1990's, the press was very much aware of the *riot grrrls* movement and its ideology. In the case of Fiona Apple, who was one of the most commercially successful of these *grrrls*, the media attention dedicated to her and the ideology of her genre allowed her audience

³⁷ And I stress that the use of the word guide is to underline that the fully drawn narratives or close-to fully drawn narratives does not fix the interpreters reading, but they help to foreground certain elements of the video (for example would a visual correlation to that of the lyrics foreground the connection of these, perhaps causing other elements of the video to fall into the background).

crucial referential knowledge when reading her work. Twenty years ago, this video was regarded as highly provocative because of its suggestions of sex, drugs, group sex and eating disorders. And as I have attempted to show in this analysis, it was exactly these traits Apple used as signifiers to make a feminist statement on the voyeuristic male *gaze*. This being said, the ongoing, fierce debate on YouTube searching for the *real* meaning in “Criminal” is a debate that no-one will ever win. There will always be *another side to a coin*; this is why all the 1168 readings must be accepted as real. The question left to ask is then on the aspect of time, reflecting on how the representation of body and sexuality in popular culture constantly pushes further into what once was regarded as taboo. Will the feminist symbolics within the signifiers of the body be lost in Fiona Apple's video once conventional gender representation (and particularly the representation of the sexual body) changes? As some of the commentaries on the video's YouTube site have shown, the time aspect might interfere with how we read gendered representations. The values and conventions of the gender term are temporally fluid and open for redefinition. The conventional stereotyped understanding of the categories of gender is easily malleable, and relates to ruling trends, themes and styles of culture. An old Cole Porter song comes to mind, in which a part of the lyrics go: “In olden days the sight of stockings was looked on as something shocking, now, God knows. Anything goes!” Ten years ago, Fiona Apple commented on the misogynist constructions of the female gender within the male *gaze*, and she was accompanied by a fair amount of *riot grrls*. What has happened since then? And would a spectator today still easily catch the feminist critique posed in “Criminal”? Apple's video might have carried a stronger shock factor during the time of its release than it would cause today. As the trends of popular culture have shifted during the first ten years of the new millennium, it seems, as far as constructing the female body as an object of pleasure, it is harder to shock the audience as ‘anything goes’.

For this discussion it would then be favourable to take a look at the representation of the female, and the sexual body in contemporary popular music, ten years after the inauguration of the *riot grrls* movement. One of the most prominent and successful women in popular music in 2010 is the American Rn'B singer Beyoncé. Beyoncé has over the last years produced a respectable amount of audiovisual material, creating a pool of iconography that is very much concerned with her gender. During the writing of this thesis, she released a video featuring Lady Gaga that immediately awoke my curiosity regarding the themes presented in the analysis of Apple's “Criminal”. Apple commented on the patriarchal male *gaze* by showing us how it victimizes women. Beyoncé and Lady Gaga play on the very same sexual symbolic material as Apple uses, but, instead of narrating a story about victimization, they appear to pronounce that the male *gaze* might empower the female object. In fact, the video visually posits the male *gazers* as the victim – while the objectified female protagonist has total control of the knife (or, as it appears in the video, crossbows and a variety of

guns). However, there are certain problematic aspects to this conclusion, and, as with “Criminal”, this is a direct consequence of an uncertainty that comes from positing the video’s spectators. In the following sections, by taking a closer look at gender representation in “Video Phone”, I will look further into the questions of gendered *gazing*.

Can you handle it? – the objectification of the male gaze in “Video Phone”

“Video Phone” is a music video that has many interesting aspects connected to representations of gender. First of all, as with “Criminal”, *the gaze itself* is recognized, acknowledged and is a part of the narrative of the video. However, where “Criminal” addresses *the gaze* by showing the video as through the eyes of an active voyeur, and thus draws the actual spectator into the diegesis, “Video Phone” addresses the phenomenon by objectifying *the gaze* as specific characters in the visual diegesis. Secondly, sexuality is heavily emphasized both visually and musically in the video. In this portrayal of sexuality, gender roles in relation to sexual behaviour are particularly foregrounded in the lyrics. On the surface, the video seems to tell a story about women using their sexuality as an empowering tool to control the male sex. The video does indeed concern and reflect on gender representation in the media and in our contemporary forms of technological communication. Even though the female protagonists of “Video Phone” are in total control of the diegetic male characters (an objectification of *the male gaze*), the question of whether they have actually succeeded in taking control of the video's observers' *gaze* still remains.

The opening of the video is reminiscent of old western movies and the typical duel scene in which the rivalling pair slowly walks towards each other in a deserted alley. All the locals are gathered behind the saloon doors and windows, excitedly anticipating the moment of fate. Who will win? The bad guy or the good guy? In the opening of “Video Phone”, this scene is referenced both by music and visuals.³⁸ The music opens with the wind rattling and whistling before a flute and a cheeky acoustic guitar introduces a short, almost blues-like ‘western’ motif. Soon after, a beat is initiated, marked by the ringing of the tubular bells. In film music, and especially in old western classics, the tubular bell has come to signify a moment of fate, a premonition of doom. Finger snaps keep the beat going, and a high pitched synth joins in, accentuating the offbeats with an unrelenting repeated pattern, creating an atmosphere of anticipation and tension. After four bars, Beyoncé's voice enters with sultry *ah ah's*, hinting that the forecasted moment of fate indeed will evolve around bodily pleasures and sexuality. This musical depiction of the ‘eye of the storm’ before the actual duel is also expressed visually through references to old western movies. During the

³⁸ Please note that the video is based on the extended version of the song, and that the album version of “Video Phone” does not include the music played in the opening scene; neither does it feature Lady Gaga. In the video version of the song, the lyrics of the first part of verse 2 (performed by Lady Gaga) are slightly altered from the original version, and 4 extra bars have been added to the end. The video-version of the song was released as a b-track on the single release.

introduction, we see Beyoncé walking down an abandoned alleyway at an industrial site. Filmed in slow motion, Beyoncé walks towards the camera accompanied by an *entourage* of four men in suits. She is wearing an open black trench coat, revealing an ammunition belt, and a gun holster placed on her naked thigh. Apart from the weaponry, she is hardly dressed underneath the trench coat with the exception of a diamond covered leather leotard, covering only the most strategic parts of her body. On her head, she wears a black eye mask, not unlike those worn by the classical bandits. All in all, this scene translates to the music and the reference to the old western movie duel – with a twist of mafia, this introduction tells the viewer that Beyoncé takes on the role of a modern and sexy version of the western bad guy, armed, dangerous, and up for a fight. As Beyoncé and her crew get closer to the camera, the musical elements builds towards a climax, accentuated by a cymbal crescendo juxtaposed to fast flickering on the screen, suggesting that it is getting closer to the moment of truth. And then, abruptly, the music is cut off. The image goes from black and white to saturated colours, and we see the head shot of a nude Beyoncé on a white background, with a grainy voice and a southwest American accent stating the following street slang words: “Shawty. What yo name is?”

Transcription of lyrics

Intro	You can see that I got it goin' on	<i>handle it?)</i>
Uh Uh (x8)	I wanna make sure you remember me	I hit you right back (<i>You like what you</i>
Shawty, what yo name is?	So I'ma leave my number on your video phone	<i>see?)</i>
Pre-chorus	I got no time for frontin'	Pre-Chorus 3
Them hustlers keep on talkin'	I know just what I'm wantin'	<i>[Lady Gaga] Them hustlas like my</i>
They like the way I'm walkin'	If it's gonna be you and me	<i>fashion (You wanna video me?)</i>
You saying that you want me	When I call, they better see me on your video screen	<i>They like the way I'm walkin' (You like what you see?)</i>
So press record, I'll let you film me		<i>You sayin' that you want me (Go on and video me)</i>
Chorus	Pre-Chorus 2	<i>So press record, I'll let you film me</i>
On your video phone, make a cameo	Chorus 2	
Tape me on your video phone, I can handle you	Verse 2	Chorus 3
Watch me on your video phone, on your video, video	<i>[Lady Gaga] You my phone star</i>	Bridge
If you want me you can watch me on your video phone	<i>And I'm happy when my lights flashin' 'Cause you on my receiver</i>	<i>[Lady Gaga] Can you handle it?</i>
Verse 1	<i>Hubba, hubba</i>	<i>Can you handle it?</i>
I love how you approach me	<i>Honey, baby is so sexy that he should win an Oscar</i>	<i>Can you handle it?</i>
Fresh white with your pants hangin' grown man low	<i>And when you miss me, just remember that I always got you with me</i>	<i>You like what you see? (Can you handle it?)</i>
Everything you sayin' soundin' good to me	<i>I'll be your Gene, you'll be my Brando</i>	<i>You wanna video me? (Can you handle it?)</i>
No need to convince me anymore	<i>I'mma put you in my move if you think that you can handle (Can you handle it?)</i>	<i>You like what you see? (Can you handle it?)</i>
Swag up, it's right, one blade, it's tight	[Beyoncé] I know you like that (Can you handle it?)	<i>Go on and video me (Can you handle it?)</i>
And I smell your cologne in the air	Turn you into a star, I got it like that, like that (Can you handle it?)	<i>You like what you see? (Can you handle it?)</i>
Baby you doin' somethin' right	Baby don't fight it, (Tell 'em, B), 'cause when I miss yo call (Can you	<i>You wanna video me?</i>
You just cancelled every other man here		
You say you like my bag and the colour of my nails		

Verse 3	You like it when I shake it?	Outro
You know them Gs, they be hollerin',	Shawty on a mission, what yo name is?	Uh, uh, uh, ah, uh
'specially them hot ones	What, you want me naked?	Uh, uh, uh, ah, uh
Brooklyn, Atlanta, Houston, to New Orleans	If you likin' this position you can tape it on your video phone	If you want me you can watch me on your Video phone
When they see me, they be like "Yo B, let me call you"	Pre-Chorus 4	
You breakin' my focus, boy, you cute and you ballin'	Chorus 4	

Here, we have moved from a narrative setting and into an abstraction, an imaginary space of contemporary hip hop. This shift or transition is emphasized musically by the removal of the diegetic wind, the characteristic western guitars, and not least, by a relocation of tonal centre. We have moved from the western movie parody, into a modern, fresh and innovative hip hop sphere - and it seems that it is this very space that will be the place in which Beyoncé gets her gear out, and battles her nemesis(es); the male *gaze(rs)*.

In “Criminal”, the male *gaze* was addressed through accentuation of the voyeuristic role of the spectator of the music video. “Video Phone”, on the other hand addresses this issue by objectifying the *gaze* (as phenomena) as actual diegetic characters in the shape of male bodies with wide angled cameras for heads. The first of these “cameramen” appears just after Beyoncé cheekily makes her slang introduction, straightening his tie, focusing the lens and zooming in on Beyoncé, which marks the beginning of the first verse. During the first verse we see Beyoncé wearing a white bikini, dancing, shaking and rolling her behind, straightening her breasts, and waving her hands as if she had a whip in her hands. The dancing is indeed a very sensual - yet vivid and powerful - dance, and, paired to the repeating vocal *ah ah*'s in the musical mix, the movements are suggesting connotations of a very sexually laden act, all watched, taped and observed by the *cameraman*. In the lyrics, she tells him/them (or us, the spectators, who watch Beyoncé through the eyes or lens of the camera) that “*Them hustlas keep on talkin' / They like the way I'm walkin' / You say that you want me / So press record, I'll let you film me*”. These lines acknowledge that she is in fact an object for the *male gaze*. And the last line “I'll let you film me” points to both the fact that Beyoncé is a star, and that she willingly stages herself as an object for public desire through the media, but it just as much points to contemporary trends of using technology for sexual exploration. By this I am referring to how pornography has moved into the public realm of media through the internet, through the increased possibilities for virtual sexual activity (aided by webcams, video phones, or similar) as well as homemade pornography/erotica.³⁹

39 It's interesting to observe how many celebrities have flaunted (accidentally or not) their home-made sex-tapes in the media. Home-made pornography has also been commented on in various sitcoms and films such as the “American Pie” anthology, “According to Jim”, “Cougar Town”, “Desperate Housewives”, “Nip/Tuck”, “Sex and the City” and so on.

Visually, almost like watching through a kaleidoscope, we now see three incarnations of *Beyoncé* dancing in the front, cross faded on the background of two mirrored headshots. This kaleidoscope of women, vigorously dancing, beauty shots, tempting lyrics that invite the listener/viewer to watch her accompanied by throbbing electro beats and raspy moaning suggest that we are granted permission to view an exhibitionist fantasy, where the sexual pleasures are saturated to the brink of ecstasy.

The music of “Video Phone” is an R'n'B tune with an almost minimalistic hip hop beat in the background. Apart from the vocals, there are very few instruments making the core of the musical mix: a drum machine keeping the beat, a tremolo synth emphasizing the offbeat, a second synth sounding almost like an old videogame carrying a flirty repeated melody, a very low frequency bass and finger snaps. During the bridge of the song, Beyoncé and the featuring artist Lady Gaga perform a burlesque dance with the classical *stripper's chair*. In this scene, the repeated pattern of the musical mix is interrupted by loud brass hits, enhancing and underlining the associations of burlesque in the visual course of the video. Advocating references to the voyeuristic nature of strip shows and burlesque dancing adds to the reading that the video very much revolves around the male *gaze* as a phenomenon.⁴⁰

One might ask, then, how objectification of self is taking control of the dialogue between viewer and observer. Beyoncé affirms the warning posed in the introductory western scene by taking advantage of the connotations of empowerment embodied in phallic iconography. It becomes clear that the victim of the male *gaze* is the *male gazer* himself.

Armed and dangerous

Throughout the video, Beyoncé appears as a chameleon of sexy female characters, ranging from sci-fi fantasy to street-smart hip hopper with many varieties between the two. However, the one thing all of the characters have in common is that they are all armed in one way or another. The introductory character had a gun holster around her thigh, another character carries a large red machine gun, and even the featuring artist Lady Gaga is armed and dangerous. Guns and weaponry, similar to the guitar, are icons that in psychoanalytic theory are described to embody phallic associations and not least signs of empowerment.⁴¹ The many incarnations of Beyoncé direct, aim and shoot towards the camera and the cameramen in many of the following scenes. The contrast of sensual sexuality and lethal danger stages her character as a modern twist on the ancient Greek

40 Another intertextual reference to voyeurism can be found in one of the ‘incarnations’ of Beyoncé where she is styled to resemble the iconic Bettie Page, one of the most debated pin-up models of all time. Page gained recognition in the 1950’s, and is renowned to be an iconic figure of popular culture, being one of the earliest pioneers of fetish modelling. Contemporary burlesque artists such as Dita von Teese are heavily inspired by Page’s style and aesthetics.

41 For further reading, see Creed (1993), Bayton (1997), Freud (2003 [1922-1923]), Halberstam (2006).

sirens, seductively hypnotizing men and having total control of their powers. In one particular scene, we see the cameramen tied to chairs, blindfolded by bags over their heads. In this scene, Beyoncé taunts the men, aiming her pistol towards their temple and pushing them around. They have become victimized as a result of their voyeuristic lust. In a similar scene, one of the cameramen is tied to an oversized target with his upper body covered in arrows. Beyoncé directs a crossbow towards him and hits him right in the chest. As it hits, he squirms – but, whether it is a squirm of pleasure, pain or perhaps a sadomasochistic mix of both, remains unresolved. Weaponry signifies both danger and power as it can hurt, threaten and control its victim. From a historical perspective, weaponry has become one of the most significant symbolic representations of power, and it belongs to the representational iconography of the male sex. Through history, warfare, as both offence and defence, has been a closed space to which very few women have had access.⁴² Women have historically been expected to play a passive role in times of war, staying at home, taking care of their children. Similarly, it has been expected that the male, physically or through the extension of weaponry, protects his female companion, thus placing him in the category of active and offensive. These traditional views on gender roles still haunt our society, and even though women have gained more access into what is regarded as male territory, it is still regarded as exceptional rather than conventional. Thus, the emphasis put on weaponry in the video certainly does connote a shift of gender roles, staging Beyoncé and Lady Gaga as the offensive sex, and leaving the *cameramen* unarmed, hypnotized, captivated and even bleeding. Further, as a phallic symbol, weaponry also connotes pleasure – especially in the scenes where Beyoncé caresses gun shafts, suggesting quite sexual innuendoes. In the final scene of the video (outro), the music ends *a cappella* where the moaning motif is harmonized into rich chords, intensively painting (or even panting towards) a climax. The references to orgasm are difficult to ignore, especially when the visual frame of the last scene depicts a cross faded picture similar to the previously mentioned character kaleidoscope where the middle incarnation of Beyoncé sits on top of a motorcycle, shooting electrified blasts from her gun. Reinforced by the clustered orgasmic grasping moaning of the vocals, this scene reaches an audiovisual saturated climax. The empowering effects of the stereotypically male props thus connote that even at the point of orgasm, it is Beyoncé who is in control of the whole scene.

⁴² I am of course aware that most military instances allow and invite women to serve and protect. Nevertheless, historically, weaponry, violence and other attributes that aims to pacify has stereotypically been regarded as a sign or a treat of the male sex. Even in music, especially rock music, women who enters the scene have had a history of being met with scepticism, or being categorized as 'tomboys'; women who fall into the category of a supposedly male characteristics – this only because she plays the guitar, and instrument with the same phallic and empowering references as the gun. In chapter 3 and 4, I go further into the questions of the symbolism related to gender role expectations. For further reading on the problematics of gender roles and the symbolic iconography of rock music, see Bayton (1997), Walser (1993), Whiteley (1997).

The weapon of Beyoncé's characters lies in her sexuality. The guns and weaponry become a symbolic objectification of her female sexuality, which can both cause physical pleasures, but also threaten and possibly be dangerous - even lethal - because it leaves her partner hypnotized and totally under her control. This is also evident in the few scenes where weapons are absent, in some of which Beyoncé utilizes other signifiers of power, such as corporeal uniforms, or wearing heavy street wear jewellery.⁴³ In the former scene, Beyoncé is accompanied by two *cameramen*, vigorously trying to catch every inch of her body. By using her body, curves and movement, she controls the *cameramen*'s every move. They need to adapt to her movements in order to catch every glimpse of her body. The inclusion of a featuring artist also denotes empowerment. Lady Gaga is a fellow female pop artist with a history of producing striking music and imagery in which she stages herself as an independent woman with sexual desires, but in total control of them. Having Lady Gaga as a partner in crime in the video then works as a reinforcement of 'women power', and thus also suggests that the song is concerning the female gender in general. Likewise, the anonymity of the *male gazers* (by having their heads replaced with cameras) suggests that, in a similar matter, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga aren't necessarily only addressing the fictional *hustlas* in the lyrics, but making a statement in general about the conventional patriarchal male *gaze* embedded in popular culture.

Paradox

Nevertheless, there is something paradoxical about the video. Even though the video is all about women taking control of their role as objects of pleasure (hypnotizing the cameraman as seductive sirens, and signifying control by appropriating phallic props that conveniently also may potentially harm or destroy any rebellion), does Beyoncé manage to do so with the actual *gazers*, the spectators of the video? In fact, the way I see it, she fails in achieving control over her audience. The threat posed in the video's narrative only applies to the *cameramen*. The spectator is still in control of his or her own *gaze*. The spectator may choose to pause or stop the video, allowing for pleasure, but also to deny these pleasures. Furthermore, in a contrasting comparison to Fiona Apple's "Criminal", neither the music nor the lyrics of "Video Phone" pose any moral or ethical problem for the viewer to reflect on his or her experience of the video. As I admitted, viewing "Criminal" stirred up an uncomfortable sensation in acknowledging that its symbolic material was based on a representation of the female sex as an object of desire. Aware of Apple being a *riot grrrl*, the video forced a consideration and reflection of gender morals, thus turning the conventional symbols on their heads. "Video Phone" is actually doing the opposite, inviting the viewer to observe, enjoy and, as the lyrics suggest, save the fantasy for further pleasure by 'taping it on their video phones', or saving the

⁴³ Also known as 'bling'.

image of Beyoncé's kaleidoscopic orgasm as a memory. Indeed, Beyoncé appears as a strong independent woman who in her music admits that she is a sexual being, that she enjoys sex and being objectified by her male companions (and/or even the media). But in the case of "Video Phone", she depends on being an object for the patriarchal male *gaze* to get the message through.

Gagaism – turning the world gay

"Video Phone" is a strange video. It feels a little too bright, a little bit too animated. The parodical elements of the video are very graphic, even exaggerated. The setting and the style of the video is in many ways very far from the usual portrayals of Beyoncé and her other of her fellow contemporary black female R'n'B artists. Beyoncé has through her career staged herself as a strong, independent and serious woman. Thus, this depiction, where she chews her gum with her mouth open, speaks and sings with an almost incomprehensible south state slang and portrays characters that almost border 'sleaze' or 'chav', is not what one would usually expect from top list mainstream pop stars like Beyoncé. Confusion also arises as the video seems to take place in the stylistic and iconographic abstract universe of Lady Gaga rather than Beyoncé's own. And within the aesthetics and iconography of Lady Gaga, constructions of gender and sexuality are very much fluid (not to say parodic, neon-colored and flaunted) which questions the previously discussed 'girl power' effect in "Video Phone". Recognizing the aesthetics of *Gagaism* blurs the gender hierarchies of the video.

Lady Gaga's star persona is constructed through outrageously camp and theatrical costumes. She flaunts her eccentricities in every official appearance, with her music videos often bordering parody. In the gay community, Lady Gaga is celebrated for her over-the-top style, and queer references. Writers Joshua Stein and Noah Michelson of gay culture magazine *Out* wrote in a recent article:

A life of glamour is an ethos to which every gay -- from the 17-year-old Dominican tranny voguing in his bedroom to the tanorexic middle-aged Miami circuit queen -- can relate. It's one reason we love Gaga. Another, of course, is that Gaga loves us back. Gayness is in Gaga's DNA. [...] Her devotion to gay culture is unparalleled by any other artist operating at her level of visibility or success. "When I started in the mainstream it was the gays that lifted me up," she says. "I committed myself to them and they committed themselves to me, and because of the gay community I'm where I am today." Earlier this year, in her acceptance speech for her MuchMusic award for best international video, Lady Gaga thanked "God and the gays." Before agreeing to tour with Kanye West this fall, Gaga told the rapper, "I just want to be clear before we decide to do this together: I'm gay. My music is gay. My show is gay. And I *love* that it's gay. And I love my gay fans and they're all going to be coming to our show. And it's going to *remain* gay." That's another clause in the Gagaland constitution: Gay culture shall gush undiluted into the rapids of society. It shall not be co-opted, fancified, dolled up, or Uncle Tommed. "I very much want to inject gay culture into the mainstream," she says, "It's not an underground tool for me. It's my whole life. So I always sort of joke the real motivation is to just turn the world gay." [sic] (Stein and Michelson, 2009 [URL])

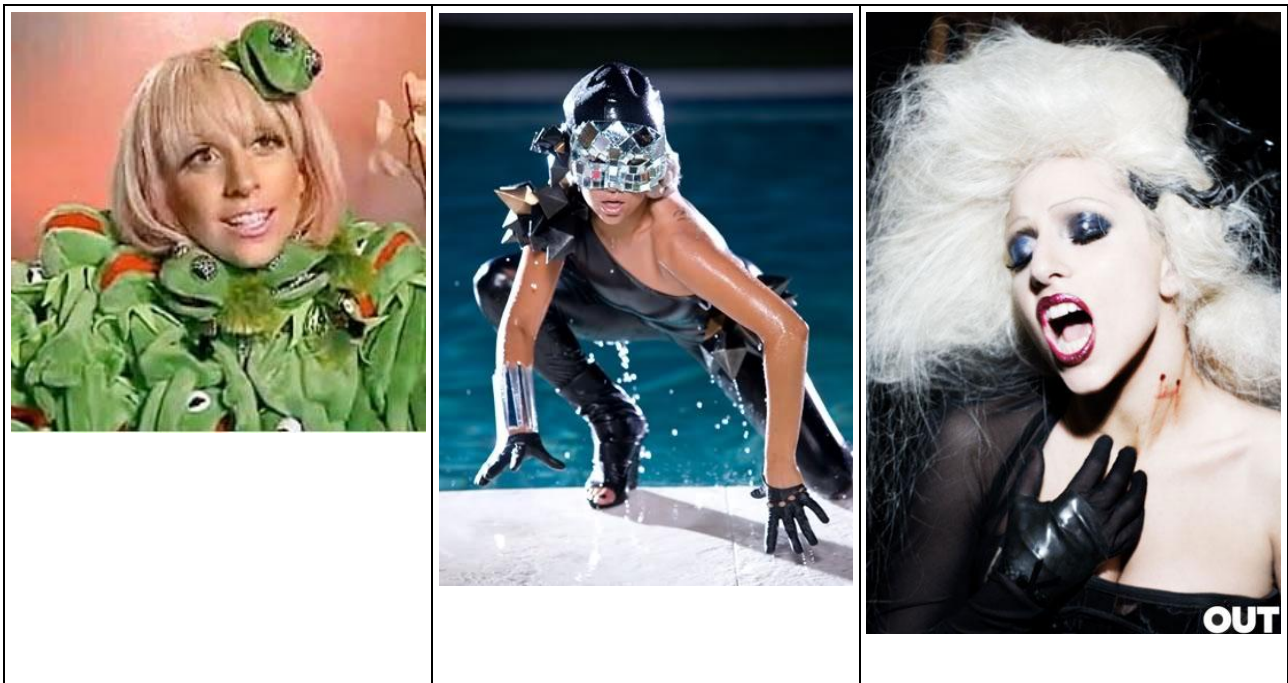


Figure 3: Three examples of Lady Gaga's theatrical costumes.

This article sums up the way Lady Gaga has been received in gay culture, and also shows how she throughout her career has emphasized that she, even though she defines herself as straight, belongs to a genre and aesthetic of queer identity. The campness of her star image is so *far out*, cleverly playing on gender blurring, that the tabloid press grabbed on to rumours that she in fact is a hermaphrodite⁴⁴, something she allegedly according to the tabloids both has verified and denied in recent interviews⁴⁵. Towards the end of the production of this thesis, she even made a comment on these rumours in the video "Telephone". This video opens with a scene where Lady Gaga is arrested, and stripped of her clothes by the prison wards. In the un-censored version of this video, this scene ends with a frontal nudity shot of Lady Gaga revealing that she indeed is female after all. And, to underline this even further, the nude scene is followed up by a shot of the two prison wardens walking down the corridors in which one of the wards says mockingly to the other: "See, I told you she hasn't got a penis".⁴⁶

Lady Gaga is nevertheless not an intersex, although she constructs herself and her iconography on being quite fluid and deceptive in terms of her sexual identity. In the quote taken from *Out* magazine above, she admits belonging to a gay culture: her music, her show, her

⁴⁴ See for instance [URL] <<http://www.thehollywoodgossip.com/2009/08/lady-gaga-hermaphrodite-picture-sparks-rumors/>> [20.12.09].

⁴⁵ See for instance [URL] <<http://www.news.com.au/lady-gaga-hermaphrodite-rumours-go-below-the-belt/story-e6firfmq9-1225769408923>> [20.12.09]. Please note that as far as I know, Lady Gaga has never officially admitted to being a hermaphrodite, however, the internet is full of blogs, articles and similar that claim so without any references.

⁴⁶ If seen in an intertextual relation to "Video Phone", the video "Telephone" further blurs our understanding of the relationship between Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, with its many hints of stereotyped lesbian characteristics. Unfortunately, this video was released at such a late stage of my writing process that there was no room for discussing it in relation to "Video Phone".

audiences is constituted within a queer aesthetics. In this sense, it is easy to argue that her eccentric costumes (see the pictures above), her irony laden stage performances and music videos and lyrics bear clear references to drag characteristics and glamour. In many ways, Lady Gaga exaggerates the glamorous elements of her femininity to such a state that her star persona might be mistaken for a man in drag – only as an actual lady. On the issue of celebrity gossip, Stan Hawkins notes: “There is no shortage of gossip surrounding pop celebrities on the Internet, where sites dealing with stories of sexual orientation never fail to draw in surfers. Nothing seems to spark off more enthusiasm than the presumptuousness surrounding categorizations of sexuality” (Hawkins, 2006, p.279). And, in spite of being a relatively new starlet in the pop scene, very few artists (perhaps with the exception of Madonna) have managed to set the mainstream gossip on fire to the same extent as Lady Gaga has achieved in her controversial expressions of sexual identity.

Looking back, then, on “Video Phone”, the feature of Lady Gaga as Beyoncé’s female partner in crime makes it hard to draw a clear conclusion on the narrative protagonists’ agenda of flipping heteronormative gender conventions. The feature of an artist such as Lady Gaga might undermine a reading that suggests female empowerment over *the male gaze* because Lady Gaga aesthetics invites the question of whether the video is constituted within a male, female or queer *gaze*. Who is she representing? And what is the relationship between Lady Gaga and Beyoncé? The masquerade of gender and sexual orientation in the staging of Lady Gaga opens up for a consideration of a *queer* or even *transgendered gaze* in “Video Phone”. Judith Halberstam addresses the problems in such fluid constitutions of the *gaze* by noting that: “The transgender gaze becomes difficult to track because it depends on complex relations in time and space between seeing and not seeing, appearing and disappearing, knowing and not knowing” (Halberstam, 2005, p.78). Even though neither Lady Gaga nor Beyoncé appear as transgendered in the video, the video clearly stages many incarnations of the female divas – and these narrative characters are portrayed in such a camp way, that it is impossible to believe it is anything but theatre; a dress up.

In locating a camp aesthetic of the video, the cultural references of phallic props and weaponry also becomes contextualized with a certain twist of irony. Vernallis notes that in understanding the role of props in music videos, it is crucial to consider the relation of metaphor: “[...] the attributes of one object transfer to another, and the yoking together of concepts from different semantic realms creates new meaning” (Vernallis, 2004, p.104). The girls do carry guns, but the guns are bright neon coloured, and appear more like toys and water pistols than the real thing. They wear uniforms that symbolically have been associated with predominantly male authority figures, but these outfits are adapted into effeminate and highly sexualized variations of the original – curiously reminiscent to the props of a stereotypical stripper’s costume (policeman, fireman, lawyer and so on). As aforementioned, in comparison to the grave address in “Criminal”,

the exaggerated and parodic elements of “Video Phone” undermine the questions of moral raised in the video. Musically, the song also bears a similar camp exaggeration: over the top low frequency bass lines, rapid drum machine loops, saturated chords of rasping moaning. The slang of the lyrics is so broad that it seems like a parody of south-state black male identity – So *chavvy*, its nature of parody overpowers the content of the actual lyrical message. The authenticity of the video appear to be built upon charged irony, however without any true comic relief, and as it remains within the postmodern aesthetics of the world of *Gagaism*; it merely refers to fragments of popular culture, gender relations, sexuality and does not really pose any statement or positioning of its own.

A man’s world?

Returning to Mulvey’s original formulation of the *male gaze*, the two videos presented in this chapter bring up a problematic aspect of the *male gaze* theory’s exclusion of the possibilities of a coexistence of various positioned *gazes* within the same object of expression. Mainly due to its non-narrative nature, music videos are perhaps more problematic in determination of the way it positions its spectators. The commentaries discussed in relation to Fiona Apple’s “Criminal” are good examples of how symbolical expressions of gender can render far different readings than one would expect at first glance. As Hawkins writes, Mulvey’s original definition questions gendered identity alongside that of sexual looking and is problematic as it only accounts for the heteronormative male (Hawkins, 2002, p.17). However, as I noted on the arbitrary sexual identification of Lady Gaga in “Video Phone”, the heteronormative male *gaze* can also be challenged when the object of desire can be associated with other sexual identifications than the conventional heteronormative female. Nevertheless, the apparatus of the *gaze* finds value in its theorization, focuses on the role of the spectator in the interpretational dialog, and is a most crucial note of consideration in the investigation of how we read and perceive representations of not only gender and sexual identities, but also in terms of race and class.⁴⁷

This being said, it should be stressed that even though I argue that other gendered perspectives besides the heteronormative male can operate interpretatively within the same music video, I do acknowledge that the female character has a strong history of being fetishized in terms of her body in the history of pop representations.⁴⁸ In both “Criminal” and “Video Phone”, this

47 Even though this is an important aspect of spectatorship and interpretation, the discussion of race and class is outside the scope of this paper. For further readings on these two aspects, see for instance Halberstam (2006), and Buanes (2007).

48 Once again I underline that I am aware of the objectification of the male spectacle in pop, but in a historical perspective this is an issue that is far more apparent in female representations. Another important notion which unfortunately will not be debated in my thesis is that where the fetishization of female spectacles posits the woman mainly as the object of desire and thus the submissive participator, the objectification of the male spectacle, even though offered as an object of pleasure for the spectator of the video, is very often portrayed as ‘gazing’ at other female objects of pleasure in the visual or lyrical diegesis, thus maintaining a sense of dominance in their representation.

notion is critically commented on (even though one is more successful than the other). What is interesting here is that the videos underline a general knowledge of constructing the female as a sexual display. In the following chapter, looking further into the issues raised in this chapter, I will look closer at the fetishization of physical perfectionism in conventional female representations in pop music videos.

Chapter 2: The natural as object

*“Sweet like candy
Yeah, I can be
Fake your beauty
Fool him slightly
Doors locked tightly
Fake your beauty”*

(Excerpts from “Fake Your Beauty” by Bertine Zetlitz)

In their radio hit from the summer of 1998, the Norwegian band D’sound quite poetically stated: “Beauty is a blessing, you can’t buy it in a store”. Twelve years on, beauty is perhaps the most prominently advertised product in the consumer market. Magazines, books, and television shows such as “What not to Wear”, “How to Look Good Naked”, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy”, “Nip/Tuck”, “The Hills”, “The City”, the franchise concept of “Americas Next Top Model” and “Extreme Makeover” also marked a tendency of a public pursuit for immaculate beauty. In recent times, *fashionista* and beauty blogs have flourished over the internet, debating, discussing and writing inexhaustibly on issues of fashion, hair, make-up, skin products and training. Beauty is the word of mouth, and it is undeniably an issue that concerns girls and boys, men and women. And the sales pitch: to be beautiful is to encompass all that is worthwhile. In a historical perspective, beauty has been seen to hold mystical values so desirable that ancient civilizations created gods and goddesses whose whole existence were to be beautiful, and to create beautiful things. Interestingly enough, there are indisputable similarities to the contemporary worship of pop and film stars.

In this chapter I will attempt to shed light on the concept of beauty, and in this unveiling certain truths of the constructedness of star images. However, instead of providing readings of the typical glamorous and sensual pop princesses, I have gone the other way around and focus on the flipside of such images. After all, what better way to understand beauty *is* there than to determine what beauty *is not*?

DIY Monstrosity



Figure 4: Snapshots from Sia Furler’s “Buttons”.

In 2008, Australian singer Sia released a video for her song “Buttons” that gained massive response due to its very peculiar aesthetics. In interpreting this video, we must pay special attention to issues

of gender, and how femininity is represented. This interpretative focus has its origin in a monstrous depiction of the female artist. Sia physically appears ghastly in the video. In the opening frames of the video, we see Sia in a nude headshot. Her eyes are as large as plates, her eyebrows are twisted down towards her nose, and her open lips reveal a nasty case of underbite. In sync with the music, she blinks her eyes separately, almost to a point where it looks unnatural or physiologically impossible.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, her ghastly looks appear more comic than scary, and this is because we know all the way that her face is manipulated – it is suspended by bits of tape. In the next shot, her face is twisted by the application of several clothes pegs. Other scenes include Sia wearing a nylon stocking over her head, which is then slowly pulled off so that her face twists into a foul grimace. At first glance I noticed the comedy of the music video, relating it to childhood games and dressing up. This is in particular due to the main focus of grimacing and naive playfulness.

Even though the video has a big sense of comedy to it, it raises a couple of interesting questions about representation of gender, and not least, it challenges the way we are accustomed to look at stardom. I believe that very few of Sia's pop contemporaries would consider letting themselves be portrayed as monstrosities in this way. And I must admit, that after watching the video a couple of times, and particularly after paying attention to the lyrics – it did not seem all that funny. Rather, in the same way that the Fiona Apple video plays on conventional representation of the female star to make a point, "Buttons" is a music video with an immense shock factor. However, a question arises: is the shock factor only bound up in comic relief of the video's musical quirkiness and visual childlike games of dressing up, or could one claim that it is shocking because the video visually and thematically conveys the very contrast of conventional sensual depiction of the female star?

The song "Buttons" is a great contrast to the other songs of Sia's album "some people have real problems [sic]". It was initially a hidden track on the album, but was released as a single after the video provided great public attention to the song. Where most of the other songs on the album are calm, sometimes sombre tunes with melancholic melodies, "Buttons" has a rhythmical drive. The introductory riff has an almost childish sense to it, with jerky accents and a lot of chromatic movement and emphasis of blue notes. Without a doubt, the musical backdrop of the song paints a playful and cheerful scenario. Sia's vocal line is equally playful and simple, and alternates between a quick and almost forced staccato and an expressive vibrato. In the verses, a motif starting with a tense declamatory staccato and ending in a releasing descending expressive cadence is repeated four times.⁵⁰ The declamatory *staccato* only extends to one note, musically leading towards to the descending release, and thus it is this part of the verses that are given expressive and melodic

49 In this particular scene, this 'unnatural' effect is made possible by using the split-screen editing technique merging two separate shots of Sia blinking, divided down the middle of her face.

50 See figure 5 below.

emphasis. This is further emphasized by a vocal crescendo through the two first bars leading up to the first beat of the two last bars of the motif. The vocal timbre of the chorus follows up on the expressive timbre at the end of the repeated motif of the verses. The last two bars of the motif are emphasized, which also translates to the lyrics as the concluding bars of the motifs always states “[...] away from me lover” (see transcription of the lyrics below). Because this phrase is repeated throughout all the verses, it can almost be understood as a hook phrase. In other words, this message – the protagonist urging her lover to stay away from her – is most likely to be picked up by most observers even though they might not pay that much attention to the rest of the verse(s) (the *non espressivo* parts).



Figure 5: the repeated melody of the verses that alternates between the static unemphasized *non-espressivo* (bars 1-2) and the dynamic emphasized *espressivo* (bars 3-4).

Transcription of Lyrics

Verse 1

You got me pushing imaginary buttons
 Step away from me lover, away from me lover
 You caught me counting imaginary school children
 Get away from lover, away from me lover
 Yes, I can see that your carpet is animated,
 Walk away from me lover, away from me lover
 Yes, I see open wounds in everyone I've dated
 Away from lover, get away from me lover

Chorus

I am no good for you,
 I'm seeing ghosts in everything I do
 I am no good for you,
 I'm seeing ghosts in everything I do
 I am no good for you,
 I'm seeing ghosts in everything I do
 Oh, oh, oh ,oh
 I am no good for you,
 I'm seeing ghosts in everything I do

Oh, oh, oh ,oh

Verse 2

You caught me turning all the lights on and off
 Walk away from me lover, away from me lover
 When will you see that I am carrying this stuff?
 Walk away from me lover, away from me lover
 Can't you see that I am losing my marbles?
 It's marvellous
 Losing another, losing another

Chorus

Bridge

Outro

Walk away from me lover, away from me lover
 Get away from me lover, away from me lover
 Step away from me lover, away from me lover
 Walk away from me lover, away from me lover

Nevertheless, if one addresses the *non espressivo* parts of the verses, one immediately gets the idea that the protagonist is an unstable person by the series of description of the protagonist's abject and irregular actions. Reading the text in a straightforward manner paints a picture of the protagonist losing her grip on reality, and therefore urging her lover to stay away from her. However, as I have

pointed out before, in case of reading lyrics, we seldom interpret and approach lyrics as denotative narratives. In this sense, the lyrics allude to a situation that most have experienced at some stage of their lives, namely, feeling that they cannot offer their loved ones what they deserve. The song is not necessarily about psychological illness, but it opens up for a more general reading that concerns problematic situations of love and commitment.

Social Abjection

As Vernallis has pointed out, most commonly, the image of a music video does not follow the progress of the lyrics basically because a song's lyrics take on an oracular function rather than a clear cut description (Vernallis, 2004, p.137-155). A direct visual realization of lyrics would in most cases produce an illogical narrative, and as many lyrics are allusions of feelings, and states of the mind, many of these concepts are hard, if not impossible, to visually re-enact word by word. In the case of "Buttons", in which the concept of 'fear of commitment' is lyrically portrayed by describing a series of seemingly unrelated events or activities (such as the protagonist being caught pushing imaginary buttons), the music director has chosen to portray this concept rather than the actual events. As I pointed out earlier, the hook phrase of the lyrics suggests that the protagonist urges her lover to stay away from her as she is battling her own demons, seeing ghosts in everything she does. She regards herself as something abject from what her lover deserves. This is visualized by portraying the singer with various grotesque and monstrously manipulated faces. Each time the lyrics reach a new description of a crazy activity the protagonist performs, the visuals cut to a new manipulation of Sia's face. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, a study of female monsters in horror cinema, film theorist and feminist writer Barbara Creed, draws on Julia Kristeva's investigations of how monstrosity, and the female monster in particular, relates directly to the term of social abjection (Creed, 1993, p.8-15).⁵¹ What is frightening about monsters is that they threaten social boundaries in society; they do not respect borders, positions or rules. Abjection, as a social construct is an inevitable part of any society, and thus, in horror, its symbolic qualities are often grounded in ancient religious and historical notions. Creed argues that these notions are often directly related to religious abominations: "[...] sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest" (ibid, p.9). In the case of "Buttons", where the lyrics concern insanity and the visuals play on corporeal alteration, the combined message of the two can be summed up in the following: the grotesque monstrous depiction of Sia's face is an allusion to the way the protagonist of the lyrics regards herself; as something deviant from the normal woman – a monster. She feels guilty or scared of becoming a burden for her lover, therefore she urges him to stay away – and thus she

51 Also, see Kristeva (1982).

equally visually warns him of how bad things could get should he stay with her. This is why we as an audience are allowed to see the tape and clothes pegs. If her monstrosity was to be made by special effects, it would not have the same transparency as a signifying allusion. The monstrosity lies not in the physics of the protagonist: it lies in the deviance from the social and behavioural norms of society. Then, what first appears as comedy in the visuals (which is backed up by the quirky and playful harmonic and melodic course of the music) can take on quite a different matter through a closer reading.

An interesting aspect that must be mentioned is that the audiovisual conceptualization (direct or indirect) of Sia's album "some people have real problems [sic]" (which includes "Buttons") is based on the same references of comedy and childlike games. The title, similar to the story of "Buttons", subtly suggests that serious matters are at stake, while they are never truly revealed as a pure conception of tragedy. Hence, the comedy of the song in question and its visuals can just as well work as an intertextual reference to the album as a whole, or even to Sia herself. By this I am referring to the fact that Sia has constructed an audiovisual image of her star persona as someone that constantly pushes the boundaries between comedy and tragedy. The connection between "Buttons" and the audiovisual conceptualization of the album has been strengthened further through numerous of live performances of the song, in which Sia and her band appear as incarnations of the children's drawing themes of her album's cover art, cleverly done by wearing a costume under black light that conceals her body (revealing only what appears as drawn contours), yet mimics her body movements.⁵²

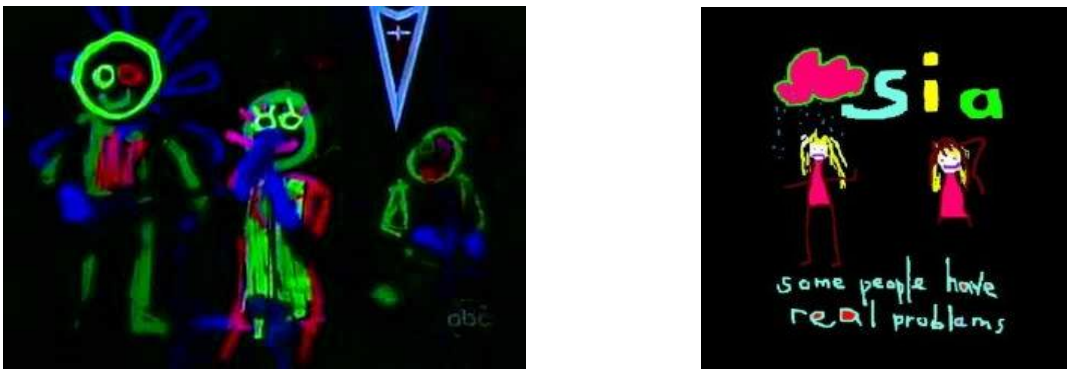


Figure 6 - Left: Sia Performing "Buttons" on "Later... with Jools Holland", Right: Cover art for "some people have real problems [sic]".

Both live performance and the album cover significantly play on the juxtaposition of serious issues onto the contrasting comedic naivety in visual conceptualizations. Here too rises a question of authorship, and not least the question of artistic agenda. There is a certain possibility that Sia and/or the director chose the visualization as a means to strengthen Sia's stylistic image as artist, making its

⁵² These performances can be seen at [URL] < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yCCDUyBcKs> > [11.01.10], and [URL] < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH_Vw9parZQ > [11.01.10].

effect on the music and lyrics merely coincidental. Thus, even though I have read “Buttons” as a video that utilizes knowledge of conventional female representation in popular music as the most striking signifying visual element in emphasizing the video's lyrics (and thus also making a comment on representation of the female in popular culture – which I will discuss in the following section), it does not necessarily mean that this was the intentional agenda of the artist or the director. Interpretation is neither unconditionally neither strictly a result of performative agencies, nor is it unconditionally coloured by these agencies. Nevertheless, if emphasized in the spectators' deciphering of the very experience, they *can* be. Adding to this argument, Derek Scott, noting on the arbitrary reception of Bruce Springsteen's “Born in the USA” and U2's “Sunday, Bloody Sunday”, writes: “Popular music can be articulated to particular political meanings whatever the intentions of the creators of that music might be” (Scott, 2009, p.9). Coincidental or not, the different mediated signs within “Buttons” do tell a story of a protagonist that addresses some sort of certain monstrosity within herself, however this monstrosity is given a vast space for definitions beyond the abject of the physical, even though this to a certain degree is the way it is visualized.

Marginalized stars

The most interesting aspect of “Buttons”, as briefly mentioned before, is that the abject depiction of Sia can be understood as a critique, or at least an acknowledgment and clever usage of popular music's marginalized conventional representation of the female artist. To clarify: the definition of conventional female (or the female star's) beauty is very restricted and marginalized, and thus the slightest deviance from these conventions make a great impact on our readings. In most popular music, female representations are indeed constructed through *the male gaze*. Hence, the director of “Buttons” needed only to make the smallest effort in effectively depicting the abject protagonist of the lyrics. Whilst the lyrics depend on describing a series of irregular, and almost criminally insane actions, a little bit of tape was all that was needed to create the same visual description. Yes, there is a witty side to “Buttons”, which is highlighted by the connotations of children's games, yet its shocking impact is based on the fact that we have become unaccustomed to see a female singer without the airbrush or a veil of make-up, and to render such reactions certainly proves that “Buttons” tells us just as much about gender representation in contemporary popular culture as it does convey the story of commitment issues.

Similarly to Fiona Apple's video, “Buttons” is a music video that challenges its spectators by blurring the pleasure of experiencing it, and it certainly proves that both audience and artists are aware of how, not only popular music, but all popular culture phenomena construct representation of the female sex that for a long time has been bordering something beyond the natural.⁵³ Thus, in

53 I am of course aware that representations of physical 'supernatural' males too appear in music videos and other

my view, the representation of the supernatural ideal of the female is far more monstrous than the DIY grotesque grimaces within “Buttons”. In popular music, representations of female characters are first and foremost constructed as physical perfection. Britney Spears, one of the world's most successful pop stars of the decade, is just one of many examples of constructed perfection. In their article “Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation”, John Richardson and Stan Hawkins discuss the exaggeration of femaleness in her video “Toxic”, unveiling that the construction of her gender is so over the top that it borders queer representations: “Via computerized effects, Britney's femaleness is so exaggerated that she queers the fixity of femininity in a spin that serves as a parody of the natural” (Hawkins and Richardson, 2005, p.618). Such an exaggeration of femaleness is common not only in popular music texts, but also in popular culture in general. Working on Sia's video indeed reinforced a sense of worry that often has occurred to me in my work on gender representations in music: I find it ever so frightening that western society pushes toward a construct of physical gender ideals that render the natural female as abject. Perhaps a commentary of this nature was never intended from Sia or the video director, but the video does nevertheless inform us of such a situation.

On another note, in relation to how we experience deception in pop expressions, it is important not to take the audience for granted. Even though the contemporary world of pop offers idolization of hyper-perfectionism of the physical body (especially after the endless possibilities for digital touch-ups in photos and videos), it is a disguise that holds a certain transparency. As Hawkins and Richardson showed in their reading of Britney, the conventional female pop singer is a character so exaggerated in physical terms that she is elevated above the standards of the general crowd; hence, she is a ‘star’ in the word’s correct sense, shining brightly high up above us. The pleasure of music videos can be said to lie in its ability of presenting fantastic worlds, fantasies, stories and dreamscapes that the real world cannot produce with the same glossy and supernatural polish. However, as with fiction, we are aware that they are merely fantasies. The pleasures of experiencing pop videos and star aesthetics thus rely on allowing them to deceive.

As a means to investigate star aesthetics further, I will now give attention to a music video that similar to Sia’s “Buttons”, albeit from a very different perspective, elucidates and comments on the stylization and deception within the constructions of contemporary pop stars.

Do you want the truth or something beautiful?

The video entitled “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful” by British singer and former burlesque artist Paloma Faith is a very interesting text in relation to the discussion of star aesthetics

graphic representations of popular music and culture. Nevertheless, the hysteria of physical perfection is a phenomenon that is first and foremost historically has been most apparent in female representations.

and the idolization of perfectionism in pop. Cleverly shaped as *metafiction*⁵⁴, the video employs the tale of a successful 1950's performer in order to conceptualize the song's portrayal of self-doubt and shame.

The video opens with a shot of Faith sitting in front of a large mirror in a backstage dressing room. She's wearing a delicate dressing gown and on the desk in front of her we see make-up kits, expensive bottles of perfume and large spectacular headpieces – all revealing that Faith might be a successful entertainer getting ready for a cabaret show. Looking sad and sullen, Faith gazes into her reflection as the first verse starts and begins to lip-sync to the mellow and poetic lyrics. As with many music videos, the temporal order of the scenes within the video does not follow a linear system, and the video suddenly moves into the future where Faith, still sitting in the same dressing room, has now changed into her stage outfit, looking even more depressed than in the opening scene. Suddenly a woman enters the room, causing Faith to all of a sudden look up in a bright smile. The girls (inaudibly) talk, laugh and smile to each other, and it appears that the girl who entered the room came to tell Faith that it was time to go on stage. However, as soon as the other girl leaves the dressing room, Faith's expression immediately changes back to the depressed sullenness. Obviously she did not want the purser to see her sadness and it is this concept that seems to be the recurring focus throughout the video.

In the next setting of the video, Faith has entered the stage. Still in the dark, we can see that she looks even sadder than she did in the opening scenes of the video. Just as the song reaches the first chorus and the spotlights are turned on, in that instant, Faith puts on a perfect beautiful smile and lip-syncs to the lyrics. Her face bears no witness of the depressed sad state she was in just seconds ago – she is glamorous, immaculate and sensuous, with a striking stage presence (see figure 7, left). In this scene, the lyrics are inferred into the diegese. The words we hear appear to be the words the entertainer performs in her song. When the chorus comes to an end, Faith smiles cunningly and slowly turns around with her back to the audience. As soon as she turns around, the glamorous smile withers and dies (see figure 7, right). Still moving sensually to the music, the audience is still unaware of the emotional state she hides. The lyrics now move out of the diegese. Not singing into a microphone, they here seem to represent the protagonist's thoughts and reflections. Faith stands with her back to the audience for the duration of the entire second verse, with the back-up dancers taking centre stage. However, as the second chorus approaches, she once again rapidly turns towards the audience with an immaculate smile on her face, this time with even more exaggerated 'diva' arm movements. This time she also performs a post-chorus before once

54 The online dictionary Wikipedia defines metafiction as a literary describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually irony and self-reflection. It can be compared to presentational theatre, which does not let the audience forget it is viewing a play; metafiction does not let the reader forget he or she is reading a fictional work (see [URL] < <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction> >).

again turning her back to the audience. The song increases in intensity and dynamics over the first two verses, and this is also apparent in the visual course. Reaching the instrumental bridge, Faith, once again with her back towards the audience, now looks as if she is about to burst into tears. Fighting the tears, she swallows, takes a deep breath and, just before the re-entrance of the last chorus, she forces a smile, and turns around, once more convincingly fresh and beautiful. As she turns her back to the audience at the final post-chorus, she finally is defeated by her emotions. Broken down, and with ruined make-up, she hesitates to turn around to meet the applause. Nevertheless, the show must go on, and, in the final scene of the video, she turns towards the audience, revealing that she in fact is on the edge of an emotional collapse. As the song fades out, she looks to the floor as if scared of the audience's reactions to the falling veil of her perfection. To her surprise, she gains a standing ovation.



Figure 7: Left: Faking happiness, Right: Bursting into tears with her back towards the audience.

Smile, though your heart is breaking – emotional coloring

Transcription of lyrics

Verse 1

The prophet took my hand on all souls day
 He preached the value of deception
 Changing shadows by a shapeshifter's rules
 Tales are never just for fools

Verse 2

The court of conscience came before me
 Presented me with a heavenly angel
 Took my hand and asked me 'truths aside'
 - to his questions I replied:

Chorus 1

Do you want the truth or something beautiful?
 Just close your eyes and make believe
 Do you want the truth or something beautiful?
 I am happy to deceive you

Verse 3

He stood as tall as redwood trees
 Drank tea from a seamstress' thimble

I didn't want to speak the honest truth
 So I spit out lies that aimed to soothe

Chorus 2

Do you want the truth or something beautiful?
 Just close your eyes and make believe
 Do you want the truth or something beautiful?
 I am happy to deceive you

Post-Chorus 1

Secrets, lies and telling tales
 I can be who you want me to be
 - but do you want me?

Bridge (instrumental)

Chorus 3

Do you want the truth or something beautiful?
 Just close your eyes and make believe
 Do you want the truth or something beautiful?
 I am happy to deceive you

Post-Chorus 2

Secrets, lies and telling tales
I can be who you want me to be
Secrets, lies and telling tales

I can be who you want me to be
- but do you want me?

If we look to the lyrics of “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful”, we do not find any immediate connection to the female entertainer of the visual diegese. The words of the song employ many allusions and metaphors, and, when compared with the visual side of the video, take the shape of abstract poetry. However, it is a poem in which the theme is fairly graspable. In the first, the protagonist meets a prophet who in a heart-to-heart moment advises her to value deception. In verse two, a second character is introduced. This character is characterized as “a heavenly angel”, noting that it is someone the protagonist either respects highly or even loves. He asks her for her honesty, but she declines (perhaps to herself in her own mind) by noting that the truth might not be very beautiful, and that she is more than happy to deceive him. The two first phrases of the third verse continue further to paint an image of a second character who is worthy of respect. The line in which the angel is described as “standing tall as redwood trees” and “drinking tea from a seamstress thimble” are both colorful ways to portray a man of poise, elegance, and decent behaviour. From the following phrases, it thus seems as if she fears that the truth about her might offend or repel him, and, eager to please, she admits to lying to improve his impression of her. Finally, in the post-chorus, she reveals such a fear in the line “I can be who you want me to be – but do you want *me*”. The words describe a common social anxiety, the fear of not being accepted for who you are.

In relation to the visual course of events, the angel in the lyrics is represented by the audience, while the anxiety of not being accepted, or not living up to what people expect from you, is realized in the visual protagonist’s determination to keep the show going.

Gluing lyrics and image together, the music of “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful” operates on many levels in the video’s narration. First, it captures and enhances the portrayal of Faith’s retro entertainer *spectaculaire* character by drawing on references of classical soul music infused with lush and dramatic strings and a powerful brass section. Even though the song is not a pastiche of vaudevillian cabaret music, it is credible that the song might be performed by the visual protagonist as it very much emphasizes its retro influences. As previously mentioned, the music fluidly moves in and out of the visual diegese. Because of its bittersweet melodic lines and harmonics, it links up and merges with the text and image that creates a combined reflective narration of social anxieties, but similarly the video uses the illusion that the visual protagonists, a nightclub singer, actually performs the song on stage. The music of the video plays a crucial role in both conceptualizing and underlining the symbolic conceptualization of a 1950’s entertainer, but it also is the component that contributes the most in creating the emotional setting for the video. Although I would not claim that the lyrics or the visuals do not provide any kind of melancholy

individually, it is only when experienced with a musical backdrop that the video seems to expand from describing sadness to presenting an almost claustrophobic state of panic towards the end of the video. The song opens with a smooth and calm string motif accompanied by a steady drum kit, and a modest but moving bass. The warm and rounded sound is completed by a number of different electric and acoustic guitars and a mellow rhodes piano, and sets the retro soul atmosphere at once. In the first two verses and the first chorus, the musical accompaniment remains simplistic in the background. Faith's vocal also remains within a calm *mezzoforte*, allowing for a rich and mellow tone that creates a melancholic introduction to the song. Reaching the third verse, an elegiac counterpoint melody of sighing strings is added to the mix. The strings continue in the second chorus, where the background vocalists become more apparent. Here, Faith's vocals are more extravert and richly coloured by the background singers. The first post-chorus moves the song into its highest register, and, as with the string counterpoint in verse 3, Faith's vocals are languid and sighing, almost melodically crying. Nevertheless, it is the bridge that almost to a surprisingly great extent builds towards the dramatic climax. Here, the introductory motif of the brass is reintroduced, however this time it is almost overshadowed by clustered tremolo strings with heavy reverb slowly performing a downwards *glissandi* movement. The same kind of tensional build-up can be seen in the display of emotions of the protagonist; at the start of the video, Faith looks a bit down and contemplative, however, as the show goes on, she becomes more and more upset. In juxtaposition, the breaking point seems to occur at the bridge. Here, the music clusters into an unexpectedly dense and dark version of the opening; simultaneously we see that the visual protagonist starts to truly break down. Swallowing and heaving for air, she painfully forces a smile upon her face, and for the last time manages to turn around and put on a spectacular show, or a spectacular lie. In the music, the same release happens when the clustered tension of the bridge is released in a grand major chord, reinforced by *tutti* band and a new dynamic upheaval of the vocals. But, as noted, this last effort to lie and deceive has taken its toll on the protagonist, and, as the music comes to an end, this is similarly shown as the protagonist reveals she has not got the energy to perform another round. As the music fades out, she lowers her head. Just as the music has come to an end, the protagonist is defeated.

In combination, music, lyrics and visual very emotionally and dramatically conceptualize a most common human anxiety. The fear of not living up to the expectations of society, family or a loved one is an impending fear for any socialized person. The video convincingly expresses this anxiety through a clever metafiction: the video is not only portraying the star Paloma Faith; it also narrates the story of a fictional 1950's star within the fictional space of the video. On the one hand, one might then argue that the video challenges conventional constructs of the star as it, unlike most videos, allows the audience insight into the staging of the star masquerade. On the other hand, it is

necessary to note that the ‘real Faith’ revealed in the video is still a constructed character with a similarly constructed image.

I am happy to deceive you – a historical reflection on the pin-up girl

The most interesting aspect of this metafictional video lies in the references to the 1950’s entertainer. It should be noted that Faith in general dresses herself in modern versions of 1950’s and 1940’s cabaret clothes; however, in this video her clothes are given diegetic emphasis. As we have seen, in order to conceptualize a particular emotional state of mind, the references to the 1950’s female star play a crucial role. In light of my discussion of how stars are constructed, it is interesting to take a look back at the pin-up girl phenomenon in the USA, and what it came to represent.



Figure 8: Left: Marilyn Monroe appearing with the USO, posing for soldiers in Korea after a performance at the 3rd U.S Inf. Div. Area during the Korean war in 1954, Centre: Paloma Faith in one of her burlesque inspired stage outfits, Right: A promotional photograph of Paloma Faith highly reminiscent of the famous pin-up Bettie Page.

The pin-up girl was a model whose pictures were mass-produced and gained wide appeal in popular culture. She could be an actress, a fashion model, or a glamour model, and her images were intended for informal display. The term *pin-up* stems from the often erotic photographs or illustration of these women, which could be cut out of magazines, newspapers, chromolithographs and calendars and pinned up on the wall. The pin-up practice is documented back to the late 19th century, and is still at large in contemporary society.⁵⁵ The pin-up girls were exceptionally beautiful, sensual and erotic, forged as a sensual fantasy for the heterosexual male. However, in the 1950’s, the pin-up girls moved out of the newspapers, and became integrated in governmental strategies of warfare. As a means to cheer on American soldiers, particularly during the Vietnam and Korea war, famous pin-up girls were flown in to cheer the soldiers on. Their strategic role in warfare was to provide fantasies and pleasure in a time and situation where reality was harsh and extremely difficult.

⁵⁵ For further reading on the history of pin-up girls, see [URL] < <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/pinupart/> >.

Because such shows provided an opportunity for letting go of reality for a while, and give into the spectacle of beauty, sensuality, pleasure and happiness, pin-up performances were strategically fruitful in raising moral and solidarity amongst soldiers.⁵⁶

In “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful”, Faith’s clear references to the 1950’s pin up singer play an important role in the video’s narrative. By turning her own retro style into a bearer of narrative meaning, she underlines the expected role of the female artist – and simultaneously elucidates an implication of what lies at stake in the supernatural constructions of contemporary stars. To elaborate: in the video, the visual character is torn between her feelings and her role as a star. Even though we are not informed of any cause, it is obvious that she is in a personal crisis. In asking “do you want the truth or something beautiful”, the main character of the video is indeed aware that the audience expects her to deliver a carefree and beautiful performance. Thus, when she is unable to keep up the charade, she is struck with terror at the prospect of how the audience might react. In the case of Faith, her pin-up aesthetics further emphasize this narrative. The pin-up girl has throughout her existence been a character constructed merely as fantasy. Through smoke and mirrors, make-up and spectacular outfits, her very much constructed image deceived through the pleasures of spectatorship. Returning to the military strategies of the U.S. army, so powerful was her spectacle that it could even make men forget about the war, if only for a moment. As Faith herself stated her official EPK⁵⁷ for the launch of her debut album: “[...] if you tell good lies well, they’re usually better than reality” (YouTube, 2009 [URL]).

In light of this, it is necessary to consider how the performance of gender in mainstream female star representation is foremost embedded in the way they the body is portrayed. Judith Butler notes on this deception: “The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of facts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Butler, 1999, p.xv). Their success, as Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie have argued, “[...] [go] with a male made female image” (Frith and McRobbie, 1990 [1978], p.374). Embracing the conceptualized star personae, many female contemporary pop singers embrace the pin-up character, constructed as deceptively hypersexual and hyperembodied versions of themselves. Thus, one might argue that Paloma Faith’s “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful” is a video that challenges this tradition by doing what conventional videos seek to avoid: reveal the truth that these women are human after all. And still, such an argument is problematic because of the video’s metafictional narration. On the one hand, the video appears as a documentary that reveals the deception of Faith’s fantasy construction. Aware

⁵⁶ A note worthy of mention is that many of the most famous pin-up girls, such as Marilyn Monroe and Bettie Page, did in fact have quite scandalous private lives including drinking problems, drugs and physical abuse. Nevertheless, as the deceptive protagonist in “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful”, the pin-up girls of the 1950’s seldom, if ever, commented or admitted to these problems publically.

⁵⁷ Electronic Press Kit.

of Faith's past as a burlesque performer, and her general retro image and musical aesthetic, the character in "Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful" might read as representing Faith herself, making for a sincere and authentic admittance of constructedness. Approaching the video from this perspective might delineate a certain criticism on the lack of sincerity in star fantasies. On the other hand, Faith is merely acting out a part: the protagonist of the video is just another fantasy character. Most importantly, even in the moment of truth, when the protagonist folds her cards and reveals what lies underneath the veil of deceit, she is constructed cinematically beautiful, desirable, albeit melancholy, flawless. Neatly crafted, polished, directed and carefully edited, the music video is in every way deceiving, even in telling the truth.

Discourses of beauty

The two videos I have analyzed in this chapter, although from very different perspectives, both reveal problematic discourses of beauty at stake in conventional pop videos. Even though neither of the videos directly pose critiques of the exaggerated and artificial appropriation of feminine clichés, they both parody the fantasy such clichés offer in their narration. In Paloma Faith's "Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful", there are two important aspects that need addressing. First, the video elucidates how stars are idealized because they offer fantasies, dreams and pleasurable experiences. Addressing the etymology of the term 'star', such a categorization reveals an idolization in which the 'star' represents a higher being, shining brightly above the mundane and dull reality. With female stars, this elevation from the mundane has historically been predominantly emphasized through the staging of the body.⁵⁸ And, as we have seen with the *pin-up* character, the body serves as a symbol for pleasure, and thus also - through a masquerade - as representing fantasies of utopia or supernaturalness. However, this does not imply that we are unaware of the constructions that lie behind these fantasy images. As Richard Dyer notes on the constructed images of film stars, "Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them" (Dyer, 2004, p.4). And it is in this we find the second important aspect of Faith's video. Even though we are aware of the illusions of pop representations, it does not insist that we choose to give into the fantasy and find pleasure in its deception. When asked "do you

58 As aforementioned, I am of course aware that physical fetishism is a common trait in spectacles of the male pop star as well (see for instance Hawkins, 2009). However, from a general perspective, the masquerade of beauty and perfection is to a much higher degree expected from female characters in pop, and in comparison to staging of masculine perfection, the conventional deception of female beauty is much more refined and defined. Even though there is no room for this debate in this chapter, an important note of consideration is that a majority of music videos of male artists constitute their music videos around the emphasis of female perfectionism through employment of female supporting characters and thus, simultaneously as the male artist is showcased, maintain a heteronormative male perspective of the video's *gaze*. In videos of female pop stars it is not as common to do the same thing with male supporting characters. There are however some striking exceptions in the videos of Madonna and Kylie Minogue's "Slow" in particular (for further relevant readings on the artificial constructions of beauty in film stars, see Dyer, 2004 [1986]).

want the truth or something beautiful”, it seems that the historical glorification of stars, idols and entertainers finds its most important value in representing beauty that surpasses reality.

The critical stance that must not be forgotten here is that glorification can get out of hand. In Faith’s video, we saw how the public’s expectations of the star started to take its toll on the protagonist because she was not able to uphold the spotless image expected of her. Glorification also might lead to idolization and a common striving to appropriate and copy the qualities that constitute star ideals. This is indisputably apparent in teenage magazines, fashion magazines and television shows that all prompt ways for the common woman to glamour up. Returning to my finding in Sia’s “Buttons”, the hysteria of physical fetishism has over the years created an image of the female star that does not only read as exceptionally beautiful, but the conventional definitions of the mainstream pop star are so exaggerated in terms of femininity that they go beyond the capacity of human physique and render the natural female body as abject. The reasons why definitions of beauty have been pushed forward to such an extent are many; to account for them is outside the scope of my thesis. Nevertheless, I must stress that consumerism plays a central role. As fantasy, sex and beauty sell. In a vast, global and competitive market, pop-as-commodity depends on public attention and standing out in order to be economically favoured. However, as I have attempted to note in this chapter, the reasons for the artificial constructions in most conventional pop representations also relate to social factors. Also, in investigating the representation politics of the pop spectacle, the discourse of constructions of beauty and the body is not be overlooked and must be tackled from various perspectives in order to reveal the social foundations that shape them.

With the points I have made so far concerning aspects of construction, beauty and spectatorship in mind, I will in the following chapter in discussing a highly problematic music video, in an attempt to elaborate further on how we can unveil social and political structures in scrutinizing the symbolic language of pop representations.

Chapter 3: Fearless women

As mentioned on a number of occasions already, the values of gender categories have sparked some of the most heated debates within politics as well as legal systems. In this chapter, I want to take a closer look at the social structures of society, and at how the controversy surrounding gender hierarchies can be traced in popular music texts by providing a reading of the Norwegian electronica band Bermuda Triangle's music video "Fearless" in which a connection to the societal gender divide of power and empowerment seems to appear symbolically.

Gender inequality is a disputed topic in both public and legal arenas, and has raised many interesting debates in magazines, papers, books, discussion forums and around the water cooler. One particular aspect of many of these debates is the discussions concerning how the marginalized female leaders often are regarded and stereotyped as frightening and awe-inspiring both by men and women. A key finding of the 2007 public online "Work & Power Survey"⁵⁹ conducted by Elle magazine and MSNBC.com showed how a major segment of respondents labelled women as moody, bitchy, gossipy, emotional and, the most popular term, "catty" (Tahmincioglu, 2007 [URL]). Such stereotypical views and constructs are shaped historically through tradition, and are perhaps a result of threatening ruling conventional expectations of gender hierarchies of power.⁶⁰ In other words, they are embedded in cultural conventions, nurtured and passed down generation after generation.⁶¹

Returning to McClary's idea that music historically has proven transparent to such conventional and discriminating views, my aim in this chapter is to look further into how music videos too mirror and comment on socio-political issues. By drawing on a Freudian perspective on oedipal complexes of male anxiety, I will argue that the music video for the Norwegian electronica band Bermuda Triangle's "Fearless" narrates a dark story about power struggles by advocating symbols of gender inequality and reflects the historical conflicts of gender in the social hierarchies of labour. As with the previous analysis of Sia's "Buttons", I have found Barbara Creed's theories of the *monstrous-feminine* very helpful in understanding the ways horror and fear can be constructed as an axis of gender. In context of Creed's theories, Judith Halberstam's (2006) work on female

59 The survey was completed by 61647 participants, about 50% percent male and 50% female. The average age was 42; 94% said they work full-time and 44% said they supervise other workers. It should be noted that MSNBC states that although the sample size is large and diverse, it is not officially considered nationally representative as it was largely restricted to the readers of MSNBC.com. For more information of the survey see MSNBC/ELLE (2007 [URL]).

60 Stressing that external framework conditions mutually affect each other, a recent study provided by the Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, clarifies that segregation in the labour market cannot be said solely to be the result of preferences, as "individual choices, shifts in the labour market, history and tradition all play crucial parts and affect each other over time" (Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2008 [URL] [my translation]).

61 Also, See Massey (2007) and Goldin and Katz (2001) for statistics and discussions on the historical discrimination of females in the labour market.

masculinity has also been crucial to my analytical deconstruction of the blurred gender representations in “Fearless”.

Barely butch?



Figure 9: Snapshots of the three protagonists in the video.

At first glance, “Fearless” is a video that might be perceived as a bold feminist statement, even a celebration of how the gender divide in executive leader positions has become far more balanced over the last fifty years. In short, the visual side of the video revolves around three young and beautiful female protagonists in charge of a large firm exclusively employing male workers that all appear hypnotized and completely submissive towards their female leaders. The concept is undeniably similar to a beehive, where the male drones and workers all live to serve the queen bee, and is a narrative plot often used in pop videos to highlight the star through the illusion of empowerment. In her master thesis, Marita Buanes notices such a trace in the synopsis for Missy Elliott’s video “Work it” that at one point literally depicts a beehive from the inside, in which the singer is DJ’ing, swarmed with bees (Buanes, 2007, p.76-80). Buanes draws lines to how male rappers tend to employ the harem metaphor in their videos as a means to “[...] emphasize their superiority” (ibid, p.76 [my translation]), and concludes that the beehive metaphor is the female equivalent to such a picture. Buanes similarly argues that metaphors for female empowerment in music videos often employ the symbols usually related to male strength, which can very well apply to the portrayal of the three protagonists in “Fearless”. In Buanes’ case study, Missy Elliott embraces the phallus metaphor by emphasizing her control over the mixer. “[She] has access to the equipment, and is not afraid to use it. She flaunts her superiority in most of the scenes as artist, producer, woman and sexual partner. She also surrounds herself with feminine girls” (ibid, p.79 [my translation]). In “Fearless”, the same kind of attitudes can be traced to the protagonist’s involvement with signs conventionally regarded as *homo social*, such as the adaptation of the suit and tie attire, cigar-smoking and sitting at the high end of the table in the board room. In popular culture expressions, this appropriation of historically male social symbols relates to the characteristics of the ‘butch’ stereotype. According to Halberstam, in cinema, the butch character represents social upheaval and is a marker of sexual disorder (Halberstam, 2006, p.186). “She may carry a gun,

smoke a cigar, wear leather, ride a motorbike; she may swagger, strut, boast, flirt with younger and more obviously feminine women [...] she expresses a variety of masculinities” (ibid). Even though the audiovisual plot of “Fearless” is of a low narrative quality, the setting, place and characters of the video are easy to make out. The three protagonists of the video instantly assume butch features, conveyed as headmistresses of an effective enterprise, flaunting power, superiority and fearlessness in the *homo social* realm of corporate labour. Accompanied by the same flaunting of power of the vocals and an insistent musical backdrop of a mechanical and pulsating beat, the video instantly sets an agenda of exhibiting female executive empowerment through historical symbols of male dominance. It must however be stressed that the symbolic drag show implemented in the video does not imply that the protagonists come off as physically male. In fact, the butch appropriation of phallic symbolism stands in great contrast to the physical appearance of the protagonists; undeniably, their femininity is still intact despite their ‘male roles’. All three of them wear high elegant stiletto heels, their hair and make-up perfectly applied, their skin flawless, and they fit into model standards in terms of size and looks. Through a taunting and teasing play with the male workers they also avoid any homosexual connotations that usually relate to the stereotype. As Halberstam underlines, the Hollywood predatory butch is most often paired with a queer subtext. She is most commonly represented as a woman

[...] who has lived alone too long; in others she is the full-blown lesbian who seeks out naive young women for sexual companionship; she might have a nontraditional occupation or be forced because of her job into a homosocial environment. She is [...], in short, the bulldagger (ibid, p.194).

Thus, Halberstam’s suggested category of the ‘barely butch’ personae seems to be a better fit. This character display shades of the ‘predatory butch’ through her job, actions or way of thinking, but she is definitely embodied as feminine (ibid, p.217), and mostly defined through the heterosexual male *gaze*. In light of this, queering in the video avoids the connotations of the stereotype butch lesbian; instead it narrates a setting of female empowerment and a twist on the historical political power balance of gender and the male dominance over the female. Hence, a reading of the video might, as previously mentioned, lead to the conclusion that the video is a bold, yet simple feminist statement, perhaps celebrating the turn towards gender equality. Such a general extraction of plot is also supported by employing three protagonists, rather than one. All three function as visual main characters, but, as all three of them lip-sync to the vocals (performed by a single voice), they create an illusion that they all represent the protagonist(s) presented in both lyrics and music. The three girls are also of different ethnic origin, further suggesting that the song might be read as an anthem for females in general, rather than portraying a particular female character. As the causal information we are given in the plot only provides parts of a narrative, this opens for a general reading of the video.

But, is the obvious display of female empowerment the only thing we can read from this video? And is ‘fearlessness’ really the main theme of the video? I would like to argue that there is a paradox in this video, which lies in the audiovisual signs that tell the story. My aim here is to prove that whilst assumingly conveying a story of ‘girl power’ and a celebration of female superiority in society, “Fearless” also informs us that such a celebration would be prematurely conceived in the real world, or, outside the beehive in which the video takes place. From this it seems that in relation to music and lyrics the visual story of the video does not emphasize ‘fearlessness’ as much as it emphasizes its striking counterpart: *fear*. Thus, my analytical deduction is that if the video has anything actual to celebrate, the metaphors of the music video would all be lost on us.

In the following sections, I will argue this point by looking closer at what narratives are provided in the combination of sound and image, and discuss the combined symbolic offering in relation to Freudian notions on gender, power and the oedipal complex. I will start with a closer look at the lyrics of the song.

That’s the way I want it! – a lyrical play on dominance and sadomasochism

Transcription of Lyrics:

Verse 1

a)

You say you will never fear what I might
Do to you, do to you
I know
What I am able to do
Beware, I’ll tear you up
I’ll do it slow – That’s the way I want it!

b)

I’ve waited long now for this moment today
You, you’re gonna like it anyway
Don’t be afraid, I’ve done it before you know
It won’t show, it won’t show

Chorus

I’m gonna place you under my skin tonight
No games, no shame, just playing the day
Let’s all go out and play tonight
No one will ever give you away

Verse 2

a)

You say you will never dream what I might

Do to you, do to you

I know

What I am able to do

Beware, I’ll strike you up

I’ll do it slow – That’s the way I want it!

b)

I’ve waited long now for this moment today
You, you’re gonna take it anyway.. hello?
Don’t be afraid, I’ve done it before you know
It won’t show, it won’t show

Chorus 2

Bridge

Chorus 3

Chorus 4

I’m gonna place (*you under my skin tonight*)
No games (*no shame, just playing the day*)
Let’s all (*go out and play*) tonight
No one will ever give you away

The Lyrics of “Fearless” have a declamatory sense about them as if they were a conversation. Of course, this not how a conversation would take place in real life, as the words are clearly directed

towards an anonymous person. Looking at the words and sentences, there is neither anything about them that directly signifies any reference to the issue of gender inequality nor is there a reference to women making their way up the labour market. On another note, they do paint a picture of power and struggle. In the verses, the protagonist poses a warning, admonishing not to take her for granted. If seeing it as a narrative, one might believe that the anonymous second person in the conversation has clearly indicated that he/she does not fear the protagonist. The protagonist then signals a fairly brutal outcome of such a misinterpretation of her persona, noting that she slowly will tear him or her up, and that she will enjoy it. This threat could read as a statement of violence and hatred, but is blurred by the play on sadomasochistic references. First of all, the protagonist proclaims to take pleasure in inflicting pain. Secondly, she continues by adding that “you’re gonna like it”, which holds a certain innuendo, being further emphasized by the addition of the word “anyway” that underlines the fetishism of power in a sadomasochistic relation: the submissive person is being forced into pleasure, whether he/she wants it or not. A masochist’s pleasure lies in self-defeat, finding pleasure in the act of being dominated above anything else.⁶² Closely related to this notion is the concept of fear. By not debating whether the words were intended to describe actual acts of sadomasochism, my point here is that the words of the song cleverly reveal symbols of sadomasochism to thematize and conceptualize a dialogue of power, dominance and submissiveness - a dialogue that works well with the visual narrative of the corporate beehive.

With Vernallis’ discussion of the non-narrative nature of the music video (which I presented in the introduction, and continue to do many times throughout this thesis) in mind, the lyrics alone do not convey a true narrative. It is merely in relation to the music and the visual aspect of the video that it gains a fuller narrative body. On its own, it is but a poem that concerns the dynamics in the struggle for power, loaded with sexual innuendos. In juxtaposition with the vocal performance and the visual storyline, any interpretation that reads solely as a cheeky solemnization of sadomasochistic pleasures would at least be partly deceiving. I will now move on to see how the musical course of the song contextualizes and creates a setting for the words.

Musical madness and darkness

As its name insists, electronica is a genre that builds on synthetically produced sounds. Quite often, the name is interrelated to the adjective *industrial*, hinting towards a mechanical sound ideal. In genre definitions, the industrial aspects of electronica are hard to pinpoint and are most often paired with other more nuanced categories. For instance, industrial metal often consists of looped guitar

⁶² For further reading, see Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik (2008), who attempted to de-exoticize the spectacle of sadomasochism in popular music, and theorized its symbolism in relation to cultural values. Most importantly, he directs attention to the fact that while symbolically bearing many cultural associations, “[...] [Sadomasochism] as artefact and popular representation is always already linked to the function of generating erotic pleasure” (Ålvik, 2008, p.18).

samples upon a base of live drums. The vocals of this genre range from ambience to chanting, shouting and/or growling. EBM/industrial has a certain flare of dance to it, with less emphasis on guitar and more emphasis on synthetic samples and beats. Techno industrial on the other hand is a more clean-sounding genre with no guitars, and ambient industrial has sweet rolling beats often ornamented with eerie samples reminiscent of the Bristol scene trip-hip sound. In the case of “Fearless”, neither of these categories provide a sufficient description of the music as it draws elements from all of them. The song has a quick pulse to it with a dark and threatening character, and emphasizes both instrumental elements of electric guitars and synthesized elements of highly distorted bass lines and drum machine loops. The vocal line in the song moves contrastingly between a brazen and audacious spoken song in the verses, and powerful yet lyrical melodic contours in the choruses. The featured vocalist Agnete Kjølsrud is well known for her theatrical style and edge, and was the main vocalist of the much renowned Norwegian psychobilly band Animal Alpha. Psychobilly is a fusion genre that incorporates elements of punk rock, rockabilly with infusions from the variety of metal subgenres. A common trait for the subculture is to model its fashion after b-grade horror films and ‘hot rod’ culture, which also is easily traceable in lyrics and music that commonly deal with horror, science fiction, macabre sexual deviations and social taboos. Despite the sombre key themes of the genre, they are presented with a twist of irony and humour, making the music genre’s style of narration equivalent to that of the cult horror movie.⁶³ Kjølsrud, perhaps the most known female in the Norwegian psychobilly scene, has in Animal Alpha relied much on the same b-grade horror aesthetics in both vocals and stage persona (see figure 10 below), and even though absent in the visual course of “Fearless”, her at times grotesque vocal style suits the eerie posing threat of the musical backdrop. Nevertheless, compared with the music in the alternative musical genres described above, “Fearless” is melodically more available to a mainstream audience as it draws on many influences of contemporary pop music.⁶⁴

63 For further readings on the iconography of the genre and subculture, see doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology Kim Kattari’s psychobilly dedicated blog entitled “The Psychobilly Writer” ([URL] < <http://www.psychobillywriter.com/> > [01.02.10]).

64 This is also the case with bands such as Goldfrapp, Crème Fraîché, Leftfield, VNV Nation and the later works of Apoptygma Berzerk, and, some writers and critics have suggested the category “Futurepop” to describe the trend of fusing industrial music with more mainstream ideals.

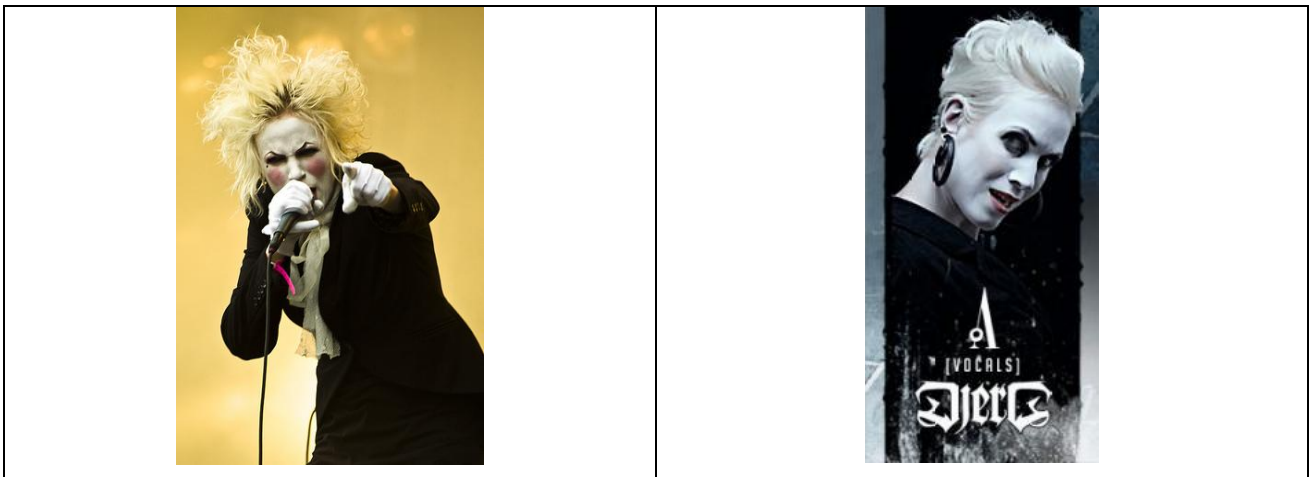


Figure 10: Left: Kjølsrud in her usual stage costume while performing with Animal Alpha, portrayed as an evil clown, Right: Kjølsrud's vampire inspired style in her current band, Djerv.

My aim here is not to go into a larger debate on genres in general or to decide on a particular any subgenre for “Fearless”, but it is important to note that the song is a fusion of both pop and industrial music, and has a dark and spiteful quality to its sound despite the catchy melody and the rich chords in the chorus all accompanied by a danceable drum’n’bass beat – a contrast that I in the following pages will argue is of high importance in reading the power associations in the video. Before doing so, there is a need to look further into the musical setting of the song which I have summed up the in the following table:

Form →	Intro ↓	Verse 1 a ↓	Verse 1b ↓	Chorus 1 ↓	Verse 2a ↓
Sound Setting →	Lyrical	Mechanic	Mechanic	Lyrical	Mechanical
Instrumental style →	Melodic synths building up towards an exciting anticipation	Industrial high-frequency bass line / Rapid drums ‘n bass rhythms	+ addition of electric bass. Creates a fuller sound	Warm electric guitars / Melodic synth	Industrial high-frequency bass line / Rapid drums ‘n bass rhythms
Vocal Style →	-	Speech-song	Speech-song	Lyrical	Speech-song

Form →	Verse 2b ↓	Chorus2 ↓	Bridge ↓	Chorus 3 ↓	Chorus 4 ↓
Sound Setting →	Mechanical	Lyrical	Lyrical Mechanical	Lyrical	Lyrical
Instrumental style →	Industrial high-frequency bass line / Rapid drums ‘n bass rhythms	Warm electric guitars / Melodic synth	Instable harmonics / merge of vibrant lyrical sound and mechanical outbursts	Warm electric guitars / Melodic synth	Warm electric guitars / Melodic synth
Vocal Style →	Speech-song	Lyrical	(echo)	Lyrical	Lyrical / Echo

The song shifts between two contrasting sound settings: the first, which I have labeled *mechanical*, occurs over the verses, and presents a minimalistic yet vivacious backdrop for the vocals. In Verse 1a, the only instruments accompanying the vocals are percussion and a highly synthesized bass line with a high treble frequency, creating a robotic, almost threatening sound. In verse 1b, a regular electric bass joins in, changing the atmosphere from strict machinery to a blend of manually performed instruments and pre-programmed elements. It maintains a sense of drive through high emphasis on the semi-quavers throughout the verse. The timbre of the ‘mechanic’ sound setting creates a dark, yet electric atmosphere, with a harmonic sense of instability. This instability is harmonically underlined by the minor second of the bass line, adding further to the dark hue of the song. On top of this, Kjølrsrud very dramatically performs an acrobatic speech-song. Here, she creates a large arch of her vocal register that moves from the very bottom of the range to high register slides. The timbre of the voice has a lot of air to it, along with rapid and sudden vibratos, and a confronting and direct address. Juxtaposed to the musical backdrop, the odd vocals with its untamed sound and unexpected figures help to create a tense atmosphere of instability, possibly even one verging on insanity.

In stark contrast we find what I propose is to be a *lyrical* setting. Not to be mistaken for a sweet relief, *lyrical* points to the release into a setting of rich and vibrant chords in the musical backdrop and the vocal shift from speech-song to a ferocious melodic statement. It must however be noted that while reaching a release in the choruses, and with the addition of manually performed instruments, the song still maintains a grave and serious tone. What both of these settings have in common is *force*. Drive, direction and directness are maintained throughout. Even though the sections contrast in instrumentation, timbre and vocal style, there is never a real point of rest. Looking back at the lyrics and the visuals, then, the music of the song also divulges an indefatigable force, and similarly exhibits an unstoppable power. Combined, the three expressions depict powerful and fearless women. But the crucial note here is that their power is presented through symbolics of madness, darkness and monstrosity (as discussed in my reading of “Video Phone” in chapter 2). It is at this point crucial to remind ourselves that in reading music videos, gravitation of either music, lyrics or music as the main signifier is potentially misleading. As Vernallis argued in her theorization of music video narratives, we need to “[...] take these audiovisual relations a step farther to leave more room for the viewer’s experience. When the mind forges a metaphor, a third term may arise. The difference between the two terms that are brought into relation creates a space where a surplus value comes into play” (Vernallis, 2004, p.186). The female protagonists of the video appear as strong, beautiful and successful self-made women, but, and I stress, this understanding is solely based on symbolic material that relates directly to monstrosity. The video does not as we first assume revolve around equality; rather it is a depiction of imbalance and

dominance. There is little evidence in the video that the women have achieved their top positions by other means than those achieved by inducing fear. Looking back at the lyrics, the obvious sexual innuendos of sadomasochism thus add to the concept of such an imbalance. The words, although predicting a sexual encounter that might be grounded in mutual respect⁶⁵, more so thematize how fear is embedded in power hierarchies than to address sexual pleasure. Together, they put on a terrifying show. In the following two sections, I will look further into how the power motif is narrated through symbols of horror.

Beauty (?) and the geek



Figure 11. Snapshots from the music video “Fearless”.

Compared with the way monstrosity was realized in the previously analyzed music video by Sia, it might seem odd to argue that the sexy, beautiful and flawless female triad in the visuals in any way can be viewed as monstrous. But, as Barbara Creed notes about the way female monsters in popular culture are portrayed, “as with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality” (Creed, 1993, p.3). Creed thus emphasizes throughout her study the importance of gender in the construction of female monstrosity by naming her the *monstrous-feminine*. In “Fearless”, we see the three protagonists on several occasions strike tremendous fear in their male subordinates. In the beginning of the video, the three women walk in to the reception of the office. At the counter sits a frail young man with glasses and a bow tie. As the women approach him, we see him swallow repeatedly and nervously. This happens during the verse 1a, in which the lyrical protagonist threatens to “tear you up”. Reaching the line “that’s the way I want it”, the black-

⁶⁵ As is has been emphasized both in research and interviews, despite the obvious power hierarchies of sadomasochistic sex, couples that practice the fetish most often live in a relationship of mutual respect and compromise. Often the submissive part will use a ‘safeword’ during the sexual act should he or she feel their boundaries are overstepped. In this sense, the fetish of sadomasochism can be regarded as role play in which power is the fetishized concept without having anything to do with the power-balance of the relationship outside of the bedroom (for further reading, see Ålvik, 2008).

haired woman reaches towards him to straighten his bow tie (see figure 11, pictures 1 and 2, above). This action appears patronizing and degrading; however it also makes an intertextual reference to the stereotypical pairing of the nerd and the beautiful cheerleader that has been depicted in pop culture on numerous occasions.⁶⁶ In such films and TV-shows, the nerds express lust and desire for the women, however – like a modern version of the siren – it is the cheerleader’s beauty, her body and her sexual confidence that simultaneously strike fear and cause nervousness. The cheerleader is also often depicted as shallow, gloating and sometimes even vile. Such a similarity can be traced back to the opening scene of “Fearless”; however, here the dark hue of the music, the posing threat of insanity of the vocal course and the threat of violence in the lyrics very much highlights a more sinister character than the stereotypical cheerleader. In the next scene (verse 1b), a similar situation occurs. Here, the women enter a room that almost looks like an assembly line of men typing trance-like on their computers. Leaning in towards a pale blonde young man, the black-haired woman and the blonde woman whisper sensually into his ears, lip-syncing to the lines “don’t be afraid, I’ve done it before, you know”. He appears hypnotized until the blonde girl touches his neck while walking away, causing him to gasp for air and twitch nervously (see figure 11, pictures 3 and 4, above). This juxtaposition of verbal threat and sensual touch adds even further to the connection between fear, excitement and sexuality whilst still maintaining the female protagonists dominant in the setting. Following this scene is the first chorus, in which the girls walk past the ‘assembly’ line, looking smug and are clearly satiated. Simultaneously, the lyrics declaim the main character’s plans for taking full control of her man through sexual actions. With the knowledge that the visual protagonists hold their male subordinates under a spell, it is as if the lyrical protagonist by threatening to ‘place’ the males under her skin also implies symbolically that she threatens to dismantle their power. Furthermore, there are two important key scenes in which the power imbalance is clearly articulated. Here, the reversed patriarchal symbols gain strong emphasis. The first of these scenes takes place in a boardroom (verse 2a, chorus 3, and the end of chorus 4). Sitting at the long end of a table, the black-haired woman is having whiskey served by a male servant. In front of her lies a pile of documents and it appears as if the three women are discussing strategies for their firm. In the back of the room, there is a line-up of male secretaries, frantically taking notes (see figure 11, picture 6, above). It is then interesting that the lyrics of verse 2 yet again violently describe the violent action of slowly “striking a man up”. The way I see it, this scene might connote that it is these acts of sexual violence that have empowered the women, or, putting it the other way

⁶⁶ Movies such as “American Pie”, “Revenge of the Nerds”, “Bring it On”, “There’s Something About Mary” and TV-shows such as “The Big Bang Theory”, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”, “Beauty and the Geek” among others all depict and comment on the dynamics of ‘geeks’ and ‘hot girls’. I am of course also aware that there are many examples where the gender roles are turned (nerd girl – jock) such as in “Grease” or “Ugly Betty”. The same motif can also be found in many music videos where female artists signify empowerment by taunting ‘geeky’ men, such as in Britney Spears’ “Womanizer” or Sugababes’ “Push the button” among others.

around, the sexual violence might connote dominance and serve as symbolic material for a description of dominance and submissiveness. The second scene takes place in a hallway where the three women lean back on large marble pillars smoking cigars. As with the previous scene, here too we see a line-up of male servants in the background waiting to be commanded (see figure 11, picture 5 above). The phallic associations of the cigars and the massive pillars are hard to overlook, and as with many of the other scenes in the video, props and costumes that usually are regarded as features of power and belonging to the masculine realm are highlighted. As Laplanche and Pontalis have noted, women can be constructed as phallic in cultural expressions in two ways: the woman either has a phallus or phallic attribute, or she has retained the male's phallus inside herself (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1985, p.311). The women in the video are thus portrayed phallic in both of the ways described above: they carry and utilize phallic and masculine props such as the cigar, the tie and the marble pillars, while in the lyrics threatening to place the men's phalluses under their skin. Thus, both the cigar scene and the board room scene link back to the recurring audiovisual motif of empowerment through sexual domination.

The depiction of the three protagonists is, as we have seen, heavily dependent on symbols of horror, violence and sex. Adding further to this combination is the employment of the guest vocalist Agnete Kjølsrud. As previously mentioned, Kjølsrud is widely known for her psychobilly aesthetics that draw heavily on references from horror. If familiar with Kjølsrud's very dark and dramatic audiovisual representation, this could intertextually guide us towards a reading in which horror is highly emphasized even though Kjølsrud's vocals are not performed as growling or grotesque on "Fearless" as it is with Animal Alpha's material, or the fact that she is visually absent in the video. The members of Bermuda Triangle commented on the feature of Kjølsrud in an interview by revealing: "[...] we have stories to tell, and thus we have made certain efforts to tell them. [...] After finishing writing a song, we thought 'who would best sing it?', and we searched for someone with the depth in order to tell that particular story" (Brækhus, 2006 [URL] [My translation]). In telling a story about fear, choosing Kjølsrud, whose vocal style posits strength, drama, impressive register and tonal control, beauty and terror, and, lest we forget, clear references to an entire subculture dedicated to horror – a concept forged upon notions of dominance and deprivation - was indeed a wise choice.

The Monstrous-feminine

As with the mythical sirens, monstrous depictions of women have traditionally revolved around their abilities to lure and destroy men because of their inability to resist giving into their lust. But what is it really about these women that men fear? In film studies, most writers have either succumbed to Freudian theories of male castration anxieties when tackling the question of what

female monsters represent⁶⁷, or, more critically, entirely avoided or denied questions of gender and gender symbolism. The traditional position argues that men fear women because they are castrated, a position emerging from Freudian oedipal theories which argues that such a fear is shaped by an infantile belief that the mother is castrated (Creed, 1993, p.1). In 1922-23, Freud wrote an article on the symbolic value of the Medusa, one of the most hideous monsters of Greek mythology, who had snakes for hair, and a face so grotesque that any man she would lay eyes upon would turn to stone. In “Medusa’s Head”, he writes:

If Medusa’s head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself. We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took flight when the woman showed him her vulva (Freud, 2003 [1922-23], p.85).

In relation to horror in cinema, most writers have regarded the female monster as terrifying because her body symbolizes man’s fear of castration, a prediction of what might be. However, Barbara Creed thoroughly criticizes such a view in her theorization of the *monstrous-feminine*. She notes:

[...] the horror genre does not attempt to soothe castration anxiety. The spectator is confronted with images of woman as symbolically castrated (for example, the mutilated female victims of the slasher film) and as an agent of castration – both are represented (man literally/woman symbolically) as castrated and as agents of castration. However, this factor is not usually recognized in critical writings on horror; it is the male who is almost always described as the monster and the agent of castration, woman as his victim (Creed, 1993, p.151-152).

With references to Susan Lurie, Creed’s study presents an understanding that challenges the Freudian position by arguing that men fear women not because they are castrated, but because they are *not*⁶⁸. In Lurie’s and Creed’s view, the woman “[...] *is not* mutilated like a man might be *if he were* castrated; woman is physically whole, intact and in possession of all her sexual powers” (ibid, p.6). The Freudian position will thus in every way constitute woman as victim *by nature*. By providing a range of examples of the many faces of the *monstrous-feminine* in cinema, Creed argued that man’s fear of castration led him to construct a “[...] monstrous phantasy [sic] – that of woman as castrator”⁶⁹ (ibid, p.7). Creed links the depictions of female monster up to a recurring motif in mythological and historical depictions of fearful female character: the toothed vagina that castrates the male, also known as the *vagina dentata*⁷⁰. In “Fearless”, the chorus, in which Kjølsrud dramatically belts “I’m gonna place you under my skin tonight”, juxtaposed unto the many audiovisual images of potential horrifying actions very much revolves around this motif. In her analyses, Creed shows how stereotyped female horror characters such as ‘the archaic’ mother, ‘the possessed monster’, ‘the vampire’, ‘the witch’, ‘the femme fatale’ and ‘the castrating mother’ all are

67 See for instance Hogan (1986), Lenne (1979) and Neale (1980).

68 See Lurie (1981-1982).

69 Creed uses the term *phantasy* rather than *fantasy* throughout as a means to emphasize *phantasy* in the Freudian sense, in which the subject is represented as protagonist engaged in the activity of wish fulfillment. See Creed (1993, p.6).

70 See also Campbell (1976, p.73).

constructed as monstrous because they challenge conventional structures of male-female hierarchies, symbolized through empowering efforts that emasculate the victim either through a graphic castration, or a metaphorical castration. And this is exactly what is going in the “Fearless” video. The three protagonists - the queen bees of the corporative beehive - are in many ways symbolically ‘castrating’ their subordinates by actions that resemble both the *femme fatale* and the *castrating mother* stereotype. Firstly, the women, albeit stunningly gorgeous, are portrayed far more phallic than the men of the video, by flaunting props such as cigars, broad ties, and large pillars, and the more metaphorical phallic (or empowering) metaphors of being board members, drinking whiskey, having subordinates and so on. In contrast, the men of the video are portrayed as soft and frail, with glasses (which connote vulnerability and physical weakness/imperfection), bow ties instead of the broad ties the women are wearing, and without jackets that through uniform also emphasize the male’s subordinate position as well as making an intertextual reference to the uniform of the typical servant or waiter. Secondly, the scene in which the male receptionist is having his bow tie corrected by the black-haired woman shows an overbearing attitude – a critique and disapproval of a formal accessory that in an anthropological perspective signalizes poise, power and elegance. Thirdly, as mentioned before, the scene in which the blonde male at the computer gasps for air as the blonde woman touches his neck (see figure 11, picture 3, above), in relation to a cut of the same boy looking very frightened during the bridge (see figure 11, picture 4, above), is reminiscent of the myth of the siren, and the *vagina dentata*: allured by her beauty, and betrayed by his own lust, the male character finds himself in a state of limbo. Whether he will be castrated or not is totally up to the female.

Frozen gender relics

As I suggested earlier in this analysis, “Fearless” is a video that could first appear as a celebration of female empowerment and fearlessness, for it visually tells a story of women in charge. However, with Vernallis’ warning that gravitation of either music, lyrics or visuals as the main signifier is potentially misleading in mind (Vernallis, 2004, p.186), as music, lyrics and image all embody signs of darkness, dominance and monstrosity, the combined address of these does not emphasize fearlessness as much as it emphasizes its counterpart: fear. Thus, a reading that credits the video for being a celebration of female empowerment becomes problematic in that neither of its internal expressions offer a precise or detailed causal narrative. Rather, one must look upon the visual story of the *femmes fatales* as a way to metaphorically visualize *fear-as-concept* instead of being the main narrative signifier – and it is here we find the most interesting offerings of the video: it actually informs us about larger societal structures and ideologies. The video (among other similar cases in popular culture) is a strong indication of that while gender inequality in the labour market is a political cause that has become an issue that politicians legally and ideologically have tried to

battle, and the fact that we have seen a lot of changes in such an imbalance over the last fifty years, the patriarchal phallic associations of power that denies female status and admittance are still generally accepted and used. But how can we read such information from this video?

Close to Creed's understanding of the monstrous-female, Patrick Bade (1979) notes that the symbolic mythology of female evil is deeply embedded in western culture and religion. He particularly emphasizes characters such as Pandora of Greek mythology, Lilith of Judaism and Eve of Christianity, stressing how all of them are historical and religious representations of a threat to a state of utopia and stability (Bade, 1979, p.7). The way female leaders have been stigmatized and stereotyped relates to such a representation. When women challenge the patriarchal rules of labour and power, they are symbolically conceived as a threat to conventional boundaries. Because power historically has been and still is symbolized mostly in phallic associations, such fearless women have thus been symbolized in terms of their body and sexuality; embracing power means appropriating the phallus.⁷¹ Thus, a general deception of the female leader (or, empowered females) lies in how society constructs her either as either a *femme fatale*, in which it is mainly her body that empowers her, or as a *hag* that has lost all of her femininity – both defined through qualities of the body and representing societal abjects. As Walser puts it, “[...] women are encouraged by a variety of cultural means to think of appearance as their natural route to empowerment. Men, on the other hand, are reassured by such representations that patriarchal control is justified and necessary” (Walser, 1993, p.119). The female leader character is hardly ever credited for her actual abilities to perform her job or to achieve her hierarchical position. All of these traits are intact in the “Fearless” video: the female protagonists are audiovisually depicted as monstrous through predictions of violence, insanity and instability. They gain their power by embracing phallic symbolism, either by application of phallic associated props, or by maintaining the male phallus inside them, disempowering the men by the impending threat of the *vagina dentata*. I am of course not arguing that the music video takes the shape of an actual horror movie; neither can it be said that the women actually perform or threaten to perform any direct castration. However, because they are symbolically signifying qualities of the *femme fatale*, such directness is not required in order to get the point across. Robert Walser further notes, characterization of the ‘evil female seductress’ are often found in heavy metal videos: ”Women are presented as essentially mysterious and dangerous; they harm simply by being, for their attractiveness threatens to disrupt both male self-control and

71 In light of this, it is interesting to see that in the survey presented at the beginning of this chapter, a majority of the female participants felt that men judge women primary on looks, secondly on weight, thirdly on their work ethic and as a shocking fourth, on their accomplishments. In the same survey, another key finding was that both men and women (women slightly more) expressed a preference for male bosses. And perhaps most interesting, the survey also showed that while the female participants believed they would have to work harder and be smarter – or both – in order to gain the respect as men, the male participants disagreed. All of these findings show that typical misogynist and stereotypical attitudes towards the female role of labour are still intact, but they just as much apply to women as to men (MSNBC/ELLE, 2007 [URL]).

the collective strength of male bonding” (Walser, 1993, p.118). Here Walser, similar to Bade, emphasizes how empowered women challenge the patriarchal order, and thus become symbolized as evil or monstrous of their potential ability to disrupt conventional male relationships and structures.

“Fearless” uses the metaphor of female leaders in order to tell a story about *fear* – a metaphor that is highly dependent on the ruling misogynist way gender has come to symbolize aspects of power. Thus, even though we are steadily heading towards a more balanced labour market in the western world, the issue of inequality exists as long as power is conceptualized in patriarchal hierarchies in our symbolic relics, language and metaphors. Such frozen relics and symbols can be found almost anywhere in society: from religious iconography and theological hierarchies, to deck of cards, to weak cadences, monarchies, or even genitalia.

If we ever were to experience true societal gender equality, all the symbolic juxtapositions that tell a story of fear in “Fearless” would no longer make any sense.

The multiperspectival gaze

At this point, it is important to underline that my intention in this analysis is not to pose a critique of the band Bermuda Triangle and their message in their video. The application of gendered metaphors in order to narrate and colour their song about fear and power struggles is in fact a highly effective way in of getting their point across, and I personally enjoy this music video because of its well polished address. On the contrary, my aim here has been to shed light on how gender is highly embedded in symbolic languages, and that gender as symbol is problematic as it ambiguously can deceive and redirect its signified outcome. Especially in the music video, where music, lyrics, and image stand interrelated in juxtaposition, gender representations can be received in a variety of ways. Here it is important to return to the question of the *gaze*.

As mentioned in chapter 1, in Mulvey’s original definition of the *gaze*, pleasure in looking is split between the active male and the passive female through a display that code the female as erotic spectacle (Mulvey, 1989 [1975], p.19). However, her definition stems from a time where males rarely were objectified in popular culture. As Hawkins notes, the fluster of film, advertising, music, pornography, and so on, in the 1980’s and 1990’s started to objectify men in the same way as women have been (Hawkins, 2002, p.17). In feminist and queer studies of spectatorship, there have been many critical responses to Mulvey’s initial definition, and she even re-cast the terms of her patriarchal argument.⁷² Thus, to determine the *gaze* as exclusively male has proven problematic in studies of more recent times. “Fearless”, similar to the videos I discussed in chapter 2, is a good example of the need to treat the concept of the *gaze* in a flexible manner. As a way of

72 See Mulvey (1981, p.12-15).

understanding popular culture representations, the value of the *gaze* as a theoretical apparatus lies first and foremost in its ability to unveil cross-cultural responses to the representations of any sex or sexual identity (ibid, p.17). In this case study, even though it is the female sex that is represented, what sex or identity is represented is in many ways decided by the ears and eyes of the beholder.

At first glance, “Fearless” offers such a display in the visual depiction of the three indisputably beautiful, and sexually suggestive female protagonists. However, if the *gaze* is determined male, it demands a full pacification of the female spectacle and is dependent on how such a display is articulated only through conventional heteronormative fantasy. As argued in this analysis, what visually appears as exhibitionistic display of the female character(s) becomes an unstable association in relation to the image’s symbiosis with a set of musical and semantic referential implications. The musical and lyrical contextualization of the image can render readings of which the heteronormative fantasy that constitute the *gaze* as male can become far less convincing: in order to communicate fear in “Fearless”, the representation of femininity has been coded in terms of the dominance of masculinity – it is this very unconventional blurred gender, arising from the semiotic dialogue of dominance and pacification that articulates the video’s narrative concept.

As a consequence of the video’s narrative dependency on queer subtexts, the conventional structures of the spectators’ identification break down. Thus, the *gaze* within the video offers a number of ways to respond to it: it is multiperspectival.⁷³

The conventions of the masculine and feminine indisputably hold many associations that have caused a plethora of visual, literal and audible signs that we consciously and unconsciously approach, utilize and experience in our everyday life. More importantly, it is ways we often apply gender to express ideas and concepts that do not necessarily seem to have anything to do with gender on first encounter. Thus, addressing the question of why looking into gender in musical expressions is important, one of my main arguments is that cultural expressions are the result of cultural structures. Therefore, by studying such expressions, it is possible to backtrack to the sociocultural and political structures that have shaped them. The music video is therefore a highly relevant medium in the study of gender and its cultural associations, and this is because of its multimediated content and its richness in terms of music, words and image. Given its fantastic, dramatic, deceptive and supernatural surfaces, the video in my reading comes over as an uncannily accurate mirror for providing insight into time, space and social function.

⁷³ As mentioned in chapter 1, most contemporary writers argue in favour of the same need for a redefinition of the *gaze*. Among these, Hawkins, in a study of the highly problematic video “Windowlicker” by Aphex Twin provides a very convincing critique of Mulvey’s original term. The video in his study parodies rap and hip-hop videos by applying a grinning male face upon hypersexualized female bodies, juxtaposing both beauty and revolt, male and female. Hawkins notes: “In a strange reversal, [...] masculinity is insulated within a narrative that ridicules heteroerotic normativity” (Hawkins, 2007, p.44).

Ending on the note of how music videos and other cultural expressions can produce narratives and audiovisual images that offer many angles of perception and interpretation, and, returning to my conclusive argument in chapter 1 which shows how signs and representations are arbitrary and redefined through social changes and shifts in time, I will in the following and final case study elaborate further on the complexity of representations in pop videos that to a higher degree portray post-modern identities.

Chapter 4: New male anxieties? Oh, so 'sick'...

Abercrombie & Fitch, what hath thou wrought? The pretty boys on the frat-house clothier's shopping bags taught a generation of heterosexual men to shave their chests. Then *Maxim*, the aggressively hetero men's magazine, extended its brand with . . . hair colouring (Haber, 2003 [URL]).

In my previous analyses, I have dealt with artists and videos that have provided commentaries on gender and gender roles by displaying unconventional representations of gender characteristics. All of them have challenged (albeit to varying degrees of success) what we stereotypically have regarded as being male or female qualities. In the following and final analysis, I would like to return to the idea of social change, investigating perhaps the most prominent male identity zeitgeist of the early 21st century: the emergence of the metrosexual male character, and how he merged into a conventional category of male identification, especially for the younger generation.

This new category of male identification raised controversy as it demanded and forged a set of behaviour that previously had been – and still is by many – looked upon as including effeminate qualities while still defining itself within a hetero-normative definition. Of course, this peculiar and dandified character has been a present character throughout history (Hawkins, 2009). However, in western culture, the dandy has mostly filled the role of a 'joker' – providing a set of unexpected behaviour and looks, drastically differing from the conventional representation of the masculine: “Passed down from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, trends in dandyism are inextricably connected to the identification of eccentricity and peculiarity” (Hawkins, 2009, p.3). In light of this, my goal in this analysis is to look into the controversy and confusion that appeared at the start of the dismantling of conventional ideals of masculinity at the entrance into the new century. Another important point in my discussion is that queer aspects of representations are not fully dependent on matters of sexuality, especially in expressions of popular culture, where queering, as Hawkins has argued, has turned into “[...] a token term for those who did not want to conform to normative representations, to the point that one might be forgiven for believing that prejudices had vanished from the pop scene, and that all was ‘fine and dandy’” (ibid, p.95).

The music video I have selected that seems relevant to all of the issues mentioned above is “Sick” by Sneaker Pimps. The video not only thematically addresses the anxieties that occur in the definition of the self, but it also projects sexuality and gender as indeterminable in a period where star representations are aesthetically constructed as postmodern fluid identities. In the video, this narrative is told by the highly gender ambiguous vocalist Chris Corner in a strange audiovisual juxtaposition of fashion, seduction, and severe panic attacks. Before I go on to discussing the music video, it seems necessary to introduce Corner and the Sneaker Pimps and their image prior to the

release of “Sick” as, interestingly enough, Corner’s appropriation of effeminacy and queer aesthetics occurred alongside the introduction of the metrosexual man.

Becoming Chris

Sneaker Pimps made their way into the music world in 1996 with their album “Becoming X”, a fine blend of trip-hop, electronica and polished punk. In that period, the band consisted of musicians and producers Liam Howe and Chris Corner, and vocalist Kelli Dayton.⁷⁴ As with many bands, the lead vocalist Dayton became the band’s significant visual character in their videos and cover art. In comparison to the other members of the band, Dayton had a very distinct ‘candy punk’ style, appearing in their first video “Tesko Suicide” with bright pink hair, undercuts, glued-on fangs, heavy mascara, a black leather jacket and a candy necklace. Howe and Corner, on the other hand, kept a distance to the camera and were in most of the band’s visual promotional material positioned to the back of Dayton, often in the shadows or out of focus.⁷⁵ Noting on the foregrounding of lead vocalists in music videos, Vernallis writes:

[...] whereas the lead performers in the video are likely to be granted emotional range and shading, the nonperforming accompanying figures are sketchier. Much about them remains unsaid, by contrast with the stars, who tell us more about themselves than we ever wanted to know. [...] Some of the reasons for the laconic supporting characters are obvious, and others are surprisingly subtle: in the former case, supporting roles have no lyrics and therefore no dialogue. The resources with which these people can assert themselves are much more meagre than those of the star, mirroring the fact that we, as a society, are predisposed towards speakers (and all able-bodied individuals) and away from the mute, passive, or silent. Understandably record companies want to tie the band to the song, and since the lead singer most often sings the hook line, we can see why the star is placed under our immediate gaze (Vernallis, 2004, p.64).

In relation to this, Howe’s and Corner’s roles in the band as musicians and producers could be the reason for their subordinate and almost anonymous depictions in the band’s first videos and promotional material in comparison with the visual emphasis on the vocalist. Corner’s original image resembled the stereotypical ‘nerd’: shy, dainty, wearing ‘the wrong clothes’, occupied with the electronics of the music (see figure 12, left picture below). However, and very interestingly in relation to Vernallis’ argument above, in the video “Spin Spin Sugar”, he introduced a far more colourful and almost rebellious character. Wearing a bright and boldly coloured outfit, goggles, nail-polish and sporting an asymmetrical haircut, Corner’s new character was very much alive and present in the new video. Stealing the limelight from Dayton, he engaged in actions and moves that heavily suggested sexual innuendos within the setting of a sleazy motel bathroom. A recurring shot in the video depicts Corner throwing a cup of milkshake towards a smudged mirror, then licking the liquid off the surface (see figure 12, middle picture below). The shot captures both Corner and his reflection, creating an ambiguous image that could be read as connoting homoeroticism in a depiction of a same-sex kiss, but also a far more graphical connotation of gay pornography because

⁷⁴ After leaving the band, Kelli now operates and records under the stage name Kelli Ali.

⁷⁵ As an example, the cover for “Becoming X” features Dayton in the middle and front of the frame in clear focus, while Howe and Corner are partly hidden behind her body out of focus, making it hard to distinguish their faces.

of the obvious similarity between the white fluid and semen. It is hard to overlook that the mirror scene could also describe a dark and insatiable lust for oneself: narcissism⁷⁶, a point I will come back to in the discussion of Corner's imagery in "Sick". Interestingly enough, returning to Vernallis' point above, as "Spin Spin Sugar" flips the conventional character hierarchies in music videos by providing most emotional range and shading to a character other than the lead singer, it reflects the internal disputes between Dayton and Corner that eventually led to Dayton being asked to leave the band just before the recording of their second album⁷⁷, only to be replaced by Corner.



Figure 12: Left: Corner, Dayton and Howe as they appeared in their video for "6 underground". Middle: Snapshot from the narcissism scene in "Spin Spin Sugar". Right: Painting of Narcissus gazing towards his reflection by Michelangelo Caravaggio.

It was with the release of the album "Splinter" (1999), and in stepping into the role as lead vocalist, that Corner fully reinvented his image. With two of the band's session musicians joining as regular members⁷⁸, the Sneaker Pimps were now an all-male band. However, the 'new' Corner displayed and maintained many of the feminine qualities previously provided by Dayton.⁷⁹ Through an unmistakable queering of image and voice, the ambiguous signals of masculinity, femininity, straight, gay, androgyny, sexuality and asexuality would make Corner a very hard character to define in terms of gender and sexual identity. Even more interestingly, many of the songs and videos from the band's third album "Bloodsport" (2001) thematized issues of identity crisis and vanity, especially in the video for "Sick".

⁷⁶ The term 'narcissism' derives from the hero Narcissus of Greek mythology, an exceptionally cruel character that disdained anyone who expressed love for him. As a divine punishment, Narcissus fell in love with a reflection in a pool, not realizing it was his own. Unable to leave the beauty of his own reflection, he eventually perished at the water's edge. Thus, the mirror scene in "Spin Spin Sugar" can be understood as a metaphor for narcissism. In a following scene, Corner falls to the floor, experiencing pain or anxiety, that could be understood as a consequence of such a lust – a possible allusion to the perish of Narcissus. Also, see figure 12, right picture above.

⁷⁷ Dayton has elaborated on the internal disputes and quarrelling on her official website. See [URL] < http://www.kelliali.com/index.php/kelliali/biog_entry/sneaker_pimps1/ >.

⁷⁸ Joe Wilson (producer) and David Westlake.

⁷⁹ And, in relation to Vernallis' point on music videos emphasizing the lead vocalist, it should be noted that even though Corner stepped into the limelight, the rest of the band remained visually absent in most of the band's later material. As an example, in all of the band's videos after the departure of Dayton, the only person appearing in the visual diegese is Corner.

I'll play your games – a self-sacrificing protagonist

Transcription of lyrics

Verse 1

I'll play your games with your sex, with electric shocks.
Learn to let myself loose and be the dummy in your snapshots
I'll play your games, learn to get on with your backward fans
Stick my body in the sun and help to get rid of the white tan

Chorus

And maybe then you wouldn't get so sick of me
And maybe then you wouldn't get so sick of me
And maybe then you wouldn't get so sick of me
And maybe then you wouldn't get so sick of me

Verse 2

I'll play your games, mark the names with the blackest spots
If you're building me up to be the target for your cheap shots

I'll play your games, keep a blind eye on the main chance

Strip my body of its skin and try to cancel out the white trash

Chorus

Verse 3

I'll play your games if your aim is for the quick fix
Cos I know what you wanted and i know how you got it

I'll play your games if you play out in the fast lane
Learn to jump into the road and hope to save a little lost face

Chorus x2

Outro

Whatever [whispered]

The lyrics of “Sick” take the shape of a self-reflective dialogue with a clearly identified protagonist and a second character who the protagonist addresses. In the verses, a recurring line is “I’ll play your games”, which is followed up by a number of efforts and actions that seem to describe the nature of such a game. In the very first line, the protagonist reveals a sexual relation to the supporting character. But immediately, we are offered an ambiguous description of this relationship. The juxtaposition of sex and electric shocks could just as well connote a passionate relationship as it could dominance, pain or danger. The next lines provide the same sense of ambiguity as we are never really told whether or not these games are of a positive character. The chorus informs us that playing the second character demands an array of efforts in order to avoid rejection from the supporting character. Putting it shortly, in order to get recognition from the second character, a transformation or a change of mind is required of the protagonist. What is intriguing is that on two separate occasions, the traits of his character that he tries to cancel out seem to revolve around his *whiteness* (“Stick my body in the sun and help to get rid of the white tan / Strip my body of its skin and try to cancel out the white trash”). These sentences connect the apparent flaws of his character both to matters of the physical (his complexion) as well as class or behaviour (by addressing himself as white trash). Not necessarily arguing that these lines concern racial matters, it nevertheless paints a picture of the protagonist trying to redefine his social status, along with his physical appearance, in order to please the second character. But is he really happily willing to apply this effort to redefining himself? Can the words be regarded as a statement by which the character states he will go to any measures to please the object of his affection? The last word of the song, “whatever”, might lead us to think that perhaps the song is more about venting his

frustrations of having to put up with such games and expectations rather than a plea of self-sacrifice; perhaps he is even mocking the criteria posed by the object of his desire. However, it must be noted that the word “whatever” does not gain prominent emphasis compared to other signs within the video. Firstly, in the musical mix, the word is hardly audible. Secondly, the word is not included in the lyrics of the album booklet and is absent in most of the transcriptions posted on websites dedicated to pop lyrics⁸⁰ as well as in the lyrics section of the band’s largest unofficial fan site.⁸¹ It should also be stressed that while having listened occasionally to the song since its release, it was only when writing this chapter that I first became aware of the word. Still, it is an important word to consider as one bearing crucial information, due to the drastic change it brings to the emotional setting of the lyrics. In the following section, I will argue that the visual side of the video reinforces a similar sense of anxiety and frustration that can be read into the lyrics.

Strip my body of its skin – masquerade or annihilation?



Figure 13: Snapshots from the music video “Sick”.

The visual setting for “Sick” takes place within a dark and cluttered flat. On the floor, a number of bottles, ashtrays, shoes and clothes lay scattered around. The air is smoky and dense, creating a sense of claustrophobia. Over the course of the video, we are presented with various fragmented images of Corner within the flat, trying on clothes, looking at himself in the mirror, sleeping, shaving his chest, dancing and having panic attacks (see figure 13, pictures 1-4). At first, this montage of images does not seem to provide any logic or narrative course. As Vernallis writes on the static address of music videos, we obtain no more visual information from them than we might

⁸⁰ Of course, it is impossible to investigate the endless amount of such websites, but looking at a vast selection of the most popular of these (such as [URL] < <http://www.lyricsfreak.com> >, < <http://www.sing365.com> >, < <http://www.songlyrics.com> >, < <http://www.lyrics007.com> >, < <http://www.lyricsonnet.com> >), it caught my attention that neither one of the ones I visited had included the word in their transcription.

⁸¹ See [URL] < <http://www.sneakerpimps.be> >.

derive from a single narrative painting (Vernallis, 2004, p.23). However, as I have pointed out many times throughout this thesis, lack of causal narrativity in either music, lyrics or image does not immediately pin the video down as lacking a story to tell. “In music video”, Vernallis argues further, “[...] what is concealed and what is revealed serve to encourage multiple viewings by engaging the viewer in a process of reconstructing, interpolating, or extrapolating a story behind the scenes that are actually visible” (ibid, p.19-20). Thus, in relation to the lyrics, the assumed non-coherent images might be given narrative purpose.

The video opens with a scene revealing Corner lying passed out and naked on the floor. The bottles, the ashtray and the general clutter signalize that heavy drinking has been going on. Just as the drums and the bass kick in, Corner rises and walks towards an enormous walk-in closet and puts on his trousers. When the first verse is initiated, the visual cuts become more rapid, switching between frontal shots of Corner lip-syncing to the lyrics and grooving to the music (as if posing in front of a mirror), and shots in which he picks items of clothes off the wall, putting them on, and checking his looks in the mirror (see figure 13, pictures 1-2, above). The video alternates between these scenes and short fragmented images of the interior of the apartment, disturbing the sense of time and continuity. Temporality is further blurred at the last line of verse 1, where all of a sudden Corner appears to be naked again, drawing a black line with a permanent marker on his arm, only to cut to a shot in which Corner now wears a completely different outfit than he did at the beginning. These kinds of shifts occur throughout the video and create a feeling of a fluid temporal dimension in which the days seep into each other⁸², and might suggest that dressing up, going out and getting wasted on a variety of alcohol and possibly drugs is what the protagonist’s life mainly consists of (see figure 13, picture 4, above). Corner’s cool attitude does however change by the arrival of the first chorus. Here, while the lyrics state “and maybe then you wouldn’t get so sick of me”, Corner simultaneously collapses, reaching for his temples as if in agony or pain. The associations of mental illness are drawn clear in the image of Corner sitting on the floor, with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth (see figure 13, picture 3, above). The juxtaposition of image and lyrics might thus tell us of a certain frustration and exhaustion of not fulfilling the criteria of the object of desire in the lyrics.

The next verse continues in the same manner as the first, emphasizing the element of dressing up and partying hard. A very important note here is that all the outfits Corner tries on are very contemporary, modern and flamboyant, with exclusive feminine cuts, revealing a lot of skin. The addition of accessories, such as velvet chokers and jewellery, combined with the application of cutting edge make-up, lip-gloss, and an asymmetrical haircut with various shaded highlights also

82 Another recurring theme that blurs the question of time is the reprise of the opening scene at the end of verse 3, in which Corner once again is filmed lying sleeping on the floor, only this time wearing a white outfit.

raise the issue of desire to disguise conventional masculinity. Looking back at the lyrics of the verse, then, a possible reading is that the theme of dressing up works as a metaphor for the change the lyrical protagonist must undergo to achieve attention from the object of his desire. In this sense, his naked body symbolizes a sense of truth, or the essence of his being, but he disguises his body with glamorous textiles and make-up. The scene in which Corner collapses while he sings “and maybe then you wouldn’t get so sick of me” therefore might suggest that the compromises he makes might be the cause for his panic attacks. At the last chorus, this reading is further emphasized in the most intense, and most disturbing, scene of the video.

Once again, Corner is naked, only this time he is wide awake, sitting in front of a basin, possibly even in a tub. With a most intense look in his eyes, he starts to wash off his make-up. In the first 4 bars of the chorus, the musical mix is stripped down to acoustic guitars and vocals. Compared to the rest of the song, the dynamic of Corner’s vocals are also far more introverted, almost whispering the lines as if scared. During these bars, the visual cuts are elongated, and the moves Corner performs are slow. However, by the arrival of the fifth bar, the bass, percussion and synthesized strings kick back in, and Corner’s vocals regain the same intensity, with a heavier vibrato and more melodic ornamentations than displayed in the previous choruses. He almost sounds angry. Similarly, the images reproduce the same dynamic crescendo, emphasizing the reintroduced beat by cutting between the shots very rapidly. Here, Corner brings out a razor, and in a frantic and almost hysterical way starts to shave his chest (see figure 13, picture 5). The sound of the razor drawn across his skin and the splash as he cleans it in the water is diegetically infused into the audible mix, creating the illusion that this scene stands out as one more intimate with the observer. The razor scene ends with Corner sitting at the very same basin, smudging his face with black paint. And finally, the very last scene of the video depicts Corner lying nude on the floor, all covered in black paint and marker looking almost primal: a jungle being. The last sections of the video are indisputably of a much darker and horrifying character than the beginning of the video (see figure 13, picture 6 above).⁸³

In sum, the lyrics and the image in combination tell the tale of a man who desperately seeks the attention of someone (possibly a woman?), and through masquerade tries to live up to this person’s standards. However, as a repercussion of this drastic adaptation, he detaches himself from, perhaps even annihilates, the core of his own identity. And, realizing this, he enters a state of panic and anger. In relation to the question of gender, what is truly interesting about this video is its use of

⁸³ A most illuminating way to describe the horrifying effects of the razor-scene can be found in the commentary field for the video’s YouTube page: “i totally screamed like a bitch at 2:15 cuz I thought he shaved off a fuckin nipple. you gotta be careful chris...damn. Also... I too could see Kelli Dayton singing this... but she doesn’t have to shave her nipples... so the part isn’t right for her I guess [sic]” (phunone [username], 2009 [URL]).

gender ambiguity to express the masquerade-like aspect of the video's narration. In the following section, I will argue that such a masquerade also is expressed through Corner's vocals.

Whispering softly to me - ambiguous voices

Simon Frith has elucidated some very important aspects of how the voice is experienced in popular music, and how it easily can be manipulated to express an array of emotions and qualities:

[...] a voice is easy to change. As a matter of personal identity it is easier to change, indeed, than one's face (or one's body movements). And this is not just a matter of "acting" in the formal sense. People's voices change over time (as they adapt to the sounds of surrounding voices, to accents, and so forth; the shifting quality of people's voices in class terms, as they are upwardly or downwardly socially mobile, has often been noticed in Britain), and, more to the point, people's voices change according to circumstances – at home or in school, in the office or in bed, with friends or strangers (just listen to how people adapt their voice on the telephone, according to who is at the other end) (Frith, 1996, p. 197).

These qualities lie at the base of Frith's point that the voice is flexible in character, and can easily be used in deception (ibid). Building further on Frith's ideas of vocal deception, Hawkins adds:

The listener's position is activated by Frith's concept of putting on the 'vocal costume'. Useful for working out temperament, style and intention, the vocal costume is what we, the listeners, turn to when we respond to the voice as a carrier of meaning. Because singing reproduces the artist's body through the imagination, it is through the voice that we get in touch with the artist first on an intimate level (Hawkins, 2009, p.123-124).

With this idea in mind, it seems pertinent to ask how the voice in "Sick" comes to play in relation to the lyrics and image. As I already have pointed out, both lyrics and image revolve around a masquerade of identity through descriptions of queer settings and actions. The voice, I will argue, is a crucial component in such a narrative, but, in stark contrast to the obvious gender play in the visual course, the queerness of Corner's voice is a sign that is contextualized and emphasized mostly in juxtaposition to the other elements of the video. However, in this context, Corner's vocal course is indeed deceiving. By playing on stereotypical qualities of both the carefree lad and, in contrast, the frail and shaky damsel in distress, it is arguable that also the voice in "Sick" comes to play a role in portraying a queer character. Nevertheless, such an understanding is problematic as it postulates recognition and acknowledgement of such stereotyping. In relation to the idea of vocal masquerade, Walser notes how pitch and register can signalize qualities we conventionally categorize as feminine or masculine in a discussion of one of the most recurring characters in the plots of 17th century opera, the Orpheus of Greek mythology:

[Orpheus's] legendary rhetorical powers made him the most popular subject of early seventeenth-century dramatic music. [...] But his story contains a built-in contradiction: Orpheus must sing in such a way as to demonstrate his rhetorical mastery of the world, yet such elaborate vocal display threatens to undermine Orpheus's masculine identity. Flamboyant display of his emotions is required as evidence of his manipulative powers, but such excess makes him into an object of display himself and suggests a disturbing similarity to the disdained emotional outburst of women. Western constructions of masculinity often include conflicting imperatives regarding assertive, spectacular display, and rigid self-control. Spectacles are problematic in the context of a patriarchal order that is invested in the stability of signs and that seeks to maintain women in the position of object of the male gaze (Walser, 1993, p.108).

Hawkins clarifies this further: “With its obvious associations with castrati singers, the high male voice (spoken or sung) always teeters on the edge of emasculation” (Hawkins, 2009, p.121).⁸⁴ But does this imply that queer representation of the voice depends on a high register, and that high-pitched male voices always will render a narrative of effeminacy? Neither need be true. Looking into the music of Antony Hegarty⁸⁵, who sings in a mid-range register, Hawkins looks to the high pitch falsetto of heavy metal to produce a striking example of the ambiguity of pitch:

[...] the tautness of vocality, produced by the stridency of a falsetto tone, in much heavy metal is suggestive of the phallogocentricity associated with conventional masculinity. Precision of pitching and rhythmic inflection is commonly aligned to virtuosic guitar-playing, measured by its technical polish. Without doubt, the coding of guitar-playing in rock is gendered differently from the quiet jazz piano backing ballads by Hegarty [...]. Thus, the stylistic coding of this voice is predicated upon a range of devices that shape notions of self-representations (ibid, p.122).

Similar to Hegarty’s, the voice of Corner is far from castrati or falsetto, but occupies a mid-range register. However, the phrase of the melody demands a certain control of both low and high register. Even though the melody of the verses only reaches a ninth of range, it moves virtuously within this register, creating contrasting effects of high and low pitch. An illusion of virtuosity can also be traced in the rapid echo-effects that occur at the last word of each phrase of the verses, mechanically repeating the last word of the phrases. The first verses are performed almost with a boyish carelessness, with a slightly lazy movement and a broad British accent. The conversational style of the verses stands in contrast to that of the choruses. Here, Corner stretches towards a higher register (but still far from falsetto), adding vibrato and colour to his tone. The vibrant highest note, occurring on the word ‘so’, is almost reminiscent of operatic colouring, or, could even seem like a parody of an operatic vibrato. Though not implying that Corner’s voice could be mistaken for a woman’s, I stress that in comparison to the ‘cool and collected’ timbre and attitude provided in the verses, his voice in the chorus is of a far more frail, and conventionally feminine kind (especially in the first, second, and fourth phrase). Closely related to this issue, Erik Steinskog argues that the voice is not an abstract entity in the singular, but a construction made of different vocal expressions (Steinskog, 2008 [URL]). In light of this, it is of interest that, whilst connoting frailness and femininity, Corner’s pitch in the chorus remains within a mid-register – allowing for the argument that the connotations of femininity in his voice are first and foremost constructed not through means of “faking” a female register, but through other timbral associations of femininity. Coded and contextualized by words, the whispering and almost shaky timbre in Corner’s voice in the choruses stages two obvious historical feminine stereotypes of popular culture: the frail, distressed and fainting damsel – or, the hysteric and overly dramatic gay ‘queen’.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the vocal

⁸⁴ Also, see Steinskog (2008, [URL]) for a similar discussion on the gender aspects of the castrati voice.

⁸⁵ For further reading on the queer aspect of Heggerty’s voice, see Natvig (2006).

⁸⁶ To avoid any misunderstandings, I am of course not implying that qualities like ‘frailty’ and ‘distress’ are

line of the verses presents a laidback and mocking boyish attitude. In the last chorus, the two final phrases also dramatize aggressiveness and anger, another stereotypical association of the masculine. Revealing both conventional feminine and masculine characteristics, the voice in “Sick” is ambiguous. Still, it is problematic to argue that it is a voice-in-drag. Addressing the ‘bathroom problem’⁸⁷ in the music of Antony Hegarty and Rufus Wainwright, Steinskog elucidates the problem of gender associations of the voice, noting that confusion arises in the sense that we negotiate interpretation of the voice in the intersection of what we actually hear and what ambivalence we might read into it (Steinskog, 2008, p.165). Furthermore, he writes that different levels of performance operate in queer texts: “On the one hand we find an embodiment and staging of gendered norms, while on the other hand we find the discursive performative. At the same time, it is important to note how drag aurally operates in a different way to visual drag” (ibid [my translation]). In “Sick”, then, we are most likely to understand the voice as belonging to a male character (further emphasized in the visuals, as albeit applying jewellery and makeup, Corner is never portrayed as a drag queen or a transsexual), but his character does not conform exclusively to typical stereotypes of the conventional heterosexual male; in the combination of lyrics, image and vocals he reveals a conflict of masculine and feminine identities. Curiously then, in the combined narration of the video, the concept of adapting one’s identity to live up to the expectation of others is portrayed through gender masquerade, with a curious association to the tragic story of Narcissus. Thus, if seen in relation to the time of the video’s release, the video might actually articulate the confusion that arose from the redefinition of conventional masculinity that occurred alongside the mainstreaming of metrosexuality. I will discuss this aspect of the video in the following section, starting with a clarification of metrosexuality as a term.

The tragedy of Narcissus

In 2000, the blockbuster movie “What Women Want” thematized the redefinitions of masculinity. In the movie we meet Nick Marshall, a hot-shot in advertising reputed to be quite the chauvinist. After a fluke accident, Marshall is suddenly able to hear women’s thoughts. After having revealed what the women in his life really think of him, he realizes that the very conventional macho, dominating and womanizing traits of his personality, which he has so eagerly cultivated, do not contribute to his desirability. Using his new-found supernatural ability, Marshall cynically adapts to the wishes and desires of women in order to gain the attention he lusts for.⁸⁸ The interesting aspect of this film is

exclusively aspects of females or homosexual men. But, in terms of how gender has been represented in popular culture stereotypes, such degrading categorizations are kept alive through the maintenance of the celebration of a macho culture.

⁸⁷ In explaining the ‘bathroom problem’, Halberstam writes: “[...] in public bathrooms for women, various bathroom users tend to fail to measure up to expectations of femininity, and those of us who present in some ambiguous way are routinely questioned and challenged about our presence in the “wrong” bathroom” (Halberstam, 2006, p.20).

⁸⁸ Of course, as with most romantic comedies, there is a twist towards the end in which Marshall realizes the

that it presents the male character which women desire in a man who possesses a variety of both conventionally masculine and feminine qualities. While maintaining the cliché of masculine chivalry, he is also supposed to be in touch with his emotions, dress properly, embrace beauty treatments, and generally commit to clichés of femininity.

“What women want” was released at a time when the term metrosexuality was making its way into the tabloids. The term was coined by Mark Simpson, and was initially a commentary on the trends of male consumerism (Simpson, 1994). In a subsequent article, he nuanced the term in the following way:

The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference. [...]The stoic, self-denying, modest straight man [...]had to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image [...] (Simpson, 2002 [URL]) .

Looking at Simpson’s nuanced definition of the metrosexual male character, there are obvious similarities between such a character and the audiovisual portrayal of the protagonist in “Sick”. Firstly, the protagonist in the video seems highly dependent on fabricating his looks to glamorous and cutting-edge standard. The setting in which Corner gazes into the mirror is a recurring scene throughout the video that emphasizes narcissism and notes towards the metrosexual condition of taking oneself as one’s own object of love and desire. However, as Simpson stresses, and returning to the mythology of Narcissus, a compulsory dependency on the approval of self might lead to the destruction of identity, leaving a void in the substance of self. As I have attempted to show above, both music and image project frustration and confusion. When seen in relation to the lyrics, the protagonist’s masquerade goes beyond clothes and make up: his needs to cancel and re-define the very boundaries of his identity result in a state of panic and self-loathing. As a means to be freed from this state of anxiety, Corner performs a symbolical removal of gender associations. He does so by rejecting any external gender attributes (wiping off the make-up, shaving his body hair), leaving a blank, de-socialized and genderless body camouflaged in a black smudge. Moving on to the final part of this analysis, I will attempt to show that it is the aspect of identity annihilation in the video that is the most interesting aspect in relation to the symbolic associations of metrosexuality.

In the late 1990’s/early 2000’s, metrosexuality emerged as a world-wide lifestyle underground trend. Drawing on the aesthetics and attitudes that previously had been stereotyped as qualities of homosexual men, the heterosexual man’s adaption of effeminacy was indeed met with scepticism and criticism. Nevertheless, and very curiously, the sceptical attitude towards this category of identification changed drastically, particularly with heterosexual women, when celebrities and famous characters such as football legend David Beckham, singer Robbie Williams,

immorality of his actions, and follows his heart instead of his lust.

actors James Franco, Orlando Bloom and Brad Pitt, among many others, started to embrace the style. In particular, David Beckham's metamorphosis into a meticulously well-groomed metrosexual seemed to stir up a global sensation. Newspapers, magazines and websites latched on to his re-invention, writing more about his looks and appearance than his achievements as a professional athlete.⁸⁹ The clue to why I bring up the aspect of male celebrities lies in the name 'celebrity' itself. They are idolized, and celebrated for being role-models for masculinity. So it is that when celebrities (and in particular those famous for their achievements in sports that conventionally have been regarded as homosocial arenas of masculinity) adapt a certain set of style or behaviour, they might become a catalyst for a re-definition of alpha-masculinity. Bluntly, they caused queer aesthetics to become infused with the definitions of conventional masculinity. In light of this, it becomes clear why so many young male football fans started to spend extensive amounts of money on their hair as a consequence of David Beckham's experimental style acrobatics during the early 2000's. Similarly, as was thematized in "What Women Want", such a redefinition of the alpha male was seen in heterosexual female idolization of the very same stars. What women wanted, or more importantly so, expected of the 2000's-man was in terms of masculinity a far more complex matter than the 1990's. And it is here we see the possibility of a crisis arising in heteronormativity: in order to reassure his own sexuality and masculinity in terms of gaining acceptance of both male and female contemporaries, the heterosexual man of the early 2000's needed to mask himself through conventional feminine attributes. However, I am not saying that such a category for definition always results in anxiety⁹⁰, but it can produce crises for those who adapt sets of behaviours not necessarily in sync with their own understanding of identity in order to meet the expectations of others.

The music video "Sick" poetically narrates the concept of self-sacrifice through symbols and associations with the rising metrosexual tendency in the early 2000's. By utilizing Corner's stylistic transformation, it tells us a lot about how metrosexuality was a category of identification that in becoming a mainstream phenomenon became problematic because it juxtaposed behaviours and attributes that previously had been seen as standing in opposition of conventionalism and deviance. Nevertheless, in light of the discussion above, the video informs us of the constructions of gender categories in general. The catalyst that produces a crisis is not as much dependent on that the metrosexual man is confronted with effeminacy; rather the crisis is achieved through the strains caused by the conventional exceptions of one's gender. From this, we can deduce that the

⁸⁹ As an example of this, as of April 24th, the search words "David Beckham + hair" provides 1,780,000 hits on the online search engine "Google" (see [URL] < <http://www.google.no/search?hl=en&q=david+bekcham%2Bhair&meta=> >).

⁹⁰ Neither am I arguing that *all* men in the early 2000's felt the need to transform into a metrosexual.

metrosexual crisis is not a new crisis at all. A similar crisis could well occur - and has historically occurred - with women, men, homosexuals, heterosexuals, transsexuals, the androgynous and so on, who have restricted themselves in self-realization in fear of overstepping the conventional expectations of society.

Chapter 5: Final reflections

I have attempted to tackle the representation of gender in contemporary pop videos through a number of case studies and a variety of analytical perspectives, and I have investigated what analytical considerations are required in the study of these. In this final chapter, I want to discuss the findings in the selected videos in relation to the three overarching research questions that have been provided for my investigations. As all of the selected videos provide information in response to each of the three research questions, instead of chronologically summing up the thesis, I have decided to structure this chapter as a flowing reflection on my topic. Also, as all of the analyses are conclusive, I have considered it redundant to repeat the entire course of each analysis; instead I have chosen to return to the most important conclusive remarks and issues raised within the separate chapters. Wrapping up, I will return to the idea of social change, which I presented in the Prelude, asking whether or not the turn of the century marked a significant change in the ways we perceive and understand the categories of gender.

My primary concern in this study has been to ask how gender operates within my selection of music video case studies. Looking back at my discussions, I have noted three general intersecting aspects:

Firstly, gender representations are performative and projected audiovisually. Undeniably, traditional music video aesthetics usually revolve around the presentation and portrayal of the artist(s) or the band. Through the illusion of intimacy, the music video appears as a window on the artist's emotions, ideas and values. Illuminating this notion, star iconography is built upon principles of the artist's projection of identity (Hawkins, 2002, p.121), and the gender aspect of this projection is realized through a compulsory repetition of performance (Butler, 1995; 1999). In relation to the music video, an easy deduction would frame the visual aspect as the main arena for gender projection. However, as I have critically argued in my analyses, gender can also be performed in terms of musical, vocal and semantic parameters. And, as gender in turn is realized through performance, it is highly malleable, and can be used to mask and/or redirect our perception of the artists.

Besides the projection of gender in visual terms, lyrics also assure the shape of personal narratives, and can open up dimensions of subjectivities that are not necessarily reproduced in the image or in the music. In his reading of Rufus Wainwright's "The Art Teacher" (where the singer appears to be singing from a woman's perspective only with a male voice), Steinskog noted how lyrics project narrative subjectivities on their own terms, as well as redefining the personae within the voice (Steinskog, 2008, p.161-165). Similarly, the voice can articulate a palette of what we conventionally regard as symbolizing feminine and masculine qualities because of its sonorous

flexibility and possibilities for textural alteration. Not least, musical soundsettings can create a sense of gender articulation through their cultural associations. Melodies, harmonics, rhythm, timbre, pulse, groove: all provide traces and hints of emotional and narrative agendas. Experienced simultaneously, music videos craft nuanced and often spectacular portrayals of identity/identities (and thereof portrayals of gender) through the juxtaposition of audiovisual and semantic symbols.

My second finding in relation to how gender operates in music videos concerns semiology. Given that gender is a construction consisting of a set of definitions and qualities, values, attributes and behaviours – it undeniably also holds symbolic value. To clarify, what we define as feminine and masculine qualities are not only determined by the clinical differences between the two sexes, but these definitions also draw clear distinctions between what we define as either feminine or masculine behaviour and values. From a critical perspective, the most obvious example of this is in how concepts of dominance and passivity often have been articulated symbolically through the opposing pair of man and woman – relating directly to the historical conventional patriarchal views that the woman is subordinate to the man. Nevertheless, there are many nuances to what qualities gender represents, and, perhaps because gender is a notion very close to our understanding of ourselves, we often use gender symbolism in describing certain qualities, emotions and concepts in our daily speech and artistic expressions. Returning to the case studies for some examples, Sia’s “Buttons” in a very unconventional way employed gender symbols in order to conceptualize the state of emotion that arises in the self-defeating feeling of not being able to offer one’s loved one what he or she deserves. Similarly, gender symbolism was the main signifier in Bermuda Triangle’s articulation of power struggle within a relationship in their video “Fearless”. As a final example, Paloma Faith’s “Do you want the truth or something beautiful” turned to the symbolism of the conventional female pin-up to poetically express a story about the fears of not living up to the expectations of others. What all the videos in this study have in common is that they utilize gender as a signifying narrative component, and that the way these gender signs render meaning relates directly to the way the female and the male genders conventionally have been defined as representing opposing values and qualities. Consequently, gender categories themselves are constituted symbolically – they are not constant or clinical – therefore, gender can be used metaphorically to tell highly descriptive narratives, not only in music videos, but in any kind of communication.

Third is the act of interpretation. The way we define and understand ourselves and others in terms of gender as a category of identification is a highly important component in interpreting music videos, and I have argued that this is a clear repercussion of the medium’s non-narrative nature. The defiance in relation to causal structure is apparent in the courses of musical, visual and semantic events, as well as the video’s combined expression, and thus requires a subjective process

of symbolical decipherment. Of course, there are varying degrees of suggested narratives in different videos; nevertheless, music videos by and large lack the essence of Aristotelian causal structuring, and their meanings arise in negotiation with personal references, values and pleasure. In other words, the audiovisual congruence is articulated through a process of cultural and subjectively determined synaesthesia. As Hawkins notes, “In dialectical relationship to the external world, musical performances mobilise subjectivities by positioning our locations” (Hawkins 2002, p.18). Hence, reading music videos is to a certain degree flexible in terms of the subjective negotiation of what the medium communicates.

In this study, such complexity has been addressed in all of my analyses, particularly crystallizing in my discussions of Fiona Apple’s “Criminal”. Here, I detected that the issue of spectatorship made possible two oppositional readings of the same video by looking at the comments posted on the video’s YouTube page. Ironically, I opened this analysis by noting that the video had 1168 readings. Doing so, I underlined that interpretation indeed is a matter of subjectivity. In terms of theorizing spectatorship, one needs to consider the possibilities for multiple perspectives and *gazes*, even though the video in question at first glance might not appear communicationally arbitrary.

Gender is without any doubt a major component of identity. Through the understanding and performance of ourselves in society, we also define and value other people and their identities. Returning to my point that pop representations indefatigably project articulations of gender, the way we perceive and understand these representations depends on the way we position ourselves, and what we understand in terms of our identity. And, because gender is a malleable set of truths and definitions, a video might not just render different readings for different people; it may also easily be influenced by temporal, social and geographical change. As we saw with “Criminal”, a video that utilizes a high degree of gender symbolism in its narration, over a course of only ten years the associations embedded in gender symbolism can drastically become redefined and differently contextualized. In contrast, “Fearless” showed that archaic gender relics can interfere with reading expressions of contemporary gender redefinitions.

In light of this, one of my main reasons for addressing subjectivity in this study has been to argue that the investigation of contextual spectatorship reveals not only a mechanism of interpretation, but, more importantly, focuses our attention on the subjective process of interpretation that links music to social structures; this becomes a useful tool in understanding the historiographies of popular music expressions as a reflection of politics, culture and, lest we forget, identity.

Moving on to the analytical aspect of my thesis, I have argued that the task of studying the music video medium is indeed a task that calls for careful methodological considerations and a flexible approach. Music videos consist of three expressional dimensions: music, image and semantics. All three categories “[...] possess their own language with regard to time, space, narrativity, activity, and affect” (Vernallis, 2004, p.13). Therefore, it is important to take each category into consideration in the deconstruction of the video’s totality, and not just focus on the image. In my study, I have tried to emphasize this consideration by showing that music and semantics often provide nuances and narrative suggestions that could not have been articulated visually. In some of the cases, I have even detected that, in juxtaposition, any of the three media could drastically re-contextualise the others.

Returning to the notion of narrativity, each of the videos I have discussed revealed a story or a concept only graspable through the symbolical connections between all the three internal media of each video. Inspired by the methods of such researchers as Richardson and Hawkins, I employed an intertextual approach in my decipherment of the videos, so as to best consider that textual allusion is dependent on a currency of knowledge (Richardson and Hawkins, 2007, p.17). As they remind us, “[...] the musical text is indefatigable in terms of how we read it, and only gains its meaning through an active reading” (ibid). The ‘indefatigable interpretative’ aspect of the musical texts thus indicates that music video analysis should not be concerned with arguing the absolute meaning of a video. Rather, the most illuminating results of the music video communication can be achieved by reflecting on why it produces a specific meaning for certain individuals within exclusive contexts. This brings us to the concern that has been the most important for me to underline in this study: music videos reflect society, and are always experienced in a social context and should therefore be read contextually. In my querying the social structures of gender, contextualization of the analyses has been absolutely necessary to unveil these kinds of mechanisms.

Although it is impossible to account for the variety of gender portrayal in the overwhelming amount of pop videos, certain boundaries and ‘rules’ can be detected. My selection of videos therefore sets out to challenge mainstream pop aesthetics in numerous ways, which I will now attempt to sum up in three distinct categories:

In my analyses of “Criminal” and “Video Phone”, I detected that mainstream pop aesthetics invite a voyeuristic dialog with its spectators. Positing the star as an object of pleasure, the exhibitionistic traits of typical music videos posit their spectators as ‘audiences’ for a highly sensualised and eroticized fantasy. “Criminal” and “Video Phone” (albeit with varying success) differ from the typical pop video because they removed the fantasy from the equation, thus bringing forth a question of moral in terms of the objectification of women. Intersecting with this point, my

analyses of “Buttons” and “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful”, crystallized my second notion, being dedicated to the fetishism of physical perfectionism in such exhibitionistic displays. Looking at how these two videos by very small measures managed to narrate audiovisual stories of societal abjection, I was able to make out the contour of a discourse on beauty in our expectations of how pop stars are visualized. In fact, the exaggerations of physicality and beauty in mainstream stardom seem to cause hysteria towards hyperembodied and hypersexual perfectionism, thus rendering naturalness monstrous.

The final two analyses of “Fearless” and “Sick”, from two very different perspectives, clarified the a third and final characteristic of mainstream pop aesthetics that embodies the two previously stated notions, namely that pop videos in general reproduce and assure the conventional definitions of feminine and masculine symbolical qualities. The curious thing about these videos is that they at first glance seemed to celebrate a departure from a patriarchal notion of power, but, on closer reading, proved a narrative dependency of articulating dominance through masculine symbols. Highly dependent on associative recognition, music videos thus often turn to conventional gender symbolism to conceptualize their narratives mainly because gender imagery carries historical and cultural nuances.

This being said, a final reflection is needed in this retrospective reflection on the videos of my selection. Even though all of them challenge, and tease out our expectations of the conventional, they are just as constructed as mainstream pop representations. I do not claim that they are any more ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ in their fantastic display than that of mainstream videos. My argument all the way through this thesis has been a poststructuralist one: that all pop videos ‘preach the value of deception’, even in exposing the truth about their social constructions.

In the final reflection on my study, I would like to return to the prelude. Here, I reflected on the idea of social change at the turn of the century. Intersected with the investigation of gender function in the music video medium and the crafting of a methodological apparatus, I have explored what my selection of early 21st century pop videos tell us about the current state of affairs in the world. If we indeed are living in a postmodern state, does this mean that our definitions of gender have been shifted and redefined? Are we living in a time where we are freed from the restraints of conventional gender expectations? All the representations in my selection of videos in one way or another can be said to defy the archaic idea of masculinity and femininity. However, in terms of their narration they depend on the spectator’s recognition of deviance of the conventional; the videos’ main narrative signifiers depend on the dialect of normality and abjection. As is clearly crystallized in my reading of Bermuda Triangle’s “Fearless”, if our symbolical understanding of what defines femininity and masculinity has been truly neutralized and de-politicized, none of the

videos in my discussion would be able to project their narrative conceptualizations. Symbolically, gender is still a constructed and limited idea. In light of this, my title “Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful?” reflects not only on the deceptive nature of pop representations, it also embodies my argument that even in a postmodern society, our general understanding of femininity and masculinity is still a construction - and to a high degree, a very limited one.

On this basis, I find it hard to argue that the millennium shift marked a full turn of gender definitions. That being said, I do recognize that we have entered a time of confusion and contradiction. In order to understand these social mechanisms, and to be able to trace their directions and developments, the study of cultural expression helps to reveal certain critical notions that we often take for granted as social truths.

Finally, I have found it suitable to end on a personal note. In retrospect, this exploration into questions of gender, identity and interpretation has, because of my interpretative approach, required a similar exploration and investigation of my own values and understanding of myself as an individual and part of society. In order to provide a critical perspective there has been a need to locate and question personal prejudice and presuppositions in terms of my own understanding of gender and sexual identities. Not least, this need for self reflection was required as I, as a male student, chose to focus predominantly on female representations and taking up feminist debates. Returning to Walser’s note that a musicologist needs to maintain and pursue a bifocal approach in their studies (Walser, 1993, p.112-113), I would like to add to this that a most necessary ingredient for achieving this is to wade into the unknown fearless, yet at the same time wary of all the pitfalls.

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Videography

Bermuda Triangle – *Fearless*

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Beyoncé feat. Lady Gaga – *Video Phone*

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Fiona Apple – *Criminal*

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Paloma Faith – *Do you want the truth or something beautiful*

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Sia – *Buttons*

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Sneaker Pimps - *Sick*

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