# Hardly That Kind of Girl?

## On Female Representations in Mainstream Pop Music Videos

**Kai Arne Hansen**

Master Thesis

Department of Musicology

University of Oslo

Spring semester 2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This master thesis would not have been completed without the help and support of a number of people, and I want to extend my sincerest thanks to the following:

First of all, my supervisor Professor Stan Hawkins at the Department of Musicology, University of Oslo, has done a remarkable job in both challenging and inspiring me. Your efforts and patience is much appreciated, and the degree to which you believe in my work has meant a lot to me throughout the process.

Thanks is also due to all Professors and academic staff at the Department of Musicology, University of Oslo, and also to my fellow students. The creative and inspiring atmosphere at IMV could not exist without you.

Karl Magnus Bjorøy has remained a close friend and adequate sparring-partner throughout my entire writing process; both your friendship and advice is valued equally.

Thanks to Even Bekkedal for supplying constant support and encouragement. I would not have been without our chats and banter, nor our endevours in procastination.

A special thanks to Egil Marstein Bauer for helpful suggestions and proofreading, your enthusiasm and support is greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank all of my friends on a general basis. None mentioned, none forgotten. You make my days, weeks, and years much brighter, and I cannot imagine life without you.

My sincerest gratitude to my family. You have supported me continously in my studies over the last years. Thank you for believing in me.

Finally, this thesis could never have been completed without the love and support of Oda Fjeldvær Eggen. As pronounced by Didrik Solli-Tangen: ”My Hard is Yours”.

Oslo, 26 April 2011

Kai Arne Hansen

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## TABLE OF FIGURES

# CHAPTER 1

## BEHIND THE SCREENS OF POP MUSIC VIDEOS

Music video is a particularly powerful medium for showcasing pop artists, offering up a site where images and sounds come together to shape compelling representations, most commonly in a projection of beauty and physical perfection. From this perspective most pop videos have a function, as Stan Hawkins has argued, to "fill a space where identities and bodies are affirmed in comfortably reassuring ways" (Hawkins 2007: 30), and the dominant paradigm in current pop videos is one of reinforcement of the already fixed categories of beauty, which hold the slender, feminine, and sexualized female body as one of its ideals. A point worth noting in this regard, is how technology offers up new representational possibilities; the images and sounds experienced in current pop videos are digitally edited and highly processed. This entails that sexualized and gendered displays often are mediated through representations of physical perfection, far exceeding what can be expected of the natural body, and thus normalizing beauty-as-perfection. Is the effect of these representations always a perpetuation of binaries and stereotypes? Or is pop representation in its sensationalization and spectacularization of sexuality and gender a form of parody, something which uncovers the strictures of social and cultural norms? While the images and representations presented to us by pop culture are far too often brushed aside as pure entertainment without specific relevance to us, I have been intrigued by their influence in their shaping of the ways we perceive ourselves and others, hence the reason for writing this master degree thesis.

In recent years we have witnessed a major development in the nature vs. nurture debate, concerning whether how we act, feel, and think are determined by biology and nature, or by learning processes entailed in experiences in cultural and social relations. Perhaps most notable is the debate`s transgression of academic circles, and this is now also a discussion between people on the streets and around tables.[1] Joining in the

[1] Of particular note from a Norwegian perspective is NRK`s "Hjernevask", led by comedian and sociologist Harald Eia, which received massive media attention.

academic debate, this thesis focuses explicitly on how representations found in pop culture can influence the construction of identity. More specifically, the underlying question is: how can female representations in mainstream pop music contribute to construct and develop identity and subjectivity, alter perceptions, and regulate social relations? Granted that identities and subjectivities are shaped and influenced by our surroundings, and by extension that pop culture is a major influence in shaping our perceptions and expectations, the representational strategies of pop artists become immensely significant. Hawkins suggests in *Settling the Pop Score*:

> Two points need to be emphasised for the present argument: first, identities are performatively constituted by the artist`s expression, and second, there are important links between music reception and identity. […] In my research into identity formation in pop music, it has become more and more evident that pop culture forms a site where identity roles are constantly evolving to fit social needs (Hawkins 2002: 12).

Here, Hawkins sheds light on the link between pop music and identity, and at the heart of his critique is an acceptance of identity as a personal, cultural, and social construction, as opposed to it being an essential, authentic core of the human self. From this poststructural perspective one's identity is not an essential, static part of the individual. Rather, it is dynamic and developing, ever-influenced by our own experiences and relations with others. Similarly, and summing up his view quite nicely, sociologist Simon Frith suggests that "identity comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover" (Frith 1996: 273). Based on these arguments, the conceptual framework for my thesis takes up the issue of social constructionism, focusing on how identities and subjectivities are constructed to establish oneself as similar to, or different from, other individuals or groups. Thus, representations of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are closely connected to the construction of identity, and this thesis investigates how categories are informed by the representations found in pop videos.

An underlying tenet of this thesis is that pop music can contribute to altering the way we understand and perceive gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity, in that we familiarize and accustom ourselves with these ideals largely through popular culture. Susan McClary notes that "[L]iterature and visual art are almost always concerned (at least in part) with the organization of sexuality, the construction of gender, the arousal

and channeling of desire", and continues to suggest that "music may perform these functions even more effectively than other media" (McClary 2002: 53). McClary`s perspective, primarily concerned with sexuality and gender in classical music, refers to music`s quality of introducing us to the experience of emotions, desires and "even (especially in dance) our own bodies" (ibid). Given that a key aspect of the articulation of pop artists` desirability takes place through the gendered body, I will strive to investigate how bodily expressions are defined by discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. My prime objective is to show how the body is employed in the performance of pop music. What is interesting in this regard, is how artist representations are played out as a central part of mainstream culture. What then is at stake in this process? To undertake this sociomusicological investigation I discuss five of the most prominent female artists in current mainstream pop: Rihanna, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Beyoncè, and Lady GaGa. Close readings form the basis of this thesis' material, with the main emphasis falling on Beyoncè`s "Single Ladies" and Lady GaGa`s "Bad Romance" and "Telephone". My reasons for selecting these specific videos will be taken up later.

A prime question arose during the writing of this thesis: what makes these artists compelling enough to explore? First of all, they are all artists with high visibility in popular culture through media coverage, and all are both commercially successful and critically acclaimed. More importantly, all of the artists are represented in their videos through highly technologized constructions, putting emphasis on the body through gendered and sexualized displays. The two artists who receive most attention in this thesis, Beyoncè and Lady GaGa, represent different aspects of the trends of sexualization and technologization of Western culture. Beyoncè showcases the desirability of the pop star through a display of physical perfection, inhabiting the post-human through an appropriation of technology which also mediates notions of sexuality and ethnicity. Lady GaGa, on the other hand, signifies the post-human through the notion of "the monster", and her gendered identity and sexuality are mediated through stark images referencing porn aesthetics. This sensationalization of the body, through spectacular displays of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, are explored in relation to social and cultural perceptions and norms. I propose that these representations must be reflective of contemporary

societal norms, at the same time as they might play a role in constituting said norms. Throughout this thesis, key questions of interest are:

- How does pop music contribute to the ways we perceive and understand gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity?

- How does the negotiation between mainstream culture and pornography materialize in both musical and visual aesthetics of current female pop artists?

- What is at stake in female articulations of the robotic/monstrous/post-human?

- What relevance does hyperembodiment have for female representations in music videos through technology?

Rather than choosing to consider a single research question, I have opted for several broad questions, offering a vast range of considerations. These questions will be pursued continuously in the thesis` analyses, and will underscore my readings throughout. When referring to specific cultural or social traits, my focus will fall, unless specified otherwise, specifically on Western culture and societies. This is not to neglect or dismiss the importance or validity of other cultures, but simply to serve the purpose of the thesis. This specificity allows for greater detail in my analyses and readings, and also improved accuracy in my assumptions. In addition, Western culture represents the biggest market for mainstream pop music.

The current chapter is intended to introduce discourses and theories which form the foundation of my work on this thesis. I have chosen to start by introducing various theories and perspectives on the discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. This part mainly concerns itself with ideas from the fields of gender studies and sociology, though I am careful to include perspectives from musicology where necessary. This allows me to present and specify the main social and cultural discourses discussed in the thesis, as well as setting the stage for the handling of their relevance on pop music, and vice versa. I proceed to discuss musicological considerations, which includes

claryfying and explaining the methods I have chosen to undertake the task at hand. When it comes to the structuring of this chapter, inevitably several of the debates and discussions overlap, and some of the terms will be revisited in different contexts throughout both this chapter and the thesis as a whole. Also, I have opted to present some of the relevant theories and discourses stemming from existing research alongside my analyses, to ensure the fluidity of discussions, and to highlight perspectives of interest. This should be considered a testament to how the different perspectives I examine intersect each other.

## THEORIZING GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND ETHNICITY

### CONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE: PERFORMING GENDER

The concept of gender construction in pop videos suggests the plurality of gender identities and meanings. Initially I would like to stress this point. Simone de Beauvoir writes in the introduction of *The Second Sex:*

> All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity (Beauvoir 1952: 149).

Musing on distinctons between the female and the feminine, de Beauvoir sheds light on something of importance: being female is not the same as being feminine. Having the right body parts is not sufficient to be characterized as a woman; there are social and cultural expectations to the ways in which a woman should dress, feel, talk, and walk. While biology determines whether one is born male or female, ones gendered identity is carefully constructed and developed through years of experiences, encounters, and relations. The basic distinction here is between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological distinction between male and female, and entails chromosome make-up, reproductive organs, and genitals (Macionis & Plummer 2005: 309). Contrasting with

this, gender refers to the social aspects of differences between male and female (ibid), designating a set of characteristics that are seen to distinguish between male and female. It involves much more, though. Gender involves power, hierarchy, and the uneven distribution of social resources, a competition in which women are most likely to draw the shortest straw. Butler (1999) criticizes the distinction between sex and gender, pointing specifically to how this distinction perpetuates sex as something natural, which further strengthens its hegemony. Suggesting that the category of sex is as culturally constructed as gender, and that sex itself is a gendered category, Butler explains gender as the discursive and cultural means by which sex is established as *prediscursive*; a neutral surface on which culture acts (ibid: 9-10). Many of the commonly held assumptions about gender rest upon conceptions of sex as biological and natural, materializing in gendered gestures that are viewed as inherent in the natural make-up of males and females. From this perspective, it is the expectations and assumptions connected to gender which contribute most strongly to perpetuating the ideas of natural difference between male and female. If we accept that gender is contributing to the establishment of sex as a prediscursive, natural, and biological category, the construction and performance of gender should be considered as having great cultural impact. Without denying the influence of biology on identity and sexuality, this thesis will focus on gender as socially and culturally constructed.

The gender term was embraced by feminists in the 1970`s, and from a feminist perspective, intending to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, gender is most often described as the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes (ibid: 8). Within the gender term there are a few concepts which need to be accounted for. *Gender identity* refers to "the subjective state in which one comes to say `I am a man´ or `I am a woman´" (Macionis & Plummer 2005: 310). It is not uncommon that one`s gendered identity contradicts one`s biological sex, a situation designated as either transsexualism or transgenderism. *Gender roles* describe the socially accepted characteristics of a given sex. These characteristics vary greatly between cultures, and can most basically be divided into the masculine and the feminine. *Gender performance* refers to how we "do" gender, the ways in which masculinities and femininities are acted out. Reconsidering de Beauvoir`s distinction between the female and the feminine, one might say it is through

the performance of gender where one acts out femininity, i.e. performs the qualities attributed specifically to women. Sociologist Joane Nagel argues:

> The gendered and sexualized body is a major location for the social construction of men and women, masculinity and femininity, and male and female sexuality. The body is an instrument of *performance* and a site of *performativity*. Gender and sexuality are both performed and performative – conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended, explicit and implicit (Nagel 2003: 51).

This perspective points to how gender is performed through presentations of the body, and Nagel continues, referring to Erving Goffman and his work on performance in social life (ibid: 52).[2] From this viewpoint, gender is performed in the way we dress, the way we talk, through our hair styling and body language, whereby the gendered meanings of these performances vary over time and space (ibid). For instance, what was considered masculine in the 1980`s does not necessarily correspond to what was considered masculine in the 1950`s.

How is the performance of gender evident through pop music? When experiencing the performance of pop music today, whether watching videos on You Tube or attending concerts, we are most often met with a spectacle largely dependent on visual aesthetics. In most cases, the artist`s body plays the central role in grabbing our attention, directing focus onto the pop star. Hawkins writes:

> In most pop forms of the late twentieth century, performance is instilled through gender on display. Accordingly, the body inscribes ideals of gender and sexuality that are part of the process of politicizing style and expression spatially and temporally (Hawkins 2009: 105).

Hawkins emphasizes the relevance of gendered identity in pop music; how artists` performances rely on showcasing their sexuality and gendered identity. This does not necessarily mean that their performances are strictly limited by cultural and social conventions or expectations, but rather that pop performances may effectively contribute to altering current, or constructing new, perceptions and expectations to gender and sexuality. This highlights that gender and sexuality are not essential and exact categories.

---

[2] See Goffman (1959) for discussions into performance of the self in everyday life.

Rather, these categories are dynamic and flexible, and this supports the argument which outlines the framework of this thesis; that gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity are cultural and social constructions, dependent on time- and space-specific historical, social, and cultural conditions (Foucault 1998, Butler 1999, Nagel 2003). Accepting that gender is enacted through performances of the body, the *performative* points to how gender is constituted, for instance through habits and rituals (Nagel 2003: 51), what we come to expect from others in terms of gender appearance and behavior, making up the framework for social relations. The performativity of gender is relevant to my discussions throughout the thesis.

Performativity has its roots in studies of philosophy and literature, but was introduced in gender studies by Butler, perhaps most famously in her book *Gender Trouble (1990).* In an additional preface from 1999, Butler writes:

> […] performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. […] 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 acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body (Butler 1999: XV).

What is emphasized here is how perceptions of gender are perpetualized through repetition and ritualization, gaining validity through naturalized gestures. This refers to how we affirm and reaffirm, construct and reconstruct hegemonic social roles and definitions through our daily repetitive acts. The performativity of gender is a powerful mechanism of social construction and social control, all the more so considering that it tends to go unnoticed - operating at the level of intuition (Nagel 2003: 51). Notably, in the context of gender and sexuality, performance and performativity are also dependent on each other, and each has the capacity to support or subvert the other:

> […] there is a tension between the performed – concrete, obvious, purposive, deliberate ways gender and sexuality are *enacted,* and the performative – abstract, hidden, unthinking, habitual ways gender and sexuality are *constituted*. […] Gender performances can fall flat, seem ”off”, or raise doubts about authenticity if they fail to conform to performative gender rules and perceptions. The performative durability of gender regimes depends on constantly being reinforced and reconstituted by encore gender performances (ibid: 53).

This suggests that it is not only the performative that can influence the performances. Rather, gender performances can be equally effective in altering or disrupting performative gender roles. A central assumption, which supports the relevance of pop music on the construction of gender, is the idea that there is a performative dimension to any given musical expression, and that pop artists "reflect on their own communicative facility in relation to genre and style" (Hawkins 2002: 14). In this sense, pop artists can attach themselves to sites of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (ibid). Illustrating how the discussed notions of performance and performativity are relevant within the context of pop music, this also implies that pop artists have the capability of influencing and constituting gender perceptions and relations, instead of simply reflecting them. This capability would also extend to include perceptions of sexuality and ethnicity, and these arguments will be revisited throughout the thesis.

## SEXUAL PERCEPTIONS: HEGEMONY AND POWER

One of the tenets of this thesis is that most pop videos are contingent on the artist`s sexualized display. Sexuality can basically be described as the "aspects of body and desire that are linked to the erotic" (Macionis & Plummer 2005: 325). Notions of sexuality are commonly centred around which sex one is attracted to; heterosexuals are attracted to the opposite sex, homosexuals are attracted to persons of the same sex, and bisexuals are attracted to both sexes.[3] These distinctions cover only one specific aspect of sexuality, though, and do not even come close in conveying the complexeties, nuances, and consequenses of human sexuality, because often these binarisms do not hold. In the same way as with gender, expectations to- and perceptions of sexuality varies culturally, socially and over time. There is no universal conception of correct or natural sexual

[3] This is a very simple assumption. Many so-called heterosexuals can be attracted to gay or queer people, and vice versa. The nuances and complexities of sexuality should not be overlooked.

desires or activities, rather, sexual practises vary from culture to culture.[4] Still, in any given culture or society there will be a hegemonic sexuality which dictates the practises, by defining socially accepted sexual desires, partners, and activities.[5] This sexual hegemony also defines ideals of the sexualized body; fat or thin, tall or short, old or young. This is not to imply that sexual hegemony is utterly succesful in its dominance; sexual rules are transgressed and even broken frequently, and can be altered and developed, but the rules are still present. The assumption of heterosexuality as a normative ideal is present in most of the mechanisms of everyday life. From a sociocultural perspective sexuality can be understood as a part of our social lives, governed by rules and behavioral expectations, and are relevant to perceptions of i.e. gender, ethnicity, race, class, and nationality. Such rules and expectations regulate a sense of normality, and contribute to the influence of heteronormativity on Western culture. Heteronormativity refers to "the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and the recognition that all social institutions (the family, religion, economy, political system) are built around a heterosexual model of male/female social relations" (Nagel 2003: 49-50), and, as Hawkins argues, heteronormativity constitutes the norms of heterosexual male representation in pop music (Hawkins 2002: 13). This suggests that social relations are strongly regulated by patriarchal structures of power that define Western culture, and it is quite obvious that this, in turn, affects the ways in which we perceive gender and sexuality.

It is important to note that any constituting of identity, whether concerning a group or individual, is necessarily dependent on setting itself apart from others. The latter deconstructive perspective presupposes that identity has "come to imply difference as much as sameness" (Hawkins 2002: 13), a Derridaen viewpoint explicitly relevant for

---

[4] This is a problematic area, as sexual desire and activities have been governed by cultural and social norms for centuries. These norms have constituted certain sexual practises as natural, and I imagine that there are still quite a few people who will have a problem with a non-essential description of sexuality. I am, of course, also aware of the biological discussion on this topic, but for the purpose of the thesis I will focus on aspects of cultural and social construction.

[5] In this context, and throughout the thesis, hegemony is understood as the cultural power exerted by a dominant group over other groups. This does not imply an active oppression through brute force, but describes how social and cultural perceptions and norms are constituted and reproduced by a dominant majority.

problematizing sexual identity. In this sense, identity is constituted by perceiving oneself as different from others. Although a person`s identity is strengthened through the inclusion in a group, granted that a key point of identity politics is the insistence on a structure of sameness between several individuals (ibid), such a group, whether this is a minority or a dominant group, finds the need to establish itself as different from other groups. Identifying the other refers to a unitary grouping of any minority groups which are characterized only insofar as they are others. In terms of sexuality, this might concern how ethnic groups define common sexual values in contrast to those of other groups, i.e. the conventional description of black sexuality as excessive, out of control, in contrast to European sexual etiquette and constraint.[6] Hawkins proposes that "the body politics entailed in configuring pop narrative allegorize libidinal positions of desire that ritually marginalize dominant groups from Others" (Hawkins 2009: 105), raising questions of social relations and power.

The perspective on sexuality that Hawkins builds his critique around stems from the work of Foucault, who insists that power is present in every sexual relation, produced from one moment to the next (Foucault 1998: 93). Foucault theorizes power and sexuality in the following way:

> Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequality, and disequillibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations; relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniement; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play (Foucault 1998: 94).

From this, we see how power relations are problematic on account of inequality and divisions in sexual relations. This also extends to relations based on distinctions between ethnic groups, or distinctions based on notions of race. The sociological aspect entailed here is that language can contribute to, or challenge, hegemony in that it can influence how individuals perceive and interact with society; through the distribution of information to the public through various media, using language to frame their message

[6] This will be discussed further in context of ethnicity.

and thereby valuating it. This thesis proposes that in much the same way, pop artists can contribute to, or challenge, hegemony, in that the images and representations that pop artists present inform our perceptions in a considerable way.

In engaging myself with debates on gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, I am curious as to how assertions of cultural differences are used, actively or passively, to regulate social relations, and, in turn, how norms and expectations connected to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity influence the perceived meaning of music performances. I am not in any way suggesting that there is any objective basis for the differences between light skinned or dark skinned, male or female, or heterosexual or homosexual people. Rather, I am interested in examining the assertions of differences, revealing the mechanisms and discourses behind these assertions, and viewing them in context of pop music. When we are presented with pop performances, we are not only experiencing the performance of music, but also the performance of the body; of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Activating the debate concerning these categories in the context of pop music directs the focus, not only to identity politics and performance strategies, but also towards the distribution of power in social relations. Following this, looking at power structures and tendencies of oppression, and being aware of this presence in representations of pop music, is important.

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF ETHNICITY

In the same way that the body harnesses social meanings of sexuality and gender it denotes ethnicity. Furthermore, it seems that notions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are so closely connected, that viewing them separately would weaken a holistic approach to identity politics. Sexuality, displayed through uses of the body, can hardly be separated from the body in question`s presentation of ethnic or racial traits.

The term of ethnicity is surrounded by some confusion and debate, being defined from several fields of research. Thomas Hylland Eriksen points out how anthropological work on ethnicity traditionally has focused on culture, and taken-for-granted cultural

differences, and how there`s been a shift towards a focus on identity, and more specifically, ethnic identity as based on socially sanctioned cultural differences, not real ones (Eriksen 2001: 43). On this basis, ethnicity is not constructed upon actual cultural differences between groups or individuals, but rather on the insistence that these proposed differences are important. To avoid confusion regarding my handling of ethnicity, it seems natural to discuss what is intended in my use of the term. My problematization of ethnicity is based on an understanding of ethnicity, race, and nationality as related social categories. From a sociological standpoint, Nagel describes ethnicity as referring to "differences between individuals and groups in skin color, language, religion culture, national origin/nationality, or sometimes geographic region" (Nagel 2003: 6). From this perspective, and for the purpose of my study, ethnicity can be said to subsume notions of race and nationality.[7] This is not to imply that the three are not important categories in their own right, but rather to suggest the close relation between them, and I retain the liberty to engage race or nationality specifically, if so specified.

Considering that most people perceive ethnicity as an inherited feature, it becomes relevant to look at how ethnicity can mean different things, depending on *where* it is perceived. For instance, consider a Nigerian living in the United States: there he might be classified as African American, or simply black, both terms being based on the color of his skin. While in Nigeria, his ethnicity will probably not be based solely on skin color. Rather, his ethnicity will be more determined by his religion, language, and region or community of origin (ibid: 39). We see that, depending on the society which evaluates it, ethnicity comes to mean different things. Religious, linguistic, or regional distinctions, which are so important in Nigeria, mean nothing in the United States (ibid). Ethnicity holds a variety of meanings, and ethnic categories are commonly based on assumptions and stereotypes:

---

[7] Currently, the usage of "race" is most often centered around visible distinctions, generally used to describe a person`s skin color, while its historical usage was broader and included religious and linguistic groups (Nagel 2003: 6). Nationalism is commonly viewed as a kind of ethnically based social identity, most often rooted in assertions of cultural differences or distinctions (ibid). If we accept ethnicity`s inclusion of race and nationality, ethnicity becomes the core concept, with race and nationality as two major forms of ethnicity.

> Ethnic constructions, whether they are based on religion, language, region, or color, inevitably are imbued with meanings and stereotypes: who is hardworking, who is lazy; who is clean, who is dirty; who is rational, who is emotional; who is smart, who is stupid; who is reliable, who is undependable; who is moral, who is immoral; who is modest and virtuous, who is vulgar and promiscuous. Such glorifications and denigrations appear to be very close to cultural universals in ethnic systems- some peoples are defined as "good" and others are labeled as "bad" (ibid).

The features attributed to ethnic good or ethnic bad are remarkably consistent as one examines ethnic discourses around the world: *our* purity versus *their* filth, and it should be noted that "much of this discourse involves matters of sexuality and gender" (ibid). This implies a close relation between sexuality and ethnicity, and hints to the potential the two might have in mediating each other. One of the most prominent examples of this, and one relevant for my investigation of Beyoncè in chapter three, is the discourse surrounding blackness and the primitive.[8]

Cornel West notes that it is "virtually impossible to talk candidly about race without talking about sex" (West 2001: 83), and suggests that "Americans are obsessed with sex and fearful of black sexuality" (ibid). This can be explained by the way in which black sexuality has been portrayed largely through myths, as black women and men are often perceived as "threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites" (ibid). The hypersexuliazation of blackness, and common perceptions of ethnic or cultural groups in general, are related to broader, historical tendencies in culture and society. Nagel offers a perspective linking ethnicity to notions of sexuality:

> The sexual ideologies of many groups define members of other classes or ethnicities as sexually different from, usually inferior to their own *normal* and proper ways of being sexual. These class or ethnic "others" might be seen to be oversexed, undersexed, perverted, or dangerous. […] These race- and class-based sexual standards tend to define African American amd Latino men as excessively masculine and oversexed or "hypersexual" and Asian men as insufficiently masculine and undersexed or "hyposexual" (Nagel 2003: 9-10).

---

[8] The category of blackness is theorized and discussed thoroughly from a multitude of perspectives by Cashmore (1997), Gilroy (1991, 1993), Snead (1984), and West (2001). While there is a lot to say about blackness, perhaps particularly in context of American society, this thesis will primarily focus on blackness in terms of how ethnicity and sexuality relate.

The hypersexualization of ethnicity which is referred to here has deep historical roots. Ascribing blackness a quality of primitivity and hypersexuality became important for the Europeans of the early 1500s (Ibid: 97), in justifying their harassment of the inhabitants of the countries they sought to acquire in Africa. Nagel points to how the after-affects of this still seem evident:

> […]Assertions of African sexual excesses became a foundational component of the black-white racial boundary. Hypersexualized depictions of Africans comprised multiple entries into the cultural ledger of American racialized sexual imaginings, fears and desires. This long historical record has a familiar contemporary ring (ibid: 97).

Depictions of blackness as explicitly sexual, and the depictions` contemporary relevance, ignite discussions relating to blackness and sexuality, and are valid for considering female representations in pop music videos. This is one of the aspects which will be important in my discussions on Beyoncè. It is worth noting that Beyoncè`s representation of ethnicity is far from essential in its blackness (as will be discussed during my analysis of "Single Ladies"). Rather, it is the duality and flexibilty of Beyoncè`s ethnicity that most interests me, as she swiftly navigates the landscapes between blackness and European aesthetics.

Another aspect worth observing in terms of ethnicity, and one which to a certain degree tends to be overlooked in everyday debates, is whiteness as an ethnic category. The category of whiteness has profound historical connotations, and "continues to be perceived as materially significant" (Harris 1995: 286). This is, perhaps, particularly relevant in a North American societal context, and Nagel comments on whiteness in the U.S.:

> Being white in the United States has important consequences, and for most of U.S. history in most places whiteness has been a source of comfort and privilege. […] But being white also means that in some situations one can be viewed with dislike and contempt or even threatened with violence. […] So, like blacks, whites have a race; it`s the meaning and consequences of their color that can vary across time, space, and audience (Nagel 2003: 42).

While whiteness has been largely privileged in Western culture it is not without its complications, especially in encountering other ethnicities. Nagel offers an example, and

argues that a white who crosses the color line by for example kissing a nonwhite, can ”become a target of hostility or attack by racist whites and viewed with suspicion by some nonwhites” (ibid). Whiteness, then, is equally to blackness an ethnic category, and subject to the expectations and perceptions of others. What is central here, is how the social meaning of ones ethnicity is not static, but is decided through interaction with others; resulting from a dialectical process that “emerges from the interaction between individuals and those they meet as they pass through life” (ibid). Further nuances and perspectives on ethnicity will be discussed throughout my analyses.

## MUSICOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

This thesis is based upon the principal tenets governing popular musicology, a relatively new field of research that complements the interdisciplinary field of popular music studies by paying particular attention to the music itself, as opposed to context. While the application of popular musicology first and foremost entails a critical approach to the analysis of music, it does not reject the relevance of cultural or social context (Scott 2009: 2). On the matter of music analysis, as well as on the relevance of popular music in relation to culture and society, I have paid particular attention to the work of David Brackett (1995), Stan Hawkins (2002, 2009), Philip Tagg (2003), Anne Danielsen (2006), and Robert Walser (1993, 2008), but have also noted the work of Richard Middleton (2002) and Allan F. Moore (2007). Framing gender within popular music, the work of Sheila Whiteley (1997, 2000), Susan Fast (2001), and Freya Jarman-Ivens (2007) should be particularly noted for succesfully bridging popular musicology to gender studies. And lastly, though not technically popular musicologists, both Susan McClary (2002) and Simon Frith (1996) have been important to my approach.

The field of popular musicology is explicitly multifaceted, “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: 2), which should suggest the flexibility and breadth of an approach grounded in popular musicology. The major body of work within the field of popular musicology is concerned specifically with recorded music, but this does not

mean that the theories and methods developed within this field is not useful for my investigations of music video. On the contrary, Scott notes that "popular musicology tends to focus on recorded music, but there is no reason why its remit should not be wider" (ibid: 4). One of the major concerns in investigating music video is how musical parameters work together with imagery. Several popular musicologists have concerned themselves with the analysis of music video, with Richardson & Hawkins (2007) and Walser (2008) being of special note. Also, Carol Vernallis (2004), entering from the field of communication studies, has played a considerable part in influencing my approach to audiovisual analysis.

Approaching my questions of interest from the interdisciplinary field of popular musicology entails an inclusion of theories and ideas from sociology and gender studies.[9] In this, my main concern is the significance of music on gendered identity and sexuality. In engaging these debates, I will try to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism, and will position myself ideologically close to post-modernism. This entails me not providing a definitive answer to each of the research questions raised at the start of this chapter. Rather, I will try to illuminate them from several perspectives, taking advantage of the flexibilities of an interdisciplinary approach. Arguing for pop music`s significance on gender and sexuality, one of the main aspects is creating a discursive dialogue illuminating issues of these categories within popular culture. As a vital part of popular culture, music can be said to serve 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 2002: 8). From this perspective, music not only mirrors social and cultural conditions, but also has the ability to influence our perceptions of these conditions. Furthermore, this implies that pop music can be significant for our understanding of gender and sexuality, by contributing to how we perceive and learn the normative rules for gendered behavior. My discussions throughout the thesis will be concerned with investigating this.

Popular musicology has an overarching critical objective, namely that of studying "the whole musical field". This movement has been, marked "not only by dissatisfaction

[9] Throughout the thesis I will also be aware of, as well as be referring to, works from the fields of anthropology and media studies.

with traditional methods (including conventional analysis) employed to undertake such study, but also by dissatisfactions with the exclusive divisions into which musicology falls, and with the exclusive repertoire usually studied by musicology […] (Moore 2008: 4). Popular musicology has grown to become a greatly inclusive field of reseach, and offers an incredible range of perspectives and points of entry. With this diversity comes a natural, and perhaps healthy, debate concerning how popular music is best studied. Moore writes:

> So, at the centre of the debate concerning how popular music is best studied is the status of the `musical text´ and the activity of` `music analysis´. I have identified this debate above as originating in `poststructuralism´, which may be understood as a group of methodologies which go beyond the seeking of solutions in the ways cultural products and practises are structured. This is an aspect of a wider cultural shift in industrial society, a paradigmatic change conveniently known as `postmodernism´ (Ibid: 5).

Moore proposes that this debate originates in poststructuralism, which reads culture not as a predetermined static experience, but as a system of representations dependent on a certain subject position,[10] constructed by signifying practises (Middleton 2002: 166).[11] One of the key aspects of my approach to music analysis, strongly informed by poststructuralism, is the use of a variety of perspectives to create a multifaceted interpretation of a text, even if these interpretations might conflict with one another. This should imply that there is no true meaning to a piece of music or a specific performance, but rather that there is an abundance of meanings, each made relevant by the position of the subject who interprets the text. A necessary clarification here is that my use of "text" throughout the thesis does not refer to words or lyrics, but stems from textual analysis and implies an object from which analysis or interpretation can extract meaning.[12] In my investigations of texts I will seek meaning, not in the author of the text, but in the text`s

---

[10] This suggests the importance of the subject in interpreting images and representations under subjective conditions.

[11] Middleton discusses signification thoroughly (2002: 220-239), as does Brackett (1995: 9-14). I will return to this when outlining my method and approach to interpretation.

[12] My use of this term will first and foremost occur in my close readings and analyses, referring to `the musical text´or `the audiovisual text´. This implies both that, for the purpose of analysis, texts are best read critically from a subjective perspective, as well as that several texts may intersect. Both these topics will be revisited later in this chapter.

interaction with other texts, cultural norms, or in subjective readings. This approach posits context as an important aspect of meaning in music, and the most notable context for pop music is arguably society. Walser writes that you only have the problem of connecting music and society if you`ve seperated them in the first place, and continues to suggest that if the "context is understood, a text can be analyzed as a kind of human utterance, in dialogue with other utterances" (Walser 2008: 27). This should show the fruitfulness of joining theories and perspectives from gender studies and sociology with music analysis, with the postructuralist approach emphasizing my regard for intersecting fields of study, allowing me to concentrate on the music specifically as well as on its relevance on the context, and vice versa, at the same time. By rejecting essentialism, this approach offers a flexibility which greatly benefits the discussions throughout, and contributes to illuminate the research questions from a multitude of perspectives.

My approach is inspired in no small part by the work of numerous prominent musicologists, and several models for music analysis that have been developed over the last decades. Of special relevance is the issue of musical meaning and aesthetics in both songs and videos. In *Settling the Pop Score* Hawkins has suggested that "any claims to extracting musical meaning […] depend on identifying the performers and their music within their social and cultural context" (Hawkins 2002: 152). My position concurs with Hawkins', who emphasizes both cultural and social context as crucial for extracting meaning from a musical text. Along similar lines, McClary argues that the study of meaning in music "cannot be undertaken in isolation from the human contexts that create, transmit and respond to it" (McClary 2002: 21), and she continues to point out that social reality itself is constituted within the discursive practices of music (ibid). McClary emphasizes that music does not only reflect social constructs and perceptions, but also constitutes them (ibid: 21). This should mean that pop texts operate symbolically, and could be approached through semiotic deconstruction.[13]

[13] Deconstruction as a poststructuralist strategy for textual analysis was developed in the late sixties by Jacques Derrida (1998), and demonstrates that any text contains several irreconcilable and contradictory meanings; that any text therefore has more than one interpretation. For the purpose of this thesis, the strategy is relevant to inquiries into how pop texts and signifying practices *construct* social reality, rather than simply represent and mirror it.

To clarify my use of the term *pop text*: this term is well-suited for my methodological approach to analyzing popular music. The pop text entails more than just the song, and Hawkins refers to it as "the total constituents of the musical experience in pop music which include the intertextual levels of visual and sound coding, packaging, and the layers of connotation that inform our responses" (Hawkins 2001). Intrinsic to the pop text are the sound recordings, live performances, television appearances or music videos, although I will be specifically concerned with the latter. Music video is an audiovisual text, projecting both sound and imagery simultaneously, and an understanding of how music and image work together is key to interpreting this text. In engaging music video, then, this is one of my primary conerns, as is the tension between text and context. This entails quite a few methodological considerations, and I draw on several fields of research to comprise my approach.

## INTERPRETATION AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Upon searching for a method suitable for my thesis, I became convinced that the best way of illuminating my questions of interest was through a flexible methodological approach, relying mainly on gender studies, sociology, and popular musicology in textual analysis. Given the vast range of considerations raised by my research questions, and along the lines of the ideological position that I have outlined so far, I will not be concerned with finding any essential meaning of the texts I discuss. Rather, I will aim to illuminate the texts I encounter from different perspectives, ultimately (and hopefully) resulting in an illumination of the functions of gender and sexuality in the context of pop music. To this end, I will rely on approaching my analyses hermeneutically, through subjective intertextual readings.

A hermeneutic approach to the analytical interpretation of music "emphasizes meaning and context rather than structure or technique" (Whittall). The approach is particularly applicable "where a text appears at first sight to have no meaning, or where its meaning is remote or opaque, or where there may be another meaning or meanings than those that are immediately accessible" (Bent). This should surely entail

investigations of meaning in pop music. Recognizing the active relationship between the parts and the whole of a text, a hermeneutic approach emphasizes the importance of the context in extracting meaning from a text. Philip Tagg muses on the advantages and disadvantages of hermeneutics in musicology:

> […] hermeneutics can, if applied with slightly greater discretion and in combination with other musicological sub-disciplines, especially the sociology and semiology of music, make an important contribution to the analysis of popular music. In short: a rejection of hermeneutics will result in sterile formalism while its unbridled application can degenerate into unscientific guesswork (Tagg 2003: 77).

Tagg sees hermeneutics as an important contribution to the analysis of popular music, but rejects its unbridled application. I do not overlook Tagg`s caution regarding hermeneutics, and if not used critically this can, indeed, result in un-scientific guesswork. I emphasize that my approach is not limited to hermeneutics, but rather, my primary focus is on interpretation with both hermeneutic and semiotic principles as important aspects of my approach. I pay close attention to how interpretation has been conducted by other researchers within the study of popular music, with particular note of Brackett (1995), Hawkins (2002), Middleton (2002), Danielsen (2006), and Walser (1993, 2008), and I will address musical codes and signification inspired by their approaches. In my readings throughout the thesis, music analysis will mainly concern timbre, use of effects, vocal qualities, and overall sound production, though some comments will be made on structure, tonality, rhythm etc. Walser points out that "it`s okay to write about music" (Walser 2008: 22), and emphasizes that language is "an incredibly powerful and nuanced system for making sense of things and communicating our understandings" (ibid). Furthermore, he suggests that we might not need as much technical jargon in analyzing music as we might suppose (ibid). Rather, descriptive language might be just as efficient in conveying ones understanding of a piece of music. Heeding Walser`s call, my music analysis throughout will mainly be descriptive of how I perceive the music`s qualities, though this will be supplied with comments on the music`s technical qualities, where appropriate. Walser notes that "musical interpretations are always open to refinement and contestation, but they are never arbitrary, and there is no way to avoid committing interpretation" (ibid: 23). He continues to emphasize that musicologists should "work for the most illuminating ones, drawing upon our knowledge of history and of how music

works and signifies" (ibid). This directs the focus towards how music signifies, both through denotation and connotation.[14] A key aspect in this regard is the term *musical codes,* which offers a way of theorizing the connections between musical sound and extra-musical factors (Brackett 1995: 9), such as visual images and aesthetics, or historical, cultural, and social associations. From this perspective, the musical code can be described as "that aspect of musical communication that describes the relationship of a semantic system to a syntactic system, the relationship of `content´ to `expression´" (ibid). The discussion regarding how to interpret what the music connotes, and how it connotes, is a complex one. Middleton argues that "semiotic theory emphasizes that connotations is always built on a prior system of denotation", and from this, he categorizes denotation as part of primary signification and connotation as part of secondary signification (ibid: 220).[15] In my interpretations, most attention will be devoted to what the music connotes, but the two terms are viewed as mutually exclusive, where one can hardly be seperated from the other (see Brackett 1995: 9-11). Relating this to a post-structuralist perspective, as I hold that there are several possible meanings to a piece of music or a performance, a semiotic approach to interpreting musical codes depend on establishing ones subject position. Both Brackett and Hawkins note that musical codes are dependent on acts of subjective interpretation (ibid: 9-14, Hawkins 2002: 10),[16] and the latter suggests that "music analysts should account for the procedures that negotiate their own musical experience" (ibid). Based upon Hawkins` position, I am keen to address through self-reflection my own references, and hopefully the competence I develop will be discernible throughout my analyses.

---

[14] Middleton describes denotation as a direct and immediate semantic correlation to musical structures, and connotation as "the feelings, associations, evocations and ideas aroused in the listeners" (Middleton 2002: 220).

[15] See Middleton (2002) for detailed discussion on primary signification (form and syntactic relationships) and secondary signification (connotation).

[16] A key issue here is how musical codes are identified and decoded culturally, and this relates to the individual references and competences of the interpreting subject. Moore suggests that competence within any style is learnt, acquired through familiarity and exposure (Moore 2007: 26), supporting that the interpretation of musical coding is closely linked to competence within the musical style in question.

Another key aspect of my approach to textual analysis lies in considering the text`s relation to other texts. The term intertextuality was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in the late 1960`s, and basically refers to how the meaning of a text is shaped by other texts. Far from unproblematic, intertextuality is "one of the most contested terms in recent history, encompassing a range of practises from overt allusion and parody to general stylistic indebtedness" (Richardson 2007: 402). Not neglecting Richardson`s concern, I hold that a critical employment of intertextuality is vital as part of a flexible approach to pop music analysis. Kristeva`s term is the most popular to describe approaches "challenging the idea that meaning is intrinsic to cultural artefacts, resulting instead from perceived interrelations between cultural artefacts (or performances) and expansive networks of invoked materials and discourses" (ibid: 403). To employ an intertextual approach for the purpose of this thesis, I look at its relevance within the field of popular musicology. Middleton describes an understanding of pop music as a *multiple text,* made up of the institutions, social settings, behavioral practices and discourses which surrounds it, as broadly accepted (Middleton 2003: 8), and goes on to suggest pop music`s mode of existence as dizzying chains of replication and intertextual relations (ibid). This seems to suggest that meaning does not occur in a specific text alone, but, rather, that meaning occurs between texts. Similarly, Hawkins notes that the pop text only becomes mobilised through its contact with other texts (Hawkins 2002: 23). Hawkins approaches intertextuality through Mikhail Bakhtin`s work on dialogics, pre-existive to Kristeva`s term, and suggests that a central aspect of examining pop texts is the dialogics in the boundaries between text and context (ibid: 25). This dialogism can be helpful in reading pop texts, as it "opens up new approaches to the structural space of the musical text" (ibid: 23). Middleton describes Bakhtin`s dialogism as "the most useful conceptualisation of intertextuality" (Middleton 2000: 74), and embraces the idea of *utterance,* or *performance-event,* which is seen as always being structured dialogically, in that an awareness of context, addressees, possible responses and a whole history of previous usages of its terms, themes and intonations are built into its mode of operation (ibid).

These perspectives on intertextuality all emphasize that meaning is not inherent in the specific text; it is not transferred directly from the author of the text to its reader.

Rather, meaning is mediated by codes imparted to both the author and the reader of the text. Thus, meaning does not reside in the text, but in the reading and interpretation of the text. Appropriately, Hawkins warns that intertextuality "is often misunderstood as being only a matter of influence by one author on another" (Hawkins 2002: 28). However, intertextuality must surely entail sets of codes and references that are a part of the interpreter`s reading, operating over numerous different texts but which have no specific or meaningful origin. This emphasizes the endless possibilities of interpretations, for "the musical text is indefatigable in terms of how we read it, and only gains its meaning through an active reading" (Richardson and Hawkins 2007: 17). The point that texts only gain meaning through an active reading is arguably most relevant for my analyses. This implies that in the analysis of texts, meaning is only read through a subjective set of competence, knowledge, references, and values. On this point Hawkins suggests that "any theorization of textual meaning hardly seems feasible without some form of aesthetic evaluation, a task located in the space between the subject (musicologist) and object (musical example)" (ibid: 24). While this emphasizes the necessary subjectivity involved in textual analysis, it also draws to our attention the need for a consideration of one`s personal set of references in order to further illuminate critical readings of the text. This demonstrates how intertextuality can contribute to enriching the understanding of pop texts, and, at best, avoid the pitfalls of essentialism. Approaching pop texts through intertextuality, then, will greatly benefit the purpose of this thesis.

## ANALYZING MUSIC VIDEO

The greater part of the discussions in this thesis concerns music videos. Vernallis categorizes music videos as a non-narrative medium,[17] and emphasizes that music video`s narrative dimensions should be considered "in relation to its other modes, such as underscoring the music, highlighting the lyrics, and showcasing the star" (Vernallis 2004: 1). Vernallis does not imply that music videos are antinarrative, do not tell stories, but rather that the narrative is to be found in signifiers and codes, becoming meaning by the

[17] The nonnarrativity of music video is thoroughly discussed in *Experiencing Music Video* (2004).

viewers interpretation and experience of them (ibid: 20-27). From this standpoint, Vernallis suggests that image and music must be equally credited in conveying the story of the video (ibid: 13-14). This endorses the fact that videos are multifaceted. Thus, their investigation will be aided by the interdisciplinary approach I have outlined so far, with emphasis on interpretation and intertextuality. This is an approach to the analysis of audiovisual texts which resembles that outlined by Richardson and Hawkins in the introduction to *Essays on Sound and Vision* (2007), where they emphasize the aspect of intertextuality:

> A pop video […] is not only related to other pop videos of a similar genre, but to all audiovisual texts, to films, musicals, commercials, political documentaries, to academic discourses, and so on. All texts have the potential to influence each other. This implies that intertextual references operate as hooks for substituting and differentiating meaning (Richardson and Hawkins 2007: 17).

From this, it is evident that the interpretation of pop videos depends on an understanding of these videos as related to other texts, and intertextuality becomes a "methodological tool for identifying the strategies of encoding and decoding a text" (ibid). However, the music video text is a complex one, and there are several aspects to be considered not to neglect the individual parts or the whole, or the dynamic between the two. One perspective offered by Walser involves identifying a neglect of the *music* in music videos. He advocates the importance of music analysis in reading audiovisual texts:

> 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. […] The challenge of analysing music video is interpreting and analysing *both* musical and visual discourses, simultaneous but differently articulated and assuming a variety of relations (Walser 2000: 157).

Walser describes attentiveness towards both image and sound as a crucial part of music video analysis, and this is a point I will be well aware of in my analyses throughout the thesis. Entering this debate from a different angle, Hawkins argues that "the analysis of performance in music videos relies on recognizing the visual representiation of gender as part and parcel of entertainment: for in the majority of pop videos the body-on-display is about flamboyant virtuosity, which both stereotypes and normalizes beauty" (Hawkins

2011), and puts this down to the technological manipulation of the artist`s image and their aestheticization on screen (ibid). This accurately illustrates the ability of visual aesthetics and the body-on-display in conveying seductive images and representations. Not neglecting the music`s role in pop videos, Hawkins, like Walser, points out that the magic of music videos are "founded on an unusually potent visual and musical relationship that is all about making a song meaningful – turn the sound off and the image is nonsensical" (ibid). Both Hawkins and Walser direct their focus towards a major issue of relevance when dealing with music videos: audiovisuality – how visual images and music interlock. It is clear that the analysis of music video must be undertaken meticulously, considering the many-sided nature of music video.

Through my analyses, I will separate the most important parts in making up the video, being aware of them all individually, as well as of how they intersect. The three main aspects of music video is considered to be *image (visual aesthetics, gestures)*, *music (musical codes, timbre, structure)* and *semantics (lyrics)*. Addressing these categories individually, I will try to identify their symbols and signs through semiotic deciphering. To ensure fluidity in my analyses, specific theories and discourses will be addressed continuously throughout. In order to illumminate how the music video is experienced as a whole, image, music, and semantics will also be discussed in relation to each other. Supporting this kind of approach, Vernallis suggests that "what a video has to say is located in the relation of all its parts as it plays out in time – in a play between both the visual and musical codes" (Vernallis 2004: 199), and she adds that analyzing music video depends on considering "all of the music, image, and lyrics, and the relations among all three" (ibid). Similarly, Hawkins notes that "processes of viewing and listening involve bridging sound and image; so what we see and hear is about opening an imaginary space" (Hawkins 2011), and continues to suggest that "it is this that ultimately defines the musical experience" (ibid). The perspectives offered by both Vernallis and Hawkins seem to support the notion that bridging the gap between what music, image, and lyrics signify individually, alongside interpreting the video as a whole, is vital in analysing pop

videos.[18] This, then, is a call that I take heed of throughout my analyses.

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS: WRITING FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE AND CHOOSING EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

Inherent in the analytical approach I have outlined so far is a distinct awareness of the interpreters role in the reading of texts. Though semiotic deconstruction succeeds through a reliance on well founded theories and discourses, the interpretation of any text is dependent on the knowledge, associations, and references of the subject (interpreter).[19] It therefore seems appropriate to offer a short presentation of the perspective from which I will be writing, as well as airing my views on how this might, or might not, be relevant for the task at hand. First of all, it seems a daunting task to approach questions of gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity from the position of a young, white, Norwegian male. Navigating these fields is a delicate matter, one that I undertake with great caution in an effort to illuminate a variety of mechanisms at work in perceptions of gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity in our everyday lives. My attachment to these debates emanates through an enthusiasm for both popular music and popular culture, and, ultimately, I am concerned with the dialogic relationships between pop music and our perceptions.

---

[18] This perspective is reminiscent of the concept of the hermeneutic circle; relating the whole to the part and the part to the whole (Bent). This concept emphasizes the relationship between the parts of a text, and between the parts and the text as a whole; the specific parts can only be understood in light of the text as a whole, at the same time as the perception of the whole is determined by the understanding of the parts. Important to note, is that the hermeneutic circle does not make it impossible to interpret a text. Rather, it stresses that the meaning of a text must be found within its context.

[19] Referring more specifically to the use of intertextuality as an analytical approach, Richardson and Hawkins note that pop texts ”depend on viewer/perceiver recognition of other texts in order to confirm meaning” (Richardson and Hawkins 2007: 17). This suggests that any intertextual references or allusions being addressed in the analysis of a text are interpreted at the discretion of the interpreter, and that any number of possible intertextual references and allusions may have been overlooked, emphasizing the subjectiveness of any interpretation.

Throughout the thesis, I make no attempt to erase the problematics of the dominant and privileged status of my own identity. While there are quite obvious challenges to writing this thesis from a male perspective, there are also considerations to be made regarding my geographical perspective. One might argue that the rapid globalization over the last couple of decades, with the increasing accessibility of the Internet being the primary cause here, has erased the borders between specific national perceptions, in the context of Western culture at least, and that we all experience the world around us in more or less the same way. Notwithstanding, I will argue that there are certain (geo-specific) conditions which should be noted. For instance, we might consider the priveliged status of whiteness in Western culture. Given historical conditions, ethnicity is an extremely delicate and important concern in the US, while not particularly so in Norway. When dealing with ethnicity throughout this thesis, then, I attempt to tune in to the subtleties and nuances which might be more apparent from a North American perspective, seeing that many of the debates which arise are explicitly relevant in a North American context. Similarly, upon encountering other questions or debates in which my gendered, ethnic, or geographical position might be of relevance, reflections on this will be supplied accordingly.

As I`ve already commented on, my research questions imply such a vast range of considerations and perspectives that any attempt to find definite solutions and answers is potentially futile. This is also reflected in my case studies, where I put an emphasis on offering a variety of perspectives on questions of how gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity function within the pop music videos, and each of the videos I`ve chosen to study offer different angles into questions of representation and perception. It should be noted that all of the examples I engage are situated within the genre of *mainstream* pop music. While a number of studies have engaged questions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity from the perspective of popular musicology, it seems that such studies in the context of mainstream pop music are relatively neglected. This strikes me as odd, seeing that mainstream pop has enormous potential in influencing our perceptions, if nothing else, at least through its ever-present visibility and availability. My main case studies are Beyoncè`s "Single Ladies", Lady GaGa`s "Bad Romance" and "Telephone", which are engaged after a series of short readings of one video each by Rihanna, Britney Spears,

and Christina Aguilera. Beyoncè and Lady GaGa are two of the most commercially successful and media-visible female pop artists in a global context, who offer up greatly differing perspectives to illuminate my research questions. The case studies of Beyoncè and Lady GaGa should also be effective in illuminating how these perspectives might intersect. Introductory perspectives will be offered throughout the second chapter, which briefly addresses three other highly actual artists; Rihanna, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, represented by one video each, to offer a contextualizing overview of more or less currently airing pop videos.[20] Even though the short readings in the second chapter cannot hope to offer great detail, I believe that this approach greatly benefits the whole of the thesis, through offering a series of perspectives which are illuminating, both to the contextual landscape in which the main videos of analysis reside, as well as to the functions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity within the main videos.

One of the main aspects of this thesis is the concept of the post-human pop star, where hyperembodiment and technology are key factors in the construction of this category. This is contextualized by the body-fixation of Western culture, as well as the increasingly important role of technology in the production, distribution, and reception of popular culture, and this is ultimaltely connected to the ways in which the "boundaries between the public and the private are changing in our culture" (Attwood 2009: xv). In regard to the hypersexualization of pop artists, this boils down to two things; new representational possibilities offered by modern technology, and the mainstreaming of pornography. The former point entails that the images of the gendered and sexualized body presented to us through music videos are digitally enhanced, mediated through the editing-possibilities of technology, and this ultimately contributes to the normalization and naturalization of (the very un-natural) physical perfection. The technologization of *the everyday* is also evident in the degree to which we communicate and interact with and within the online world, and this is part of a broader "tendency in contemporary Western

[20] Similarly to Beyoncè and Lady GaGa, these three artists have been chosen because of their commercial success and critical reception, as well as their visibility in popular culture. All three artists are highly debated and discussed, both in the media and by fans through blog posts and YouTube-comments, and together with Beyoncè and Lady GaGa make up the current generation of female pop stars.

societies in which sex and technology are stitched together so that we become sexual cyborgs" (ibid: xiv). This perspective brings us to the latter point, and includes that pornography is now mainly experienced online, which in turn means that it is widely available, and, thus, has lost much of its taboo quality. This is evident in how porn style is now "commonplace, especially in music video" (ibid), as the visual aesthetics of music videos and pornography are in many cases hardly seperable.[21]

Certainly, the post-human pop star is a product of its time; a technological construction offering itself up as a site for negotiating gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity. Current pop music videos present the body as a digital construction of physical perfection, not only through visual imagery, but also through music and sound. The technologized, audiovisual representation of the body is an important aspect of the politics at play in current pop music videos; the construction of hyperembodiment in pop artists is reflective of broader tendencies in general culture, and at the same time, offers a context for altering old and constituting new perceptions and expectiations to notions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. The analyses provided in the following chapters will lead us through several discourses on how female representations are constructed within music video, and a key aspect of this is the technologization of the body through both image and sound. This relates to an increasing sexualization of Western culture, where digital perfection makes its mark on the gendered and sexualized display of the body in music video. What is particularly relevant here is how music videos frame the negotiations between female objectification and emancipation in pop artists` representations, and how these representations offer themselves up as sites for blurring and at times even queering boundaries, as pop artists tread carefully between challenging and accommodating the expectations and perceptions of a mainstream audience.

[21] This raises controversial issues regarding power and the objectification of women and power. A perspective on this is offered by Haraway, as she discusses how the objectification of women is a form of alienation of women, because women have not authored the objectifications (Haraway 1991: 141).

# CHAPTER 2

## HYPEREMBODIMENT, PORNOGRAPHY, AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION IN THREE CURRENT POP VIDEOS

A major aspect of current trends in pop music videos is that of hyperembodiment, which is evident on several layers, from visual imagery to sound production. Playing into the expectations of an increasingly body-fixated culture, pop artists are shown off with beyond-perfect bodies, rendering them more than simply human. While bodyfixation in context of popular music is nothing new, this seems to have escalated alongside the technological advancements in the fields of photography and videography; the opportunities presented in digital editing and touch-up of photos and videos are virtually endless. Vernallis suggests that music videos "tend to be processual and transitory rather than static, and to project permeable and indefinite rather than clearly defined boundaries" (Vernallis 2004: 177), and this relates to how music videos offer a virtual reality, or a simple escape from everyday life. The image of music video "attempts to pull us in with an address to the body, with a flooding of the senses" (ibid), thus setting the video up as a virtual space for desire and identification, with the artist as the star persona. While perspectives on hyperembodiment in music videos involve how the body is technologically constructed within the audiovisual text, another key aspect is how and where these videos are accessed; mainly online.

It is no secret that the Internet is the current main arena for watching music videos, especially with music television channels, MTV included, prioritizing reality series` over music videos. The Internet also offers viewers and fans a way of responding to the videos and interacting with others, through comments on YouTube or blogposts. A point to note here is that the Internet is largely controlled and regulated by men, raising questions regarding reception of pop videos. It`s no surprise that the overwhelming growth of the Internet, and the virtual and interactive space it entails, are governed by politics of its own. In the early 1990`s cyberfeminism emerged as a community concerned with feminist interactions in the online world. Cyberfeminism "was born at a

particular moment in time, 1992, simultaneously at three different points on the globe" (Guertin 2003),[22] and one of the most notable inspirations for the movement is arguably the work of Donna Haraway (1991). Cyberfeminism can be understood as "a means of interrogating boundaries, troubling binaries, and problematizing language" (Guertin 2003), paying special attention to the female in interaction with the technologized online world. Haraway`s thoughts on the cyborg (Haraway 1991: 149-181) are particularly relevant with regard to investigating the technologized construction of the body in context of pop music video, and this will be revisited in discussions on the robo-diva in chapter three.

How is the body technologically constructed within music videos? How do musical codes contribute to representations of hyperembodiment? How does music and image work together in the playing out of gendered and sexualized identities? These are some of the underlying questions of this chapter, and they are all engaged through an anti-essentialist approach, seeking not to come up with definite, precise answers or descriptions. There are several questions and debates that arise in the following which, as previously stated, can hardly be answered definetively, and it is important to note that the potential meanings of the texts I engage are shifting and flexible. One of the most interesting aspects of the following readings is how pop videos seem to ambiguously accommodate and resist normative expectations and perceptions at the same time.

This chapter sets out to offer a framework for negotiating notions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in pop videos, with emphasis on the technological impact on female representations. This is done through readings of videos by three current, female pop artists, namely Rihanna, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera. Most pop videos rely on the construction of the pop artist through a gendered and sexualized display, which in context of the female pop artist seems to be centred around an idealization of

---

[22] "In Canada, Nancy Paterson, a celebrated high tech installation artist, penned an article called `Cyberfeminism´ for Stacy Horn's Echo Gopher server. In Australia, VNS Matrix (Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt) coined the term to label their radical feminist acts and their blatantly viral agenda: to insert women, bodily fluids and political consciousness into electronic spaces. That same year, British cultural theorist Sadie Plant chose that term to describe her recipe for defining the feminizing influence of technology on western society and its inhabitants" (Guertin 2003).

physical perfection. Hawkins suggests that "in the vast majority of pop music videos a repertoire of norms discipline the body through stark imagery and processed sound" (Hawkins 2011), and continues to argue that "the very sight of an artist performing affords a new rendition of the audio recording, the emphasis falling on the mannerisms of the body" (ibid). This perspective supports the body's prominence within music videos, reflecting social tendencies and the shaping of norms that discipline human behavior. Examining the modes of representation within music video, then, should reveal something about how these representations contribute to constituting the norms themselves. Staging the body is my main concern in the following readings, as I endeavor to illuminate how the audiovisual text offers itself up as a site for negotiating gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity.

The reading of Rihanna`s "Umbrella" investigates hyperembodiment as a technological construction, relating this to both image and sound, and my reading of the video is informed by two critical interpretations by Hawkins (2011) and James (2008). This reading also introduces the idea of the robo-diva, which will be revisited in chapter 3. In my engaging with Spears` "Womanizer", focus falls on the duality of Spears` representation, shifting between the emancipated and the objectified. This is also discussed in relation to the director`s role in making a video, his/her influence extending into the artist`s representation through a variety of decisions. The reading of Aguilera`s "Not Myself Tonight" relies on Barthes (1977) and Frith (1996) to theorize vocal embodiment, and problematizes this in regard to technological mediation. This reading also introduces theories regarding the sexualization of Western culture, as I investigate the video`s references to pornography.

**RIHANNA – UMBRELLA**

Only five years after her debut, Rihanna is arguably one of the most succesful, current pop artists, and she has created for herself a recognizable personal style, balancing glamorous excess with sexy raunchiness. Her public image emphasizes her capacity as a fashion icon as much as that of pop artist, and this is also reflected in the aesthetics of her

music videos, where extravagant, seductive images are featured prominently. Rihanna`s biggest hit to date is arguably "Umbrella" featuring Jay-Z, off of the album *Good Girl Gone Bad from* 2007.[23] The song is driven by an insistent, funky drum loop, accompanied by several layers of background synths contributing to an airy mix. After a short rap by featured artist Jay-Z, Rihanna comes in with her trademark voice, and the verses clearly showcase her as the star; the levels of the synths being lowered, directing focus towards the vocals, which themselves are emphasized using reverb effects, leaving Rihanna`s voice lingering in the air after each phrase. The sound production is polished and slick, and this is reflected in the airbrushed images of the video, showing Rihanna in the center of a semi-circle of bright lights, wearing a clinging, black leather outfit. The camera shifts in and out of focus, altering between close-up shots and full-body shots, emphasizing the point of showcasing Rihanna`s desirability and appeal. A key aspect of Rihanna`s representation in "Umbrella" is how she comes across as hyperembodied, and Hawkins argues:

> If Rihanna`s representation in "Umbrella" epitomizes hyperembodiment, it entails a beautification process that takes the aesthetics of pop to an extreme. […] Highly constructed pop videos, like pop songs, tend to be contentious for many, and Rihanna is one in a long line of female artists at the onset of the twenty-first century whose act steadily meets the eyes of a porn-fixated culture (Hawkins 2011).

Hawkins points to how Rihanna`s representation panders to a porn-fixated culture, where the idealized body is characterized by the ideals of perfection. In "Umbrella" this is emphasized by Rihanna`s beyond-perfect-aesthetic; her airbrushed body is complemented by clinging leather outfits, or portrayed nude covered in silver paint (see *figure 1)*, all within the "wet" look of the video as a whole. Portraying the body as beyond perfect is one of the most important aspects of constructing the female pop artist as the "star", setting her apart from the rest of us, and this entails an idealization of certain bodily traits and acts as properly female. Butler notes 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: XV). Applying Butler`s thoughts to pop music

[23] The music video to "Umbrella" is discussed thoroughly in two separate articles by Hawkins (2011) and James (2008).

video, the staging of the artist`s body is important. Pop videos stylize the body through gendered and sexualized displays, and does not only work on a visual level, but also through sound, creating the powerful construction of the pop artist as star.

**Figure 1: Rihanna covered in silver paint.**

One of the main aspects of pop music videos is the artist`s bodily responses to the music. Throughout most pop videos "the fragmented imagery of the body accrues meaning through the contingency of the music, which operates as a continuum for bodily movement" (Hawkins 2011). Here, Hawkins addresses a matter of gender significance: while the traits of hyperembodiment are quite easily spotted in artists` on-screen aesthetics, the music`s role in constituting hyperembodiment should not be neglected. Hawkins suggests that Rihanna`s airbrushed body "has it`s corollary in the gloss of the produced sound, establishing sonic conditions for stylizing corporeality in terms of gender, ethnicity, and generation" (ibid). This endorses the argument that hyperembodiment is not only achieved through the visual aesthetics of the body, but also is emphasized and reinforced by the sound production. Rihanna`s representation in "Umbrella" is contingent on the glamorous, electronic production of the song, where the rigidity of the sampled beat and the smooth synth lines inscribes her gendered display with a technologized nonchalance. The powerful and convincing musical expression guides the viewer`s responses to the visuals of the video, and Rihanna`s display of the sexualized body relies on sound and music equally as on image. On this matter, Hawkins

notes that "the tension and release in Rihanna`s movements through variable camera-angles convert into a visual commentary of the rhythm, timbre, and texture in the audio recording" (ibid), and that "the digitalization of her image and sound occurs within a context where she becomes a reflexive mirror for human vanity, her body fragmented into close-up facial shots, full body shapes, and components (limbs, torso, hair, breasts, and so on)" (ibid). This shows the impact of digital production on the construction of Rihanna`s representation in "Umbrella", resulting in a powerful display of hyperembodiment.

What is significant here is the technological construction of the artist`s representation within the music video, where the body is sensationalized to "encourage multiple viewings, its fetishistic appeal culturally specific and based upon many variants of the gaze,[24] not least of all that of the director`s […]" (ibid). The latter point speaks to the director`s role in constructing the artist`s representation in the video. Throughout the video process the director is "at the helm from beginning to end" (Schwartz 2007: 35), and the director`s concept and ideas for the video "creatively guides the entire team" (ibid). This recognizes the director`s creative control in making the video, with this control extending to decisions regarding the artist`s style, outfits, poses, and looks; in short, the artist`s entire visual representation. Vernallis notes that "music-video directors develop trademark styles" (Vernallis 2004: 136), suggesting the directors` impact on the artists` representations in music videos.[25] Following this perspective "we might say that the body showcases the star through the gaze of the director" (Hawkins 2011). This speaks to the multifaceted construction of the artist`s representation in music video, and how the body is framed in a range of technological constructions and directorial

---

[24] Here, the gaze refers to how objectified bodily excistense relates to the attitude of those regarding the subject. Laura Mulvey has theorized this infamously as the *the male gaze* (1975) proposing that the male gaze shapes the female object, having a determining role in the coding of feminine aesthetics. Developments in pop music style and identity politics over the last couple of decades have rendered Mulvey`s treatment of the gaze one-sided and outdated (Hawkins 2002, Fast 2001). Still, the relevance of the gaze is present, but more so as a plurality of gazes, as the gaze is not necessarily male in a post-mulveyan light.

[25] A similar point can be made on the music production process, where sound engineers and music producers are predominantly male, which becomes relevant in light of how musical codes contribute to the construction of the artist`s representation.

decisions. From this perspective, Rihanna`s hyperembodied representation is the product of several processes, from the engineering, arranging, and production of the song, to the planning, filming, and editing of the video. This entails that the fragmented images of Rihanna`s body is in dialogue with the music, as each twist and turn of the camera reflects articulations in sound. The erotics of her representation, then, are constructed by the synergy between image and sound: the powerful visual images of Rihanna`s digitally perfect body is mirrored by the slick sound production.

Robin James is engaged with the video, "Umbrella", from a slightly different perspective when it comes to hyperembodiment, focusing on notions of ethnicity, and the idea of the *robo-diva* (James 2008).[26] Tom Breihan notes that the chief characteristic of Rihanna`s voice "is a sort of knife-edged emptiness, a mechanistic precision that rarely makes room for actual feelings to bulldoze their way through" (Breihan 2007), and James, following Breihan, suggests that Rihanna`s "claim to robo-diva status derives from her voice as the site of her robo-incarnation" (James 2008: 414).[27] James describes how Rihanna changes outfits and style, between the dark and futuristic to the fresh and natural, and suggests that the "juxtaposition of the innocent, white-clad Rihanna with her `darker´, edgier incarnations is consistent with the good girl/bad girl opposition referenced in the album title: Good Girl Gone Bad" (ibid: 415). After describing how the video introduces the silver-painted Rihanna, James suggests that "because this metallic Rihanna immediately follows her `good girl´ incarnation, the juxtaposition is stark and significant: the opposite of `good girl´ is not just `dark girl´, but robo-girl (she's not just black, she's metallic)" (ibid). She continues to suggest that the way the "Umbrella" video presents the racialized good girl/bad girl dichotomy in terms of technology, futurism, and the robo-diva throws black women`s femininity in the face of white patriarchy, in that its "very existence challenges the political and aesthetic norms of white patriarchy" (417). Though this is an interesting perspective, I have a few problems with James` reading.

---

[26] The robo-diva refers to female pop artists presenting themselves as non-human, usually through robot aesthetics. Though only shortly discussed here, the robo-diva will be revisited in detail in the analysis of Beyoncè`s "Single Ladies".

[27] This is reminiscent of Hawkins` approach to hyperembodiment, regarding how visual aesthetics and musical codes work together to create the effect.

Firstly, I agree with Hawkins (2011), in that Rihanna`s representation in "Umbrella" is mainly non-emancipatory; it does not break new ground or vaguely attempt to challenge the male gaze. The basis for this argument rests on the assumption that Rihanna`s representation conforms to normative expectations in terms of desire, and that the video depends on a range of signifiers which objectify the female. Secondly, I disagree with James`apparent categorization of Rihanna as a black woman, when she is of Barbadian-Irish-African-Guyanese parentage, a point Hawkins theorizes (ibid). It seems that James overlooks the fact that by her visual aesthetic alone, Rihanna would probably more often than not pass as European or Latin-American. Such a generalization, treating non-whiteness as blackness, can only lead to an over-polarization of debates regarding ethnicity, and certainly misses out on the nuances and complexities at play here. Still, Rihanna`s robo-diva representation in "Umbrella" provides a noteworthy perspective on the sexuality and ethnicity of non-white women, and directs attention to how technology can impact on female representations.

**BRITNEY SPEARS – WOMANIZER**

During her career Britney Spears has received massive public attention, both for her music and her personal life. Perhaps the lack of privacy was one of the reasons Spears, after a period of turbulence in her life, finally broke down in early 2008, and was placed under temporary conservatorship of her father. Her sixth studio album, *Circus*, was released in december 2008, and the first single from the album, "Womanizer", received positive reviews and performed very well on pop charts worldwide, seeing the singer get back on the proverbial horse. "Womanizer" opens with a characteristic siren sample, which also returns throughout the choruses of the song. This siren is extremely effective in catching the listener`s attention, building up tension towards the first verse. The build-up is accompanied by various images of Spears lying naked and sweaty on the wooden bench of a sauna. This is supposedly the "real" Spears, the person underneath the disguises she wears throughout the video, initially appearing outside of the events transpiring in the overall narrative. The images and sounds of the opening sequence do

little to offer the viewer any narrative, though, and functions purely as a showcasing of the star. The attentiongrabbing effect of Spears` perfectly airbrushed, naked body in combination with the screaming siren, works to the video`s utmost advantage, and has the viewer on the edge of his or her seat when the narrative is introduced. The opening is accompanied by a background synth presenting the main chord progression throughout the song, in the key of C# minor, and a percussive fill-in leads up to the verse.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| C#m | C#m | F#m - E | Eb - D |

**Figure 2: Main chord progression in "Womanizer" (8 bars).**

The beat kicks in as Spears starts singing, thereby emphazing the vocals, and, by extension, the presence of the pop star herself. At this point, the narrative of the video is introduced. Returning to Vernallis and the nonnarrativity of music video, it seems that "Womanizer" is close to an exception from this rule. The visual narrative is chronological, interrupted only by incoherent clips of the "real" Spears in the sauna, and shows a potentially cheating boyfriend going through a day where he is presented with numerous temptations; all of them the "real" Spears herself in different disguises. This visual narrative works together with the lyrics, clearly revealing that Spears knows who he is and that she won`t stand for his womanizing ways. All of this is further wrapped up in catchy hooks, a steady beat, and a huge dance-pop sound. The male character of the video starts out confident and cheeky, flirting exceedingly with both a woman at the office and the waitress at a cafè (both the "real" Spears in disguise), who lead him on and tease him, before sending him off uncontented. When faced with the third temptation, the driver of his limo (still Spears in disguise), his facade starts to crack. The driver engages him head on, climbing into the backseat while steering the car with her foot, and suddenly the male character comes to realize that the situation is getting out of control. This scene correlates with the song`s bridge, achieving a slight change in pace. While the rest of the video is dominated by rapid cameramovements and editing, emphasizing the restlessness of the song, this scene is largely shot with slower cameramovements. The

change in mood is further emphasized by the bridge of the song, departing from the tension of the main chord progression (tonality of C# minor) into the release of A major. Similarly, the lyrics depart from the accusations, suggesting "maybe if we both lived in a different world it would be all good". This is a clever dynamic twist, emphasizing the impact of the following climax of the last chorus, and the accompanying visual narrative, showing the man being confronted by all of the different incarnations of Spears, before he vanishes underneath her bedspread as she makes up the bed.

The message of the video seems quite obvious; Spears makes a moral judgement against cheating, objectifying women, and womanizing. The video gains impact in light of how male sexual promiscuity has been stereotyped as natural, and a possibly derived meaning could be that Spears challenges both the validity of this stereotype, as well as the cultural acceptance of it. However, all throughout Spears` self proclaimed girl anthem (People 2008), the viewer is presented with fragmented images of the "real" Spears; naked and sweaty in the sauna. Thus, Spears` representation in the video clearly panders to the gaze of the viewer,[28] somewhat undermining the message the lyrics are trying to get across. From this perspective, Spears` emancipation in the video is somewhat problematic, when she so willingly plays the role of the objectified woman alongside that of the emancipated female. Still, it never feels as though Spears ceases to be in control. This brings up the point of representational politics; how does Spears exercise control, achieving emancipatation through her representation in the video, despite her oversexualized display? In most pop videos "sex takes over from narratives of love, as new rules are quickly established" (Hawkins & Richardson 2007: 619), and from this perspective "the desire to be desirable is closely linked with the desire to appear to be free, and, in the case of many female artists, emancipated and empowered" (ibid). This should mean that Spears` toying with sexual and gendered codes works both as a vessel for showcasing Spears as the star, and at the same time as a queering of femininity and

[28] Note that not only the `real` Spears, but every character Spears is disguised as throughout the video is sexualized almost to the point of parody. Further, these representations function not only to seduce the video`s male character, but are equally accommodating to the gaze of the viewer.

gender perception, in that she is presented as sexualized to the point of parody.[29] From this perspective, Spears` cultural or social agency "can be linked to a politics of representation where gender becomes the rationality for striving for freedom" (ibid). Thus, the juxtaposition of the two oppositional sides of Spears` representation, offers an interesting dialogue, somewhat creating a new context for debating perceptions of gender and sexuality. The dynamics of Spears` representation in "Womanizer" brings to mind her previous performance in the music video to her 2004 hit "Toxic". Examining the latter, Hawkins and Richardson notes:

> Spears is constructed as a multiple identity who reinvents herself through her relationship with others at the same time as she confirms a classic fetishistic mission. In this framework, the link between the female and technology symbolizes a mechanized, cyborg form of eroticism. Via computerized effects, Spears' femaleness is so exaggerated that she queers the fixity of femininity in a spin that serves as a parody of the natural (Hawkins & Richardson 2007: 617-618).

Though written about the video to "Toxic", this holds equally true for "Womanizer", as the similarities in the aesthetics, images and dynamics of the two videos are striking.[30] It should come as no surprise, then, that the director of the two videos is the same man, Joseph Kahn. Commenting on the similarities of the videos, Kahn says that he "didn`t see it as a direct sequel but a 2008 answer to `Toxic´" (Vena 2008), and that he "knew there were going to be comparisons" (ibid). The similarity between the videos demonstrates the degree of creative control vested in the video director; the director guides the artist through his or her performance (Schwartz 2007: 37), having tremendous impact on how the artist comes across in the video. This brings us back to the point of how the artist is showcased through the gaze of the director, raising several questions regarding the politics of gender, representation, and reception. The contradiction between the emancipatory ideal, displayed through the lyrics of the song and emphasized by the main narrative of the video, and the obvious objectification of Spears through the images of the

---

[29] In this context queer is not a synonym for homosexuality, rather, "queerness is less a category of sexuality than an approach to sexuality"(Oakes 2006: 48), acting as a critique of prevailing cultural categories (ibid).

[30] Notably, the similarity between the two *songs* have also been commented on, with "Womanizer" being described as "a brilliantly executed mashup of `Toxic´ with the album`s more insane moments like `Ooh Ooh Baby´"(Popjustice 2008).

sauna-scene, opens up for a problematization of gender roles and sexual identity. At the same time as Spears` representation accommodates the gazes of a mainstream audience, the parodic quality of this oversexualized display calls to attention the norms and expectations that encourage such representational strategies. Spears` representation in "Womanizer", then, offers a range of problematizations without neglecting the primary task of showcasing her as the star. Thus, the video brings gender debates to the mass market without jeopardizing Spears` desirabilty in regard to normative social perceptions. This is evident in how the video quite conventionally accommodates heterosexual desire, all wrapped up in a package of excellent entertainment value.

**CHRISTINA AGUILERA – NOT MYSELF TONIGHT**

Having frequented the pop charts for over a decade, Christina Aguilera can be counted as a textbook example of how pop artists move across a variety of styles, both in terms of musical expression and personal image. Aguilera`s latest incarnation engage in sexualized cyberplay, with the release of the *Bionic* album. The lead single from this album is "Not Myself Tonight", which joins in on the current electro pop trend. The sound is dominated by dirty synthesizers and a sampled, simple beat, and the song has hardly any organic elements to it. The high-technological sound extends to the vocals, and Aguilera`s voice is digitally altered throughout the song by applying delay effects, rhythmic editing and dramatic pitch-shifting. These alterations might have a signifying effect in mediating the human (feminine) expression of Aguilera`s voice. Frith mentions "the voice as body", referring to the way in which the voice is produced by physical movements of muscles and breath, and continues to suggest that hearing a voice is the same as hearing a physical event, *hearing a body* (Frith 1996: 191). The gendered and sexualized body is a major location for the social construction of femininities and masculinities, female and male sexualities, and the idealization of gender specific female and male attributes; in short – the social construction of women and men. Frith suggests that the sexual charge of most pop music comes "from the tension between the (fluid) coding of the body in the voice […] and the (disciplined) coding of the body in the beat"

(ibid 144), and from this perspective, pop artists` representations depend on gendered and sexualized stylizations of the body through signifiers in music and sound. The voice seems particularly expressive of the body because it directs our attention to something happening in the body itself. In this way it becomes an unmediated expression for the conveyor of the voice (ibid: 191).[31] This raises questions of vocal embodiment and gender, especially in light of Butler`s argument that "bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" (Butler 1999: 12), which in turn should suggest that vocal performances gain meaning through signifiers of gender. This is relevant in regard to pop culture`s idealization of coherence to the established gender categories, and this idealization is the effect of corporeal signification in that "acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance" (ibid: 185). From this perspective, Aguilera`s articulation of vocal embodiment could be a determinate factor in her gendered representation, and an important part of this is how she signifies coherence or incoherence to normative gender perceptions through her representation.

What happens then, when vocal embodiment is obscured through the use of digitalized effects? Because the grained voice, signifying the body, certainly has its counterpart in the voice lacking grain (Barthes 1977: 188). The extensive use of effects on the vocals in "Not Myself Tonight", arguably implying corporeal alteration, should surely have an effect on how Aguilera`s voice, and by extension Aguilera as the conveyer of the voice, is perceived. The alteration of the voice is also emphasized by the lack of organic elements in the musical arrangement, and the presence of artifice and technology is almost overwhelming. This departure from organic aesthetics is reflected in the title of the album on which the song appears, *Bionic*, and on its album cover, depicting Aguilera with half of her face removed to reveal the robot underneath. Returning, for a moment, to Hawkins` discussions on Rihanna, he suggests that her heavily compressed vocal sound

[31] Frith suggests that the voice as direct expression of the body is "as important for the way we listen as for the way we interpret what we hear […] because with singing, *we feel we know what to do*" (Frith 1996: 191), it doesn`t require thought or imagination to know where the sounds come from. The grained voice is thoroughly discussed by Barthes (1977), and his work should be noted as the foundation of Frith`s on this topic.

is an integral part of her hyperembodiment, and that this is "attained through a timbre that is processed digitally" (Hawkins 2011). In much the same way, one might argue that Aguilera`s similar vocal production contributes to a sense of hyperembodiment; working together with references to the robotic, and the air-brushed, porn-aesthetic of the video, to compose an image beyond ordinary humane (female) corporeality. Certainly, the cyber references are emphasized by Aguilera`s excessively digitalized voice, and the signifiers in the sound production work playfully together with the aesthetics and props of the video to construct Aguilera`s sexualized, hyperembodied representation; the S&M inspired leather outfits and props playing a large part in this construction.[32] The result, then, sees Aguilera departing from normative gendered and sexualized representation. Rather, Aguilera takes on a hypersexualized, post-human form, emphasizing the spectacle of her display of the body, and resulting in a queering of boundaries.[33]

The electronic, almost industrially dirty expression of the song is quite evidently complimented by the aesthetics of the video, immediately offering rapid editing and stark images. The video is quite explicit in its visual sexualized aesthetics, positing Aguilera as the object of desire through a multitude of different images. Pamela Church Gibson notes "the increasingly sexualized atmosphere of Western society" (Gibson 2004:vii), where sexually explicit images are to be found everywhere as "pornography filters into the mainstream" (ibid). Looking at "Not Myself Tonight", the video seems to support and reflect the tendencies of Western society that are proposed by Gibson. Aguilera appears throughout the video in sexually explicit attires and positions, with the aesthetics of it all quite clearly referencing pornography (see *figure 3*). This endorses the proposition that porn-images became chic subsequent to the late 80`s (McNair 2009: 55), insofar as "talking about, referring to or borrowing from its codes and conventions had lost much of its transgressive, taboo quality and become acceptable, even fashionable" (ibid). This is generally true in the context of popular culture, and arguably specifically true in the

[32] In this context S&M refers to stylistic traits of sadomasochism as articulated through pornography.
[33] Queering in terms of music has been admirably discussed and studied in Brett, Thomas & Wood (1994), and more specifically in terms of popular music by Whiteley & Rycenga (2006), Jarman-Ivens (2007), and Steinskog (2008).

context of female pop artists. Aguilera borrows images and codes from pornographic representations of S&M; leather corsets, mouth gags, chains, and whips are all props which appear frequently throughout the video. The visual imagery works together with the song to create a vivid performance, in which sexual gestures are cleverly synchronized with points of interest in the music, such as an emphasized beat, or a high-pitched vocal scream, ultimately highlighting the extravaganza of the sexual display through which Aguilera constructs her representation.

**Figure 3: A series of porn-referencing images from "Not Myself Tonight".**

The staging of Aguilera`s body, and the general aesthetic of the video, brings to mind Madonna`s mid 1990`s music video to the single “Human Nature”. As a response to public criticism regarding Madonna`s sexual antics, “Human Nature” is a sarcastic parody, in which Madonna advocates for freedom of expression. But where Madonna urges “express yourself, don`t repress yourself” and states that “I`m not sorry, it`s human nature”, Aguilera sings “I`m not myself tonight” and “In the morning when I wake up, I'll go back to the girl I used to be”. While Madonna meets her critics head on, Aguilera underlines that she is “out of character”; this is not the real her. The result of this might be that Aguilera`s performance is playing into the supposed expectations of a porn-fixated culture, in lacking the cage-rattling effect of Madonna`s determined free will.

One of the narratives in the video shows images of Aguilera taunting and kissing a tied up woman, and the sexual tension between them is arguably quite obvious. Here,

Aguilera is seemingly queering the boundaries of heterosexuality by depcting herself as a sex-craved lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual-curious girl, both through the lyrics of the song and the narrative of the video. The images are accompanied by Aguilera singing "I`m kissing all the boys and the girls", referencing what would be considered bisexual behavior. Instead of this having a destabilizing effect on stereotypical sexual relations, however, this effect falls through when Aguilera follows up with "someone call the doctor `cause I`ve lost my mind", rendering the bisexual exploration a flimsy whim; not at all a part of who she is or wants to be. This reflects that pop artists` "degree of acceptance is predicated on them *signifying* queer rather than *being* queer" (Hawkins 2006: 282); that pop artists can not stray too far off the beaten track of normative representation without being in danger of losing the acceptance of a mainstream audience. This means that "signifying queer is a lot more about maintaining tensions than resolving them" (ibid), and more than anything, perhaps, Aguilera`s queerness in "Not Myself Tonight" bears witness of the sensationalizing of sexuality as a performance strategy. One aspect to consider here is the aesthetic of this part of the narrative in the video. Both women are dressed in sexy lingerie, and the scene is staged within an atmosphere which is reminiscent of male-oriented, lesbian pornography. The latter point entails aspects of body language and positioning, as much as costumes, props, and imagery. Positing the exploration of female-on-female sexual relations within this aesthetic more than anything accommodates the male gaze through references to a common and well known, heterosexual, male fantasy.[34] Aguilera`s sexualized display here does not differ drastically from that articulated by Spears` in "Womanizer", but still, there is something that I would argue sets the two videos apart. Aguilera`s blatant appropriation of mainstream hardcore porn, used in quite a conservative, normative way, also considering the way she "chickens out" in the lyrics, does not quite achieve the same parodic effect which is evident in "Womanizer".[35] Thus, the video comes across as a

[34] The dynamics of porn-aesthetics in pop contexts will be revisited in the analysis of Lady GaGa`s "Bad Romance".

[35] One might argue that the parodic effect is, in fact, evident, but in my opinion this seems less than intentional.

sensationalization of out-of-control female sexuality, rather than a critical comment on gender relations and sexual perceptions.

## CONCLUDORY THOUGHTS

So, what do these readings demonstrate about female representations in contemporary pop videos? How can we critically evaluate the strategies of the female artists I've presented? Most of all, this chapter has foregrounded, and offered introductory perspectives on, some of the themes that will be more thoroughly discussed in the following chapters, although they have also shed light on some key aspects of constructing female representations within pop videos. With the digitalization of physical perfection being key to the imagery of current pop videos, striving to keep up with an ever-increasing body-fixation in Western culture, this is sure to have an effect on the representation of the artist. In his reading of "Umbrella", Hawkins notes that a range of signifiers objectify the female, and that "Rihanna`s powerful and erotic imagery is transgressive in terms of its representational function – it frequently exceeds the limits of what is acceptable for emancipated girls playing out the `sinful´" (ibid). I would propose that similar effects are achieved in both Spears and Aguilera`s videos, as similar aesthetics and images can be found in all three videos. In common for the three videos is how negotiations of gendered and sexual values are problematized when they are positioned within an aesthetic that accommodates heteronormative expectations, employing the objectification of the female to project desire and desirability alike. What is significant here, is how such strategies are not strictly perpetuating the norms and perceptions they are playing into. Rather, these representations seem to subvert normative expectations at the same time as they accommodate them, most notably through a sense of parody in the outrageously sexualized and gendered images they display, the effect of which, more often than not, will be to overt the societal and cultural norms which call for such strategies. Thus, these videos offer perspectives on how the body is inscribed with gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and how this is related to the context of culture and society.

# CHAPTER 3

## BEYONCÈ: ALL THE SINGLE…ROBO-DIVAS?

After four studio albums, 40 million copies sold, four US number 1 hits, and several line-up changes, the pop group Destiny`s Child announced their break-up on June 11th 2005. Personal careers had already started a few years earlier for both Kelly Rowland and Beyoncè Knowles, the two remaining of the group`s founding members, and the group`s end may have been inevitable. Through the release of several albums, both critically acclaimed and hugely commercially successful, the last decade has seen Beyoncè growing into the role as one of contemporary pop music`s greatest stars.

Beyoncè Giselle Knowles was born in Houston, Texas, on September 4th 1981. At the age of eight she teamed up with, amongst others, her friend Kelly Rowland in the group Girl Tyme, which eventually was renamed Destiny`s Child. After several years rehearsing and touring, the group was signed to Columbia Records in 1997. Destiny`s Child went on to become one of the most successful pop groups of all time, despite being troubled by internal conflict and lawsuits. With a powerful musical expression marrying R&B and mainstream pop, the group articulated an image as strong, independent women, an image that Beyoncè to a large degree has adopted in her solo career. Largely in possession of creative control in regard to Destiny`s Child`s musical production, it came as no surprise when Beyoncè branched off to pursue a solo career, and The New York Times went as far as stating that "it's been a long-held belief in the music industry that Destiny's Child was little more than a launching pad for Beyoncé Knowles's inevitable solo career" (Ogunnaike 2004).

In this chapter my aim is to investigate aspects of Beyoncè`s visual aesthetic and musical expression in "Single Ladies", specifically with regard to representations of hyperembodiment, and how the technologization of the female body can impact on relations between ethnicity and sexuality. The video encourages several discussions regarding the technologization of representation. Much of this chapter contains discussions on ethnicity - the hypersexualization of blackness in particular - before entering into debates on technologization and hyperembodiment. I wish to emphasize that

my primary interest in Beyoncè`s representation of ethnicity is her ethnic ambiguity. Still, she is black, and this must be theorized before discussing how her blackness is mediated. These discussions involve engaging notions of authenticity and inauthenticity, which I relate to Grossberg`s studies into these categories (2000). Following this, I discuss Beyoncè`s robo-diva alter-ego Sasha Fierce, which is represented in the video by the singer`s black leotard and robot hand. Proposing the link to the robotic, such an erotification of the post-human seems to mediate expressions of both ethnicity and sexuality. Through a discussion on the robo-diva, I investigate what the employment of robot aesthetics might mean for the relation between blackness and sexuality, also problematizing the robo-diva through Haraway`s notion of the cyborg (1991). The ”Single Ladies” video is addressed through interpretations of both visual imagery and musical sound, and is furthermore explored in context of music video as a site for negotiating notions of ethnicity and sexuality.

## SINGLE LADIES: MUSIC VIDEO, DANCE, AND THE BODY

October 13th 2008 saw the release of the music video to Beyoncè`s “Single Ladies”, the hit single debuting on radio only five days earlier, which arguably can be described as one of the previous decade`s most powerful pop performances. The first few bars of the video, directed by Jake Nava, are accompanied by a pitch black screen, before a fade into grey reveals Beyoncè and her two back-up dancers. With no form of visible set or props of any kind, the visual aesthetic of the video is simplistic and clean, presenting the dancers against a blank background, really only present in the shifting shades of grey, black, and white (see *figure 4)*. Shot in monochrome, the minimalist aesthetic of the video is further emphasized. Returning to Vernallis, suggesting that most music videos are nonnarrative (Vernallis 2004: 3), “Single Ladies” is arguably a good example in support of this, though at the extreme end of the scale. The video contains no storyline, no characters, and no set. Beyoncè and her two back-up dancers are presented in a blank space, and the video`s simplistic setting forces the viewers attention onto the intricate dance routine. Thus, the video functions as an uninterrupted showcasing of the star,

where Beyoncè receives the viewers full attention. The simplistic staging of Beyoncè and her two back-up dancers against a plain background seems to gain impact by the desaturated image, insisting on the contrast between the black dancers, dressed in black, against the bright white background.

**Figure 4: Frames from "Single Ladies".**

The sexualized, bodily display is projected visually through the pure visual impact of the video, specifically in the aesthetic of the dance routine. Despite the limited use of tools, Nava`s editing is very effective in following the dynamic of the song, with hooklines and key phrases, as well as points of interest in the lyrics, being elegantly underlined. Nava utilizes the blank background, and has it varying in brightness to underscore the song. This works together with the fluid camera movements to create an interesting audiovisual flow, accompanying the dance-routine. Vernallis notes how camerawork and music can work together, directing attention to the body of the performer:

> One of music video`s pleasures lies in tracing a trajectory through space, while following along with the music. As the camera cranes, the performer`s body twists, and the eyes follow, the viewer can pursue one thread (the music, say) or another (for example, the camera as it tracks through space or the line of the body as it leans backward) (ibid: 109).

Here, Vernallis describes how music video consists of unfolding spaces, and she continues to suggest that music video "can return us to simple pleasures, like the exploration of space, as narrative is pushed aside" (ibid: 110). In this sense, "Single Ladies" is indeed a pleasure to watch. The camera glides in smooth lines, as the dancers move around in the blank, open area, creating a sensation of flowing, virtual space.

Throughout the video, the blank background varies in shades of grey, between bright white and pitch black, which, in addition to bringing a sense of life and dynamic to the video, outlines the dancers in varying degrees of contrast against the background. The "oh oh oh"-hookline is each time marked by a sudden overexposed white background,[36] and the dancers are presented in stark contrast to this blinding whiteness throughout the entire section of the hookline. This demarcation of the song`s form is also emphasized by the choreography, seeming to present the most sensational moves to accompany the hook, showing that "sometimes a strong image can work in tandem with a feature of the song to create a musical visual hook" (ibid: 156). Like this, Nava`s video editing contributes both to underlining the song`s hooks, as well as directing focus towards the more extravagant elements of the dance routine. With the danceroutine established as the center of attention, focus is directed towards the dancers` bodies, and how they respond to the music.

Hawkins notes that in music videos dance assists continuity and draws the viewers attention to the music (Hawkins 2011), and continues to suggest that through dance, the artist`s "physical movements encourage engagement on the part of the viewer, with the choreography revealing aspects of the artist`s persona" (ibid). This demonstrates how dance can be employed as a performance strategy, showcasing the star through a bodily display of virtuosic moves. Vernallis suggests that "dance is essential to music video because it teaches how the music is to be experienced in the body" (Vernallis 2004: 71), seeing as music videos provide an account of the performer`s body "[W]ithin a scheme that reveals the body bit by bit" (ibid: 97). In "Single Ladies" Beyoncè`s body is presented through a variety of camera angles and shots ranging from full body to close up, and without a visible set or any props the focus is entirely on the dance routine - how the body responds and moves to the music. Reoccuring physical gestures entail sassy kicks, frequent clapping of hands, and both the rolling and thrusting of hips, all of which are closely linked to events in music and sound. The clapping, for instance, references and corresponds with the handclaps in the song, and kicks and hip-thrusts are done in

[36] The exception is the hook leading to the song`s bridge section. Here, the background is somewhat more neutral, while the high-contrast white is used to emphasize the transition to the bridge.

correspondence with the hit of the snare drum. Rapid physical movements are almost always synchronized to an articulated beat or the hit of the snare, which emphasizes the physicality of these gestures and draws attention to what happens in the music at the same time. Beyoncè`s bodily display is constituted by music just as much as by image, thus providing a good example of how music and image come together in artist representations.

## B(L)ACKDROP: MUSICAL CODES, BLACKNESS, AND SEXUALITY

Surrounding the music video to "Single Ladies" are long lasting, and still ongoing, negotiations between ethnicity, race, and sexuality, with popular music as perhaps one of the most prominent arenas for these negotiations for the past couple of decades. When discussing the case of Beyoncè, it seems unavoidable to bring up the traditional discourses surrounding blackness as primitive, explicitly sexual, and close to nature. A key aspect of approaching this discussion from the angle of popular musicology, is the mapping of musical codes onto the discourses surrounding performance. At the base of this discussion is the premise that some musical qualities are perceived, through cultural assertions of them, to be more white, or more black, than others. An example of this might be how the use of sample technology, greatly employed by black hiphop artists throughout the 1990`s, can create a rhythmic expression, which, through timbre and sound, might be held to signify black culture (Hawkins 2002: 175-176). Looking at "Single Ladies", this link to blackness seems evident in how the rhythmic drive of the song is dependent on these kinds of samples. The rhythmic drive is the main musical element of the song, with sparse melodic and harmonic elements. The main drum groove of the song is repeated in 4/4-bars, with the most prominent elements being the bass drum and hand claps. The bass drum marks the first beat with two 16th notes, marks the second and third beats flat, before syncopating the fourth. The hand claps mark every 8th, but what makes an interesting interaction with the bass drum is the accentuation of every offbeat, which to a certain extent creates a sense of air between the bass drum`s

syncopation on the fourth beat, and the prolonged wait until the hand claps accentuate the last 8th in the bar, along with the snare drum (see figure 5).

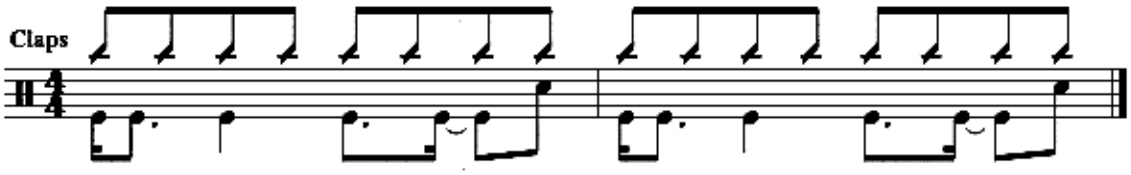


**Figure 5: Main drum beat of "Single Ladies".**

Not before we are a minute into the song, are we introduced to harmonic development, as a dark synth sound is added to accompany the refrain. This synth is present for four bars, before the second verse sees the song returning to an arrangement based solely on rhythmic elements and vocals. It appears obvious that the song highlights rhythmic qualities over harmonic development and traditional structure and form.[37] The song`s obvious rhythmic focus can be viewed in connection with the traditional link between black music and rhythm, as a part of, or a sidetrack to, the discourse on blackness and the primitive. Anne Danielsen offers a viewpoint on this in her studies on rhythm and groove in "Presence and Pleasure – The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament":

> The primitivist account of black culture in our recent history, as wild, irresponsible, closer to nature, out of control – but also more sexually potent- unavoidably influences contemporary relations between blacks and whites on all levels. […] It is striking how black music has been placed in opposition to European high art musical traditions in the West. In contrast with Western art music`s traditional focus on form, harmony, and thematic development, African music, for example, has been identified mainly with rhythm (Danielsen 2006: 24).

[37] This is not to say that there is an absence of formal distinction between verse and refrain. But instead of this distinction being marked by a new chordprogression, it is evident in the introduction of new elements, such as the earlier mentioned synth and a new sample, joining the hand claps in accentuating the offbeat.

Danielsen comments on how blackness has been culturally coded as closer to nature and "more sexually potent" (ibid), compared to whiteness, and puts this in perspective with the distinction between African music and Western art music. Pop music in general is, of course, most often dependent on a strong rhythmic foundation. While this is nothing that solely concerns "Single Ladies", this particular song is arguably dependent on rhythmic elements to a greater extent than pop songs usually are.[38] The argument here is not that "Single Ladies" is neglecting in its scarcity of harmony, chord progressions, or melodic instrumentation, but rather that the dominance of rhythm is one of the defining aspects of the song. The sparse instrumentation adds to a greater focus on the highly repetitive beat, and this can be viewed in light of repetition as part of black culture.[39] What is noteworthy here, is how the extensive use of rhythmic repetition in "Single Ladies", may become signifiers of blackness, in light of the discourses surrounding rhythm and black culture. The main drum groove, presented at the very start, is repeated throughout the entire song. On account of the sparse instrumentation, the feeling of repetition is quite distinct, working musically to create a static backdrop for the vocals. Danielsen identifies a "general `othering´ of rhythm in relation to musical aspects like harmony, melody, and form within the musicological tradition" (ibid: 205), a perspective which further suggests the ethnic significance of the song`s foregrounding of rhythmic qualities over harmony and melody. To suggest that the song`s heavy reliance on rhythmic drive and repetition would cause the average listener to associate it with blackness would be a stretch, to say the least. But still, as a part of the discourse on blackness and primitivity, the simplicity in form that this absence of harmonic and melodic development entails is still worth noting. The way the music *feels*, if one might use as crude a word; efficient, powerful and, perhaps, primitive, could certainly influence the listener`s experience to a large degree.

---

[38] A reason for this assumption might be that I grew up listening mainly to rock, blues, and soul artists, where riffs and melody are often foregrounded. Though rhythm should not at all be neglected as an important aspect of these genres, what I picked up from artists from these genres may have informed my musical competence and values in a way that facilitates an unfamiliarity with the musical expression of "Single Ladies".

[39] See Snead (1984) and Danielsen (2006: 156-168) for relevant discussions on repetition.

Another aspect of the musical expression of "Single Ladies", and certainly an important aspect in determining the feel of the song, is the way Beyoncè uses her voice. Returning to Frith and "the voice as body", this perspective should entail that since there are different bodies, and different ethnicities with different bodily traits,[40] there are different qualitites of the voice to accompany these bodies. Relevant here is the notion of "grain of the voice", most famously explored by Barthes (1977), where "grain" might be intepreted as distance from a colorless or lifeless tone, as for example produced electronically (Moore 2007: 46). The singing voice is evaluated as physically produced, and is attributed qualities such as nasality or throatiness (Frith 1996: 192). The term grain is in this way used to describe the seductional qualities of the voice, the sound of throat, tongue, and lips; how the voice is produced by a body. Following the principle of Barthes, claiming the link between grain of the voice and identity (Barthes 1977), Beyoncè is connected to blackness through the use of her voice, with both grain and phrasing closely associated with genres such as soul and blues, commonly conventionalized as "black music". Her voice is clarly characterized by a distinct presence of *body*, with an articulated nerve, a dirtiness or grain, closely connected to the vocal styles of blues.

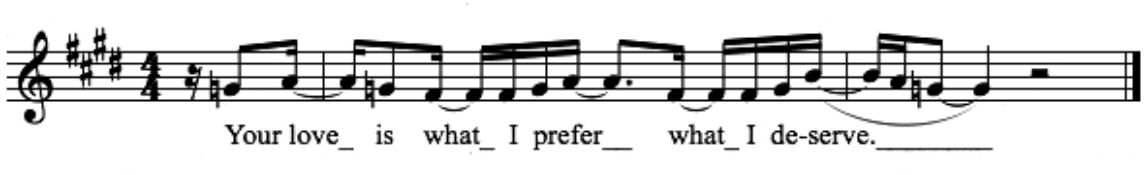


**Figure 6: Excerpt of vocal phrasing in the bridge of "Single Ladies".**

Furthermore, the melodic phrasing, characterized by Beyoncè`s vibrato style and legato phrase endings, can be traced back to the virtuosic vocalists of soul (See figure 6). From this we see that Beyoncè`s voice, according to Frith the unmediated expression of its

[40] Note that this does not insist on the importance of actual biological difference, but rather on the importance of the cultural coding of difference in terms of ethnicity and race.

conveyor, is linked to two music styles conventionally perceived as distinct parts of black culture. It is important to note that these signifiers only work in relation to dicourses and conditions outside of the musical text, and that it is in the tension between the musical text and its context that this meaning can exist.

Returning to discussions on the close relation between ethnicity and sexuality, feminists have long noted that black female sexuality is most often represented as excessive, and that "these sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women's sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, madonnas from whores" (Crenshaw 1995: 369). This endorses the proposition that the virgin/whore dichotomy is based on racial difference, where white women are considered asexual, as opposed to black women as excessively sexual. Following this, the account of black women as more sexually potent than white women is arguably most relevant for the reception of pop representations, with blackness offering a sense of otherness that is to be feared, but also as something dangerous and exciting that can be desired. West offers a perspective on the mythic status of black sexuality, and how this hypersexualization can be experienced as equally dangerous and interesting:

> The myths offer distorted, dehumanized creatures whose bodies – color of skin, shape of nose and lips, type of hair, size of hips – are already distinguished from the white norm of beauty and whose feared sexual activities are deemed disgusting, dirty, or funky and considered less acceptable. Yet the paradox of sexual politics of race in America is that, behind closed doors, the dirty, disgusting, and funky sex associated with black people is often perceived to be more intruiging and interesting, while in public spaces talk about black sexuality is virtually taboo. (West 2001: 83).

West notes that while blackness is often viewed as sexually dangerous, it can be viewed as equally sexually intriguing. A recent study by Andrea Elizabeth Shaw (2006) implies that black sexuality no longer holds the same taboo-qualities it used to. Shaw has studied discourses regarding non-white women in terms of sexuality and embodiment, and notes that whiteness is no longer the sole ideal of beauty and femininity in Western culture

(Shaw 2006: 6-7).[41] She continues to suggest that, even though black women have become a part of mainstream culture, they "inhabit a space largely defined by its sexuality" (ibid: 8). Granted that notions of ethnicity are relevant to how sexuality is perceived, the perception of black sexuality as particularly powerful offers several perspectives on pop artists` sexualized displays. Katherine Liepe-Levinson remarks that sexual desire in Western culture is, in fact, rarely represented through signifiers of the "normal" (Liepe-Levinson 2002: 25), and from this perspective, the otherness of black sexuality could be used as a performative strategy. A criticism towards this perspective on the hypersexualization of blackness in the context of pop music, might be that this presence of hypersexuality has not been visible until fairly recently.[42] Still, recent or not, its influence on the scene of current popular music is evident, as the sexualized displays presented in music videos are projected through uses of the body. Thus, these sexualized displays can hardly be separated from the body in question`s articulation of ethnic or racial traits. This is most relevant from a performative point of view, where artists might use presentations of blackness to emphasize sexuality, or, in contrast, would want to downplay blackness to avoid being stereotyped. In Jon Refsdal Moe`s article "Aesthetic and Performative Considerations of Christina Milian's Music Video *Dip It Low*", he investigates how Milian approximates black culture to gain the cultural impact of belonging to a minority group. Moe writes:

> [A] performance of blackness allows Milian to escape the less culturally empowered image of Hispanic, the minority that she belongs to. Of course, this performance of blackness or African-Americanism also makes her more adaptable to the mainstream American market than had she performed visible Hispanic idoms (Moe 2007: 353 – 354).

---

[41] Similarly, Cashmore argues that the "images whites held of blacks have changed in harmony with changes in aesthetic tastes", and that "what was once disparaged and mocked is now regarded as part of legitimate culture" (Cashmore 1997: 1). He continues to suggest that "whites not only appreciate black culture: they buy it" (ibid), which is relevant in terms of ethnicity as a performative strategy. See Cashmore (1997) for a thorough study on the commodification of black culture.

[42] While the performance of pop music has always been connected to expressions of sexuality, at least since Elvis Presley, the trend of hypersexuality and hyperembodiment could be considered more recent developments. Although black performers, like James Brown, surely came across as explicitly sexual, the *hypersexualization* of blackness as a performative strategy was arguably hardly visible until the emergence of the black hiphop artist in the 1980`s.

Here, Moe touches on something very important, and lays the foundation for debating the problems involved in employing blackness as a performative strategy for cultural empowerment. While a performative use of blackness might contribute to the weakening of cultural classifications of ethnicity and race, and dissolve and challenge stereotypes, it could also be said to sustain and intensify the black/white dichotomy in contemporary pop culture. In the case of Milian, Moe suggests that her "performative passage to cultural empowerment also implies her submitting to pre-established categories of ethnicity and colour, and subsequently the logic of racism" (ibid). When blackness moves from an indication of ethnicity or race to a performative strategy of representation, this could ultimately problematize the black minority population`s social role, which can be said to be dominated by blackness not as culturally empowering, but as a categorization and limitation it can be hard to escape (ibid: 355).[43] In the context of pop videos, then, this should make the black female body a site where notions of ethnicity and sexuality can be negotiated through technological construction, as the music video offers a space where the artist`s representation is constructed through digitalized images and sound. Thus, music video offers representational opportunities which are not available to the same extent in for example stage performances or in everyday life.

Relating these discourses to Beyoncè, her gendered and sexualized display in "Single Ladies" is signifying of blackness through both the musical signifiers already discussed, as well as through visual aspects. The most obvious argument here concerns the black dancers dressed in black, in stark contrast to the blank background. The simplicity of this staging emphasizes the dancers skincolor, and directs the viewers attention to the physicality of the enticing dance routine. Vernallis notes the relevance of race and sexuality within music video:

> […] [T]he body, music, and pleasure have always been closely linked, and pop music historically has always dealt with transgression: one of the most powerful ways to do so is through race and sex. African American women`s bodies in videos are often eye-

[43] Though I find Moe`s handling of ethnicity somewhat essentializing at times, his perspective on the cultural limitations of blackness as ethnic category is well developed, and relevant to my discussions on Beyoncè`s artiluations of blackness and her ethnic ambivalence.

> poppingly beautiful, Amazonian sculptural forms that achieve a semiotic pitch that the image needs in order to match the speed and density of the music (Vernallis 2004: 71).

Vernallis raises a valid point on the relevance of the body within music video, and how this is related to notions of ethnicity and sexuality that reflect social and cultural perceptions. Following this perspective, Beyoncè`s body is certainly presented as "eye-poppingly beautiful". But instead of agreeing with Vernallis` grim assertion of what this signifies, that the bodies of black women are for ogling and sex (ibid: 72), I suggest that this reflects an increasing bodyfixation in Western culture more generally, as representations of physical perfection are not exclusive for non-white artists. The technological construction of the body through editing and production is a common strategy in showcasing the star through desirable images, and this finds its corrollary in the production of music and sound. From this perspective, Beyoncè`s hyperembodied representation speaks more to how pop artists are showcased through gendered and sexualized displays, than to representational strategies based on derogatory stereotypes in terms of ethnicity.

The fact that Beyoncè approximates blackness through several signifiers could arguably give her the cultural empowerment of belonging to a minority, but at the same time, the light color of her skin and her European aesthetics, as well as her construction of hyperembodiment through digital editing, might allow her a flexibility which is not easily accessed through traditional blackness. Thus, I perceive Beyoncè`s expression of ethnicity as highly flexibly, and will argue that any sense of blackness which is a part of her representation is extensively mediated through technology and robot-aesthetics. With this perspective in mind, I will now consider Beyoncè in terms of hyperembodiment and ethnic ambivalence, as I examine how her representation in "Single Ladies" is technologically constructed.

## ETHNIC AMBIVALENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND HYPEREMBODIMENT

Even though she comes from a black background, being daughter of a black father and Creole mother, it is still a considerable part of Beyoncè`s visual aesthetic that she is relatively light skinned. It is easy to perceive her as almost Latin American- or European-looking, and this is emphasized by the smooth, digital lightness of her skin. As digital editing and airbrushing smooths over physical features that have ethnic implications through cultural assertions, this construction is very interesting considering that "black performers often have to compromise their identity in order to reduce their sexual threat" (Hawkins 2002: 188). Through her presentation of physical perfection the boundaries of ethnic categories are transgressed, and Beyoncè slips seemlessly in and out of several ethnicities. This is more visible when comparing different videos, as pop artists change style radically from video to video, but it is also evident in the images of "Single Ladies". Depending on camera angles, lighting, and editing Beyoncè`s representation is ever-flexible, as even the color of her skin seems to vary relative to the shifting shades of the blank background. This ambiguity is reflected in the sound production. We have seen how musical codes might be held to signify blackness through Beyoncè`s use of the voice, with both grain and phrasing closely associated with genres such as soul and blues, as well as through the song`s reliance on samples and rhythmic repetition. At the same time, the musical production seems to reflect the polished perfection of her physical presentation. The sound production is clean, polished, and with a distinct artificial dimension, signified by the extensive use of modern-sounding synthesizers and samples. There is definitively a presence of technology and artifice in the music. Using conventional stereotypes, technology is often equated with masculinity, and this perspective should suggest how Beyoncè`s femininity is mediated by the presence of technology in her musical expression. This could also be applied to her articulation of ethnicity, with technology being the opposite of nature and the primitive which is commonly associated with blackness. From this divide in her musical expression in combination with her perceived ethnic ambivalence, we might suggest that Beyoncè`s expressions of the female and the corporeal is interacting with technology, creating a dialogue between authenticity and artifice.

Grossberg suggests that "the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity" (Grossberg 2000: 206). From this perspective, the authentification of inauthenticity draws attention to the fact that authenticity itself is a construction, and thus, the "only authenticity is to know and even admit that you are not being authentic, to fake it without faking the fact that you are faking it" (ibid).[44] Looking at Beyoncè`s performance in "Single Ladies", there are several elements which project a sense of inauthentic authenticity. First and foremost, we have the setting of the video in a blank space, which sets it apart from any "real" space we might encounter in our daily lives, and furthermore underlining the construction of the video as a virtual space. Secondly, turning to the sound production of the song, it is quite obvious that there is an element of artifice here, as the use of technology is evident in the use of samples and synths: the sounds that we hear are primarily produced electronically (most probably through programming), and not through the playing of analogue or acoustic instruments.[45] Putting this in context with Beyoncè`s "authentic"-sounding voice, we see a negotiation of authenticity in the dialogue between the human expression of her voice and the clinical, electronic production. This dialogue extends to involve the images of the music video; the technological production of the song is reflected visually in the images of the video, and the digitalized perfection of Beyoncè`s body is complimented by a robot hand, which facilitates a mapping of technology onto the black female body, suggesting the tension between the authentic (natural) and inauthentic (artificial), visually as well as musically. This dialogue rejects a one-sided view of Beyoncè`s ethnicity, reinforces the perception of ethnic ambiguity, and emphasizes the flexibility of her ethnic articulation. Relating this to notions of sexuality, especially in terms of the hypersexualization of the black female body, Beyoncè`s ethnic ambivalence might contribute to mediating her representation of blackness, sexuality, and gender.

---

[44] Authenticity is a slippery concept, and one should be careful not to essentialize this as a sense of "realness". What is relevant here is how the artist comes across as convincing, reflecting the credibility of the artist.

[45] This relates to a broad tendency in the distinction between authentic rock and inauthentic pop, where traditional arguments entail that authentic music is performed on instruments by the artist, while inauthentic music is produced through programming etc. This is dependent on the listeners values and tastes in music, and is connected to a perception of the artist`s agenda and integrity (Moore 2007: 199).

Furthermore, putting this in connection with her openly technological construction, both visually and in terms of produced sound, the admittance of inauthenticity can prove as a vehicle for achieving and maintaining cultural agency, as the performance is tied to the experiences and desires of the audience. From this perspective, the fact that the performance is highly mediated through the technologies of visual and sonorial editing is irrelevant (ibid: 205) because "the ability to manipulate the presentation becomes the very measure of affective power" (ibid). In this way, Beyoncè`s representation gains agency through openly exploiting the opportunities of technological construction and mediation.

## PUT A RING ON IT: BEYONCÈ`S ROBOT HAND

Beyoncè`s articulation of hyperembodiment in "Single Ladies" is constructed through references to post-human aesthetics as much as through digital editing of image and sound. The category of the post-human is approximated through the notion of Beyoncè`s alter-ego Sasha Fierce. According to Beyoncè herself, Fierce is "the fun, more sensual, more aggressive, more outspoken side and more glamorous side that comes out when I'm working and when I'm on the stage" (Leach 2008), and this alter-ego also represents Beyoncè`s opportunity to separate herself from the spotlight. In Beyoncè`s own words, "I have someone else that takes over when it's time for me to work and when I'm on stage, this alter ego that I've created that kind of protects me and who I really am" (ibid). Fierce is recognized in the music video to "Single Ladies" by the robot hand Beyoncè is wearing, which stretches up towards her elbow.[46] [47] Besides this obvious link to the robotic, the post-human aesthetic is supported by the clean and almost sterile look of the video, as well as by Beyoncè`s black leotard. Unlike the backupdancers` outfits,

[46] This is referential of Beyoncè`s live-performance at the 2007 BET awards, pre-dating the video to "Single Ladies", where she appears in a full-body robot costume. Through this intertextual reference, her performance of the post-human in "Single Ladies" is amplified by her previous exploration of this category through consistency and repetition.

[47] The robot hand could also be read as an intertextual reference to Michael Jackson`s white sequined glove, a recognizable symbol of his infamous 1983 performance of "Billie Jean".

Beyoncè`s leotard also covers her left arm, showing off the gleaming robot hand in strong contrast, and, perhaps, leaving the viewer to wonder whether what`s under the leotard is human or robotic. Either way, this construction is very effective in calling attention to something explicitly mediated in Beyoncè`s visual aesthetic, and offers a perspective on some interesting debates. The references to the post-human, presenting Beyoncè`s black female body in a robot outfit, puts fuel to the fire of the reality/artifice dichotomy, and offers another point of entry for discussions on ethnicity and sexuality in context of technology. In light of earlier discussions on blackness and nature, and the hypersexualization of the black female body, Beyoncè`s performance of the robo-diva creates an interpretive context where, through the mapping of technology onto her hypersexualized body, a distance is suggested to her own corporeality, and further a distance to the stereotypical depiction of the black, female body.[48]

There are several aspects of the video to "Single Ladies" which references the robotic or the post-human. In terms of music, the entire song is engulfed in the electronic sound of digital samples and synths. Visually, and most obviously, the robo-diva is signified through Beyoncè`s costume; the black leotard and the robotic hand. The presence of the robotic hand is emphasized on several occasions, both musically and visually, perhaps most prominently at 2 minutes 44 seconds into the video where Beyoncè abrubtly stops dancing, and a fast zoom into close-up sees her pointing at the robotic hand. This is also underlined in the music; using digital timestretching, the song is briefly suspended in mid-air as the beat is cut off, accentuating Beyoncè`s pointing gesture. This example emphasizes the degree to which Beyoncé`s representation in "Single Ladies" is constructed technologically through digital editing and production, encompassing both images and sound. Furthermore, at the end of the video when the music has stopped, the camera zooms in to a close shot of Beyoncè, resting the robotic hand against the side of her face, panting heavily, suggesting physical exhaustion after

[48] The robo diva is discussed by James (2008), where she studies Beyoncè`s performance at the 2007 BET awards. According to James, a central aspect of the performance of the robo-diva is how technology mapped onto the black female body challenges the authority of white patriarchal society (ibid: 413-414). I find this a very fascinating perspective, and though I will not comment on James` reading of Beyoncè`s performance at the 2007 BET awards, I will explore a similar perspective myself in regard to the "Single Ladies" video.

performing the extensive choreography (see *figure 7)*. The physical exhaustion points to something explicitly human, but at the same time the robotic is emphasized by mechanical sound effects as she moves the hand. Like this, Beyoncè`s corporeality and feminity is mapped onto technology, further underlining the dialogic relationship between authenticity and artifice in the performance of "Single Ladies".

**Figure 7: Beyoncè flaunting her robot hand.**

The use of robot-aesthetics sees Beyoncè exploiting the opportunities of self-mediation. The robo-diva, I suggest, is not a device for creating distance between Beyoncè and her own physicality. On the contrary, the artifice of the performance is exactly what allows her control of her own body. The mapping of technology and robot-aesthetics onto the black female body rejects the traditional stereotyping of the black female as close to nature and excessively sexual by mediation through technology (traditionally viewed as a masculine category). By challenging the conventional stereotypes about black, female sexuality, she is afforded the opportunity to redefine it in her own image. This is done in a sexualized display which writhes in physical perfection, achieved through digital editing of image and enhanced by the digital editing of sound, and the result is a representation which offers up the pop star as a sensational, technological construction. A

construction that through the category of the post-human, which emphasizes her ethnic ambiguity, is swiftly removed from the boundaries of ethnic categories.

Beyoncè`s referencing of robot aesthetics further problematizes the static boundaries of ethnic and gender categories through the notion of the cyborg. Haraway describes the relationship between organism and machine in Western culture and society as a border war, where the stakes have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination (Haraway 1991: 150). In the midst of this border war is the cyborg, which, through unifying human and machine, is about permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints (ibid: 154), leaving the binaries on which Western society is based obsolete. This could involve the destabilizing of the distinction between nature and technology, mind and body, even male and female. The cyborg, then, is about "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (ibid), and not least, pleasure in the blurring and confusion of boundaries. In light of Haraway`s account of the cyborg, Beyoncè`s performance of the robo-diva functions as a comment on notions of race and sexuality, and as such, becomes a tool for challenging the boundaries established by heteronormative conventions. I will, though, not go as far as James (2008) in celebrating the emancipatory effect of the robo-diva. Beyoncè`s representation in "Single Ladies" is certainly interesting as a problematization of ethnic and sexual boundaries, offering a new context for re-evaluating the binaries which define ethnic and sexual perceptions. Still, Beyoncè`s ethnic ambiguity and departure from stereotyped black female sexuality is facilitated through an articulation of hyperembodiment, which, even though it renders traditional ethnic categories unsatisfactory, objectifies the female through an unrealistic projection of physical perfection. In turn, this raises important questions about the technologization of the body within music video and identifies several problematic areas. Entailed in this is how the music video, through the extremely powerful synergy between image and music, presents the viewer with an experience of the body that can hardly be matched by experiences outside of the video`s virtual space. This is disconcerting, seeing that this experience can contribute to shaping our expectations and perceptions of real life.

## CONCLUDORY THOUGHTS

It seems that the performance of the body, more strongly than any other aspect of music video, holds the markers and values of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Because of the simple visual setting in “Single Ladies” the body receives full attention, as the music guides the viewer along the lines of Beyoncè`s hips and thighs, which twists and thrusts in accordance with the music. Utilizing musical codes is a key aspect of constructing representations within music videos, and in Beyoncè`s case emphasis falls on vocal embodiment in dialogue with electronic instrumentation. Beyoncè`s vocal subjectivity is based on an expression which, through grain, timbre, and phrasing, plays into cultural assertions of blackness by association to musical styles like blues and soul. This is mediated through the use of digital technology, as the voice is put in relation to the highly electronic instrumentation and sound. In “Single Ladies” the process of production, in terms of both music and image, shape Beyoncè`s representation, as the gloss of the sound production is perfectly reflected in the digitally edited images displaying airbrushed perfection.

Through her representation in ”Single Ladies” Beyoncè seemingly exceeds the boundaries of perfection, with airbrushed, spotless skin and a well-polished body image which mediates her blackness and seperates her from the notion of black women as natural. The digital airbrushing renders facial features smooth and generic, leaving little basis for the viewer to evaluate Beyoncè as part of a specific ethnic category. Thus, instead of being trapped in the stereotypes surrounding black women and sexuality, Beyoncè is awarded a great ethnic flexibility. This allows her to indulge in explicitly sexualized displays without surrendering to the cultural implications and limitations this would imply in relaion to the stereotyped hypersexualization of blackness. Rather, she takes refuge in the flexibility offered by her ethnic ambivalence. Important to note, though, is that Beyoncè`s ethnic ambivalence should not be essentialized. Her performativity is arguably still very much rooted in blackness, which shows that even

with all the make-up, lighting, and airbrushing tricks available to the images of music video her ethnicity still remains black.[49]

Beyoncè`s expression of ethnic ambivalence is also contingent on the appropriation of robot-aesthetics, both through visual props and electronic references in sound, and this impacts equally on sexuality and ethnicity. Through the mapping of technology and artifice onto the black, female body, we are offered a new context for discussing racialized and sexualized identity, with questions being raised about the validity of ethnic and sexual stereotypes. Thus, Beyoncè`s hyperembodied representation displays sexuality within a framework which is hardly accessible through notions of traditional blackness, and her ethnic ambiguity allows her greater freedom in showcasing herself to the gazes of a diverse group of viewers. Still, though her representation problematizes the relationship between ethnicity and sexuality, Beyoncè still comes across as somewhat conservative in terms of gender representation. Her display of physical perfection panders to the gaze of a mainstream audience, and conforms to the expectations of heterosexual desire, which somewhat contradicts the emancipatory ideal suggested in her engagement with ethnic perceptions. If anything, then, "Single Ladies" stands as proof of the complexities of gender representation within the multifaceted medium of music video.

[49] A strong point here involves how Beyoncè would be perceived within a U.S. context, where her blackness arguably would never be questioned.

# CHAPTER 4

## LADY GAGA – A MONSTROUS AFFAIR

By virtue of its title, *The Fame*, Lady GaGa`s debut album released in August 2008, accurately anticipates the spectacle and hysteria which has surrounded the artist for the last couple of years. Lady GaGa is noted for her extremely extravagant, experimental style, along with her distinct brand of cathcy, danceable mainstream pop. The sale of more than 15 million albums, and over 50 million singles, over the first two years since the release of her debut album spells out a commercial success that is staggering. Upholding her public image of glamourous excess and provocative mischief, Lady GaGa continues to thrive in the pop mainstream.

While the Lady GaGa concept was conceived decades later, Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta was born in New York City on March 28, 1986. She started playing the piano at the age of four, and at 17 she gained early admittance to the New York University`s Tisch School of the Arts, but dropped out during sophomore year in order to focus on her music career. Eventually, she signed a music publishing deal with Sony/ATV, and worked as a songwriter for artists such as Britney Spears, New Kids on the Block, and The Pussycat Dolls. By 2008 Germanotta, now under the name of Lady GaGa, had relocated to Los Angeles where she finalized her debut Album.

The lead single from Lady GaGa`s second studio album, *The Fame Monster,* is "Bad Romance", which did very well on the international charts, reaching number one in several countries, and peaking at number two in the US. The video offers a useful point of entry for numerous debates centred around gender and sexuality, and also exemplifies the influence of what I would term *outsider culture* on GaGa`s brand of mainstream pop. My main focus in this chapter falls on strategies of flirtation with fetishism, and the notion of monster-aesthetics. Reading the audiovisual impact of the music video to "Bad Romance" against the lyrics of the song, I investigate GaGa`s toying with heteronormative S&M, and problematize this in relation to pornography. I enter discussions on pornography and GaGa`s sexualized display through the work of Simon Hardy (2009) and Paul Willemen (2004), and I approach S&M through Anne

McClintock`s studies into this phenomenon (2004). Subsequently, I turn my attention towards her appetite for *outsider culture*, and thereby engage my argument with the presence of the post-human and the monstrous in her visual aesthetic. A key aspect of this discussion involves how these visual images might be supported and reflected by signifiers in music and sound. In the end, GaGa`s appropriation of the monstrous is aesthetically compelling, and how this is achieved will be traced throughout the chapter.

## CAUGHT IN A BAD ROMANCE: LYRICS, AUDIOVISUALITY, AND S&M

Stretching further the boundaries of gender and feminity, which before her arrival at the scene of pop music seemed already exhausted by artists such as Madonna,[50] Lady GaGa`s visual aesthetic appears to be inspired by burlesque and the glam rock of artists such as David Bowie and Marc Bolan.[51] While GaGa`s visual aesthetic and persona is quite elaborate, "Bad Romance" is in many ways a structurally simple pop song, with the main part of the song built on a familiar framework of Intro - Verse – Pre-Chorus - Chorus – Verse – Pre-Chorus - Chorus – Bridge – Extended Final Chorus. The harmonic development is straightforward with A minor as the main key, and both melodically and tonally the song offers few surprises. The main hooks and the choruses are set apart from the rest of the song by a shift in tonality to C-major, as opposed to the A-minor which dominates most of the song, strategically highlighting the most memorable parts. (see *figure 8*)

[50] Numerous studies deal with Madonna from a musicological perspective, notably Hawkins (2002), Whiteley (2000), and from the perspective of video or multimedia analysis by Cook (1998) and Vernallis (2004).

[51] This reading might reflect my personal experience with glam-rock, the genre being part of my treasured musical preferences while growing up. Others might associate GaGa`s aesthetics with more recent pop acts, such as The Scissor Sisters.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Song structure** | Intro A, Choruses, Bridge B | Verses | Intro B, Pre-choruses, Bridge A |
| **Chord progression** | F-G-Am-C<br>F-G-E/G#-Am | Am-C-F | Am/none |
| **Tonality** | C-major | Am | Am |

**Figure 8: Table of chord progression and tonality in "Bad Romance".**

Having entered the pop scene at a time where YouTube is one of the most important channels for promoting both the music and the artist through music video, GaGa has taken good use of the video format, offering her fans elaborate, mysterious, and often very long videos, thoroughly showcasing her as the star of the show. The music video to "Bad Romance" is directed by Francis Lawrence, and the main storyline entails Lady GaGa being kidnapped, drugged and auctioned off into sexual slavery. From the sound of it, one should think that GaGa plays the typical role of the female victim, but, as we will see, the video holds several perspectives on gender roles and sexuality. Offering an obvious point of entry to the sexual content of the song, is the lyrics. When discussing the meaning of pop songs in everyday life, arguments about music`s social and political values most often refer to the lyrics, showing that words matter to people, they are important to how pop songs are heard and evaluated (Frith 2002: 159). When dealing with the lyrics of pop songs from a musicological perspective it is important to note the qualities of words in the context of music, how words can gain or lose meaning by the musical context, and in terms of music video also the visual context, in which it is performed. Hawkins notes:

> Significantly, lyrical connotations and musical codes clearly constitute an integral part of reading visual narratives. It follows that the intimacy in the mode of address in pop videos is articulated as much through gestures as words, which carry with them impressions of their meaning (Hawkins 2002: 120).

This perspective on mode of address illustrates that lyrics, musical codes, and visual narrative should be read as a whole to effectively investigate the meanings of a music video, concurring with my previous assesments. Through investigating the lyrics of the song in their musical context, as well as in the context of the video`s images, I am keen to

discover how Lady GaGa`s sexuality is constructed through her toying with the boundaries of heteronormativity, specifically in terms of how she incorporates traits of S&M into her image. A major issue in this regard is whether or not the references to S&M in "Bad Romance" can be read as normative according to heterosexual conventions, and how this is constituted through image and sound. To accompany these discussions, I have drawn up a table that shows how the visual narrative, music, and lyrics complement one another in the music video (see *figure 9*).

| Part | Visual narrative | Music | Lyrics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-intro (0:01-0:12) | Wide shot: Lady GaGa sits on a throne surrounded by people.<br>Close shot: the camera zooms to her face before showing a close-up of her finger on the mute-button of a remote. The song starts as GaGa lifts her finger from the button. | Synthesized excerpt of a fugue in B minor from The Well-Tempered Clavier by Johann Sebastian Bach.<br>Staccato, electronic harpsichord sound. | |
| Intro A (0:13-0:29) | Several different shots show the Bath Haus of GaGa. There are seven white pods in a clinical, white tiled room, the center pod (containing GaGa) has "monster" written on it, with the T in the shape of a cross. | One of the song`s main hooks are presented, returning later as part of the chorus. Same chord progression as chorus, the part is dominated by a variety of synthsounds, and the lack of beat contributes to an eerie quality. | 1 Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh<br>Caught in a bad romance<br>2 Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh<br>Caught in a bad romance |
| Intro B (0:30-0:45) | The pods open, and GaGa and her dancers emerge wearing white latex suits covering their whole body and faces. | Accompaniement strips down to one staccato synth, vocals are foregrounded. Crisp and somewhat nasal quality to the vocals. Bassdrum comes in at line 5 of the lyrics, underlining "GaGa". | 3 Ra-ra-ah-ah-ah<br>4 Roma-ro-mama<br>5 GaGa oh-la-la<br>6 Want your bad romance |
| | Wide and mid shots: the monsters are out and start clapping and dancing to the beat.<br>Close shot: We are presented with another Lady GaGa, innocent-looking and wide-eyed in a bathtub in a brightly lit room. | Full beat and synth bassline joins. | 7 Ra-ra-ah-ah-ah<br>8 Roma-ro-mama<br>9 GaGa oh-la-la<br>10 Want your bad romance |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Verse 1<br>(0:46-1:01) | Close shot: the lyrics are sung alternately by GaGa dressed tightly in black (the costume references the monsters), and the wide-eyed GaGa in the Bathtub.<br><br>Wide shot: the monsters dance with an animalesque quality in sharp, rapid movements. The legato feel of line 15 (”Love-love-love”) is emphasized in the choreography. | Staccato synth disappears, and the beat changes timbre, the effect suggesting a false halftime feel. Vocals foregrounded, this time with a rich, full tone, underlining the sensuality of the lyrics. Lines 14-16 are sung more nasally, also demarcated by chaotic synths being added. Line 15 stands out from the rest in a legato feel. | 11 I want your ugly<br>12 I want your disease<br>13 I want your everything as long as it’s free<br>14 I want your love<br>15 Love-love-love<br>16 I want your love<br>(hey) |
| Verse 2<br>(1:02-1:17) | Close shot: continued from verse 1. ”Hey” emphazised by blackdressed GaGa grabbing her crotch.<br><br>Wide shot: continued monster danceroutine. | Similar musical organization to Verse 1.<br><br>Vocals in both verses feels rather monotone and static, melody centres around Am, only deriving from the 1st, 3rd and 5th notes by a rapid 7th. | 17 I want your drama<br>18 The touch of your hand<br>(hey)<br>19 I want your leather-studded kiss in the sand<br>20 I want your love<br>21 Love-love-love<br>22 I want your love<br>(Love-love-love<br>I want your love) |
| Pre-chorus<br>(1:18-1:26) | Close shot: lyrics sung by bathtub-GaGa, her laidback nonchalance somewhat betraying her innocence. Mimicks monster dance at one point.<br>Wide shot: charactheristic hand movements emphasizing the beat. | Simpler beat, and a pulsating synth builds up tension towards the chorus by changing timbre.Vocals are spoken, heightening the listeners awareness of the lyrics, and suggesting a certain sincerity. | 23 You know that I want you<br>24 And you know that I need you<br>25 I want a bad, bad romance |
| Chorus 1<br>(1:27-1:58) | Close shot: GaGa is kidnapped from the bathtub, and stripped from her clothes.<br><br>Wide shot: the white tiled room is brightly lit, emphasizing the impact of the chorus. | Full beat, focus on the vocals, with a rich synth background.<br><br>Main chordprogression of F – G – Am – C, feels less static than the verses, gives a sense of momentum. Tonal center of C-major. | 26 I want your love and I want your revenge<br>27 You and me could have a bad romance<br>28 I want your love and all your love is revenge<br>29 You and me could have a bad romance |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Close shot: close facial shot of GaGa with no costume or props, presumeably the ”real” GaGa. Focus on the eyes, emotional and pained look.<br><br>Mid shot: Bathtub GaGa is forcefully drugged. | Continued drive from first part of the chorus, vocals blend more with the background. | (Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh)<br>30 Caught in a bad romance<br>(Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh)<br>31 Caught in a bad romance |
| Intro B<br>(1:59-2:06) | Mid shot: GaGa is dressed in a diamond-studded outfit, violently handled and against her will presented to a group of men. | Additional synth in the upper register, frantic and restless. A percussive synth contributes to the beat.<br>The chaotic qualities of the music underline the visual violence, also emphasized by the return to Am tonal center. | 32 Ra-ra-ah-ah-ah<br>33 Roma-ro-mama<br>34 GaGa oh-la-la<br>35 Want your bad romance |
| Verse 3<br>(2:07-2:22) | Close and mid shot: another GaGa is depicted naked in dimly lit surroundings, her spine is bulging, her body is presented as somewhat abnormal and monstrous, and she wears a bat for a hat. Short facial shot puts emphasis on ”horror” in the lyrics.<br><br>Wide shot: kidnapped GaGa dances for the group of men, backup dancing by a group of the kidnappers. The moan is emphazised by the choreography when GaGa grabs her crotch (again). | Voice foregrounded, similar to verses 1 and 2, but with an additional, hollow sounding synth marking the offbeat.<br><br>The new synth contributes a busier feel in the verses, and to further distinction between the different vocal parts (lines 36-38 and lines 39-41). | 36 I want your horror<br>37 I want your design<br>38 Cause you’re a criminal as long as you`re mine<br>39 I want your love<br>40 Love-love-love<br>41 I want your love<br>(Moan) |
| Verse 4<br>(2:23-2:38) | Wide shot: main focus is on GaGa performing for the group of men.<br><br>Close shot: naked, abnormal GaGa and bathtub GaGa edited in rapidly to emphasize ”vertigo stick” and ”hey”. | Similar musical organization to verse 3. | 42 I want your psycho<br>43 Your vertigo stick (hey)<br>44 Want you in my rear window<br>45 Baby, you’re sick<br>46 I want your love<br>47 Love-love-love<br>48 I want your love<br>(Love-love-love<br>I want your love) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-chorus (2:39-2:46) | Mid shot: abnormal GaGa dances. Underlines the beat.<br><br>Mid shot: kidnapped GaGa dances.<br><br>Close shot: the group of men bid on the kidnapped GaGa, and she is auctioned off at one million rubles. | Similar to previous pre-chorus, combined with visual imagery the part gets a slightly different feel. | 49 You know that I want you<br>50 And you know that I need you<br>(Cause I`m a freak bitch, baby!)<br>51 I want a bad, bad romance |
| Chorus 2 (2:47-3:18) | Wide and mid shot: kidnapped GaGa performs the choreography from first chorus.<br><br>Close shot: naked, monstrous GaGa strokes her glowing spine, underlines ”bad romance”. | Similar to Chorus 1. | 52 I want your love and I want your revenge<br>53 You and me could have a bad romance<br>54 I want your love and all your love is revenge<br>55 You and me could have a bad romance |
| | Wide shot: kidnapped GaGa continues dancing.<br><br>Mid and close shot: another GaGa in black lingerie is seemingly suspended in time, surrounded by diamonds frozen in mid-air. | | (Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh)<br>56 Caught in a bad romance<br>(Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh)<br>57 Caught in a bad romance |
| Intro B (3:19-3:26) | Wide shot: kidnapped GaGa continues dancing.<br>Mid shot 1: camera circulates GaGa suspended in time. Mid shot 2: GaGa dressed in a chrome solarsystem outfit, spins in circles, seemingly floating. | Vocal melodies and harmony same as earlier, without the frantic and percussive synths of previous intro B. The tidier background grounds the song, emphasizing the vocals, and foreshadowing a dramatic musical change… | 58 Ra-ra-ah-ah-ah<br>59 Roma-ro-mama<br>60 GaGa oh-la-la<br>61 Want your bad romance |
| Bridge A (3:27-3:43) | Various shots show GaGa in a peculiar, green glittering dress, seemingly walking the catwalk. Having no connection to the overall narrative of the video, this emphasizes the intermission-like qualities of the music, building suspense. | …which arrives in shape of the bridge.<br>Vocal spoken in rhythmic, robotic manner, underlining the absence of harmonic progression in this part. Tonal center of Am, vocals monotone on 7th, creates a | 62 Walk walk fashion, baby<br>63 Work it, move that bitch, crazy<br>64 Walk walk fashion baby<br>65 Work it, move that bitch, crazy<br>66 Walk walk fashion baby |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Close shot: face shot of the previously innocent bathtub GaGa singing ”I`m a freak bitch, baby”, seductive and spiteful look connecting her to the notion of the femme fatale. | suspended tension.<br>Pulsating synth from pre-chorus connects this part to the rest of the song, functioning as a red thread.<br>Change in timbre builds towards climax. | 67 Work it, move that bitch, crazy<br>68 Walk walk passion, baby<br>69 Work it, I`m a freak bitch, baby |
| Bridge B<br>(3:44-4:15) | Various shots show GaGa and the dancers dressed in red, performing a choreography on the floor.<br><br>Various shots show GaGa, wearing a polarbear cape, approaching the winning bidder. GaGa`s slow, intent approach supports the building tension in the music.<br>Close shot: face shot of the ”real” GaGa full of emotion, singing ”I don`t wanna be friends” and ”want your bad romance”. | Instead of a climax being reached, the music settles on an anti-climax with the removal of the beat. Several staccato synths ensure musical drive, as tension builds.<br>Chord progression from chorus, tonal center of c-major.<br>Back-up vocals and hi-hat added, contributing to an intensification of the bridge, obviously building towards the final chorus.<br><br>Last bar of the bridge feature solely vocals, setting the stage for the major impact of the final chorus. | 70 I want your love<br>71 And I want your revenge<br>72 I want your love<br>73 I don’t wanna be friends<br>74 Je veux ton amour<br>75 Et je veux ton revenge<br>76 Je veux ton amour<br>77 I don't wanna be friends<br>78 Don`t wanna be friends (Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh)<br>79 I don`t wanna be friends (Caught in a bad romance) (Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh)<br>80 I don`t wanna be friends<br>81 Want your bad romance (Caught in a bad romance)<br>82 Want your bad romance |
| Chorus 3<br>(4:16-4:47) | Wide shot: GaGa undresses and the room starts burning.<br>Wide shot: the now familiar chorus choreography is performed and elaborated by GaGa and the dancers wearing red.<br>Close shot: face shot of the ”real” GaGa, contemplative and longing look on her face. | Lead vocals ad-lib, foregrounded over the main chorus line. Adds impact to the lyrics, GaGa is seemingly sincere in her desires. | 83 I want your love and I want your revenge<br>84 You and me could have a bad romance<br>85 I want your love and all your love is revenge<br>86 You and me could have a bad romance |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Wide shot: choreography intensifies and continues.<br><br>Wide shot: the burning room and GaGa in the polarbear cape watching unaffected.<br><br>Close shot: the ”real” GaGa with a soft, almost excusing expression, singing ”caught in a bad romance” | Powerful, desperate lead vocal on lines 87-89, 1st and 3rd notes of Am, over chorus chords. | (Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh)<br>87 Want your bad romance (Caught in a bad romance)<br>88 Want your bad romance (Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh oh-oh-oh-oh)<br>89 Want your bad romance (Caught in a bad romance) |
| Intro B (4:48-4:57) | Wide shot: the dancers gather around GaGa, she is positioned in the dead center of the frame, obviously the center of attention.<br><br>The lights are dimmed as the song ends. | Instruments fade, leaving handclaps and vocals. The foregrounding of the voice draws attention to GaGa, working toghether with the visuals. | 90 Ra-ra-ah-ah-ah<br>91 Roma-ro-mama<br>92 GaGa oh-la-la<br>93 Want your bad romance |
| Outro (4:58-5:09) | Mid shot zooms to wide: Lady GaGa is lying beside a skeleton on a torched bed, in her underwear and a brassiere that occasionaly spits fireworks. The femme fatale in the aftermath of the sexualized display. | Revisited fugue from intro, same timbral qualities.<br><br>Sound effects from fireworks. | |

**Figure 9: Table of the relationship between visual narrative, music, and lyrics in "Bad Romance".**

Once Lady GaGa has emerged from her monster-pod, and as the percussive impact of Intro B settles into the synth-bass driven first verse, we are presented with the first lines of coherent lyrics so far in the song. The synth sounds from the upper registers are faded out, leaving bare a smooth synth bass line, while the timbre of the beat changes, contributing to a false feel of half-time. This results in an emphasis on the lead vocals, with the lyrics clearly conveyed over a tidy background. Furthermore, the transition from the intro to the first verse is marked visually by a sudden close-up shot of Lady GaGa starting to sing. The lyrics of the first two verses, lines 11 through 22, are sung alternately by an innocent looking, wide-eyed GaGa positioned in a bathtub, and a black-dressed replica GaGa standing in front of a mirror.[52] The difference between the two is emphasized in several ways, most notably by the costumes, environment, and lighting;

[52] An interesting sidetrack here is the mirror effect of narcisissism, theorized by Hawkins (1996).

innocent GaGa has golden curls, and is placed in a brightly lit white room, while the other GaGa has black shades, a black tight-fitting costume referencing the monsters from the intro, and is positioned in what seems to be the same room, or at least a similar one, but dimly lit.

Lady GaGa is looking for love, as the lyrics suggest, but not the standardized, innocent, romantic love that is so succulent in popular culture. Rather, GaGa seems focused on the darker, uglier aspects of a taboo love; a love that comes across as more sexual than anything else. For instance, the somewhat innocent ”touch of your hand” becomes explicitly sexual in the context of the video, with black dressed GaGa stroking her thigh before she thrusts her hips forward and grabs her crotch. Such sexualized display is a current trend in pop videos, and as I have illustrated in my previous readings, relates to the increasing sexualization of mainstream culture in general. Mostly, GaGa`s representation in “Bad Romance” exemplifies how this sexualization is facilitated through pornographic images filtering into the mainstream (Gibson 2008: ix),[53] thus raising questions of how this staging of the gendered and sexualized body constructs female ideals within the porno-aesthetic. On this issue, Butler describes pornography as “the text of gender`s unreality, the impossible norms by which it is compelled” (Butler 1997: 68), noting that it repeats and insists on faulty gender relations that “will not disappear without the abolition of the text itself” (ibid: 69). One might also consider that which Hardy (2009) notes as mainstream pornography, something that is always characterized by a marked gender asymmetry in its circuit of communication (ibid: 5), in that it “has been produced predominately by men for a male audience” (ibid), and from this perspective pornography`s primary goal is that of male ejaculation, leaving little space for female sexual gratification. Entailed in this perspective is that the ”erection and ejaculation of the performer is echoed in a second plain of reality by the erection and ejaculation of the male viewer” (ibid: 8). Yet, as Hardy argues, we “cannot know for sure whether the body of either female performer or spectator is moved in a *real sense”* (ibid). This shows how pornography prioritizes desire and pleasure one-sidedly in favour of both

[53] This is also true of Aguilera`s ”Not Myself Tonight”, and discussed in my reading of that video in chapter 2.

male performers and spectators. From this perspective, a normalization of pornographic aesthetics and images within mainstream pop videos perpetuates the binaries which have defined gender and sexual relations in Western society. Noteworthy here is how GaGa`s sexualized play in "Bad Romance" is not just implied in the lyrics, but also through visual imagery and music. The dirty, sexual connotations of the lyrics are emphasized in the timbre and grain of the vocals, with GaGa throughout the verses singing in a dark, sensual voice, almost slurring some of the words. This is supported by a tension in the musical arrangement of the verses, between the dirty sounding syntheziser and the insisting beat, as the synth accentuates the off-beat, filling in the gaps between the bass-drum and snare in the beat. A pulsating groove worms its way out of this material, which draws the listener in, engulfing him/her in the electronic sound. This underlines that the sexual display is not simply constituted by images, but also by sounds that can be equally arousing in terms of desire and pleasure. Paul Willemen, professor in film studies, suggests that sexuality`s priviliged association with the look is the result of a historical process (Willemen 2004: 9), and explains that other senses might be just as important in experiences of sexual nature:

> The linkage between sex and cognition marks the site of what Western culture designates as the paramount instance of a kind of knowing that mobilises the full range of the human sensorium. However, this cognitive urge cannot be associated simply with the desire to see. It insists in and mobilises all our senses (Willemen 2004: 9).

If sexuality mobilizes our entire sensorium, then sound, certainly, can be equally important to image in projecting sexuality. Returning to Frith on the voice and body, he points out that certain physical experiences or feelings are given vocal sounds beyond our conscious control, such as ecstasy and lust, and these vocal sounds seem expressive of our deepest feelings "because we hear them as if they`ve escaped a body that the mind - language- can no longer control" (Frith 1996: 192). Turning to "Bad Romance" again, such vocal sounds become evident throughout the verses as GaGa grunts and moans repeatedly. Notably, these grunts and moans are enhanced technologically: they are heavily, digitally reverberated, leaving the moans (the lust) lingering in the mix like an afterthought. The grunts and moans are also emphasized visually, as editing provides appropriately explicit images of GaGa touching her crotch or thighs in synch with the

vocal sounds. The added dimensions of the sexually explicit images of the video, edited to synchronize with the moans and grunts, give the sounds added impact in signifying sexual pleasure and lust. Reading the lyrics against the textual background created by the synergy of image and music, GaGa seems to know that the love she is after will hurt her, and perhaps it is the pain more than love itself that emerges as the object of her desire. All this can be seen in relation to S&M, which in popular culture, and for the purpose of this discussion, is most commonly ascociated with sexual activities where, in it`s simplest format, sadists desire to inflict suffering and masochists want to receive suffering. From this perspective, GaGa`s desires are obviously masochistic.[54]

While S&M might be considered, as Ålvik (2008) suggests, as a trait of non-normative sexuality, it is arguably predominantly situated within normative heterosexual desire. Much of mainstream pornography that includes categories of S&M depict women in inferior roles to men, with the male commonly presented in pornography as the dominant partner(s). This leads me to critically reflecting on the stereotypical qualities inscribed in gender binarisms, with men constructed as testostorone-driven and aggressive in contrast to women as passive and shy. Anne McClintock comments on these assertions and how they relate to S&M. By referencing how 19th century sexologist Richard von Kraft-Ebbing grants men the active or aggressive role in sexual intercourse, she argues how women are stereotypically thought to remain passive (McClintock 2004: 238).[55] McClintock continues to describe how Kraft-Ebbing ascribes to women a natural disposition that takes pleasure in being treated roughly by a man sexually (ibid), and how both Kraft-Ebbing and Freud recognizes the naturalness of male sexual aggression, noting that most men show the desire to subdue (ibid). The relation of power in S&M,

---

[54] There have been few studies on masochism in popular music. A master thesis ”Modalities of Desire – Representations of Sadomasochism in Popular Music”, submitted by Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik has described S&M`s relevance on artists like Depeche Mode and Blue Öyster Cult. It should be noted that Ålvik primarily describes S&M`s function as an alternative to normative sexuality, only mentioning its influence on heterosexual activity in passing (Ålvik 2008: 20). While Ålvik describes the use of sadomasochistic imagery in several genres of popular music, his engagement with its influence on mainstream pop is too minimal, and I feel there is a need to problematize the hegemonic workings of heterosexuality in precisely the S&M examples Ålvik takes up.

[55] Hawkins problematizes this point in relation to masculinity in *The British Pop Dandy (*2009: 96-102*)*.

though, is never static, as gender roles need not decide who is the dominant part of the act, and men are just as likely to be on the masochistic end. S&M, then, can be seen as a comment on gender relations and power, especially in light of its emphasis on props and costumes, which adds a notion of theatricality or parody to the sexual display. McClintock notes that "with its exaggerated emphasis on costume and scene S/M performs social power as *scripted*" (ibid: 237), and this means that this power is subject to change. Thus, S&M "reverses and transmutes the social meanings it borrows" (ibid), and therefore has a powerful impact on representational politics when surfacing in a music video.

It is important to note that GaGa`s approximation of S&M is not one-sided. Though the desire of an "ugly love" is obvious in the lyrics, the visual narrative of the video presents GaGa with several personalities that constantly shifts between submitting willingly or having these violent desires forced upon her by her kidnappers. The lyrics gain meaning by the visual narrative of GaGa being kidnapped and auctioned off to sexual slavery, with an obvious tension between force and submission. But even the innocent-looking imagery of GaGa conveys the lust for a bad romance, both in the first two verses and specifically in the spoken lines 23-25 (see *figure 9,* p73), somewhat betraying her tactics and leaving us to wonder if it is GaGa or the kidnappers who are in control. Notably, GaGa`s deceptive and ensnaring sexualized play contributes to her coming across as a *femme fatale*.[56] The deadly seduction of the femme fatale materializes during the final chorus of the video, where the images show the Russian who bought GaGa at the auction catches on fire, while she stands calmly watching the burning bed as he perishes. The notion of the femme fatale ties GaGa`s representation up with countless seductive and deceitful female characters from espionage thrillers, film noir, and mainstream porn narratives, which grounds her character in "Bad Romance" within a familiar discourse on iconic femininity.

Lady GaGa`s representation in "Bad Romance" might reflect how S&M refuses to read power as fate or naturally distributed between women and men, as S&M is a

[56] This refers to the well established arcehtype of literature and art, describing a mysterious and seductive woman who often leads her lovers into dangerous or deadly situations.

performance of social power as sanctioned "by social convention and invention, and thus open to historical change" (ibid: 239). From this perspective, I would suggest that GaGa`s use of S&M imagery and poise signifies a refusal of the stereotypical sexual relations defined by the power structures between male and female. The tug of war between the normative and non-normative in GaGa`s strategy, is substantiated by the various roles played by her in the video; the stereotypical, victimized, and innocent GaGa vs the black dressed, seductive GaGa; the beautiful, "real" GaGa vs the abnormal monster GaGa. The tension between these recurring opposites are accompanied by the paradoxes in the lyrics, with GaGa alternating between "want your bad romance" and "caught in a bad romance". With these opposites in mind, it is worth taking a look at how non-normativity, hyperembodiment, and the post-human are incorporated in GaGa`s representation.

## GOING GAGA FOR MONSTROSITY: CODING AND CORPOREALITY

The video is excessive in its visual editing, with several of the clips seemingly unrelated to the narrative. Throughout there is a constant dynamic between three main visual aspects; the overall narrative, close-up shots of the different GaGa personas, and wide and mid shots of the danceroutine performed by different groups always led by GaGa. Several of the characters GaGa plays, for example the subject suspended in time, the monstrous subject, the solarsystem subject, the fashion-bent subject,[57] have no function in the narrative. Rather they work in different ways to show off the GaGa-persona.[58] Vernallis notes that in "the absence of a strong narrative, music video creates tension by varying basic visual materials, such as shots and edits" (Vernallis 2004: 49), and this can entail that the body of the artist becomes the videos ground (ibid). I want to consider

[57] The fashion-GaGa of bridge A can be said to work as a diversion from the narrative, relieving the viewer from the intense story of the video, something that is underlined by the sudden change in musical expression as well, before bridge B both visually and musically bring us back to the theme of the video and song, buidling to the final climax, the release of the third chorus.
[58] This ties into the previously mentioned notion of the femme fatale, the multitude of characters and their extravagant costumes contributing to the mystery of the GaGa persona.

Vernallis's point in relation to how videos function as a showcasing of the star. In "Bad Romance" this is emphasized by the spectacular display constituted by the incoherent images of Lady GaGa in extravagant, if not outrageous, costumes. Filled to the brim with props, costumes, and effects, and featuring GaGa in nearly a dozen different roles, the video leaves little doubt regarding who is the center of attention here. Random as some of the costumes may seem, to view them and the overall visual aesthetic effect as coincidental would be naive at best, and the artist herself seem intent in her awareness of the audiovisual impact. Here, in an interview on MTV, GaGa makes the statement:

> When I'm writing music, I'm thinking about the clothes I want to wear on stage. It's all about everything altogether—performance art, pop performance art, fashion. For me, it's everything coming together and being a real story that will bring back the super-fan. I want to bring that back. I want the imagery to be so strong that fans will want to eat and taste and lick every part of us (Harris 2008).

This highlights GaGa`s awareness of the impact of her "pop performance art"; not settling for dedicated fans, she wants the super-fan. This desire for a close connection to her fans goes beyond mere fashion. [59] GaGa categorizes her fans as a single group; her little monsters. This plays on traits of *outsider culture*, empowering the geeks and freaks, and GaGa presents herself as post-human alien, creating a connection to her fans through similarity and difference simultaneously.[60] The paradox between GaGa`s self-proclaimed outsider status and the obvious commercial qualities of her music and image has not gone unnoticed. This dichotomy has received much attention in the press, questioning her sincerity and critiquing the authenticity of her as an outsider (see Fynes-Clinton 2010). Considering GaGa`s treatment of her fans, and her self-representation as an outsider, against the commercial qualities of her music and image, through the obvious tension between the normative and non-normative the video to "Bad Romance" seems almost an extension of GaGa herself. Whether GaGa is sincere by identification with outsider

---

[59] This follows in the tradition of Madonna, who engaged her fans and audience through a multitude of platforms, perhaps most famously through her coffee table book *Sex*.

[60] This relates to the projection of authenticity, in terms of how GaGa comes across as convincing to a group of fans which reads her as genuine through her approximation of outsider culture. In this way, GaGa`s approximation of outsider culture can be experienced as a validation of the experiences and values of those who identify themselves with such a culture.

culture or not, her employment of monster aesthetics raises debates regarding sexuality and gender roles.

Allow me to take up a point from the first paragraph of this thesis. Hawkins has claimed that pop music videos "fill a space where identities and bodies are affirmed in comfortably reassuring ways" (Hawkins 2007: 30), in other words, pop videos are a major arena for the negotiation of gender roles and sexuality, and through encounters with pop videos the viewer is introduced to various ideals of femininity or masculinity. When one watches mainstream pop videos there are obviously certain expectations to be met, following thousands of videos playing into heteronormative stereotypes of what is beautiful and desireable, and "it is in the star persona that constructs of beauty are reinforced by the stability of fixed categories" (ibid). So what happens when these expectations are not met? How do we react if the star persona is presented as abnormal and post-human?

In "Bad Romance" the safe-haven of pop aesthetics is frequently disrupted through depictions of the pop star as montrous, and normative sexual boundaries are, to some extent, transgressed. As the song kicks off, the video consists of images of Lady GaGa emerging from a pod enscribed with "monster", wearing a white latex outfit covering her entire body and face. This is accompanied only by a staccato, off-beat synth and GaGa`s voice, wallowing in gibberish (see *figure 9*). The latter might be read as signifying the post-human through the refusal of structured language, and both the vocal performance and the staccato synth contributes to the scene`s sinister mood. Throughout the first two verses, the white latex monster version of GaGa is depicted with rapid and animalesque movements, most notably in a midshot showing her from behind, drawing attention to her bulging spine and pointy headwear. Much of the video`s focus during the first two verses and first chorus fall on the monster-dance routine, which is notable because, as Hawkins argues, "dance and music is a perfect arena for staging the body, extending every possible musical gesture into the body`s motion" (ibid: 32). In "Bad Romance" the monster dance routine is accompanied by a synth and sample driven sound, with barely an analogue/human element to it, striking up a notable unity between the music and the visuals of the video. The post-human monster aesthetic of the video

achieves its impact through the technologically produced qualitites of the music, emphasizing the non-human elements. The mix is dirty, and many of the sounds seem in overdrive as they are manipulated through filters and effects, resulting in a musical production which emphasizes the monster-aesthetics of the images. The sound production`s total reliance on electronic and sampled elements, with the only human element in the mix being the vocals, presents an interesting dichotomy. The vocals are somewhat problematic as well, because while GaGa`s voice is indeed the only human element in the mix, this voice is also heavily mediated through digital tweaking and editing. This is reminiscent of my discussions on both Rihanna`s "Umbrella" and Aguilera`s "Not Myself Tonight", and also in "Bad Romance" this strategy might signify a departure from the conventionally human, and contribute to the construction of hyperembodiment.[61]

**Figure 10: Weirdly proportioned GaGa with bat-hat and bulging spine.**

[61] In GaGa`s case this is linked both to the images of the monster as well as to the more compelling images of GaGa accommodating conventional norms of gender and beauty. Thus, GaGa`s representation displays the post-human at both ends of the scale: through both physical perfection and the monstrous.

In verse 3 the video introduces us to another GaGa, shown naked, shot in close-up or midshots, covering her breasts and flirting with the camera. This is a familiar strategy in pop videos,[62] where countless female pop stars are depicted similarly, shown off as desireable objects. What differentiates "Bad Romance" from similar current pop videos, is GaGa`s mapping of monstrosity onto the female body. Her body depicts the monstrous in several ways: disproportionate body, bulging and glowing spine, and wearing a bat-hat (see *figure 10)*. This opens a new context for negotiating the terms for beauty. It should be noted that even the images that show the monstrous GaGa are stylized within the smooth, airbrushed aesthetic of the rest of the video: the projection of the monstrous is situated in the midst of a series of other images, all seeming to idealize physical perfection through digital editing. GaGa`s articulation of monstrosity can also be linked to her portraying the femme fatale: her character is established as mysterious and supernatural within a discourse that ties these qualities up with sexual allure and irresistible desire. Thus, even though GaGa codes the body monstrous, and offer an unusal perspective on the female within the confines of mainstream pop, it can be argued that she never strays too far from the narrow path of pop aesthetics. Drawing on familiar pop video clichè`s GaGa is presented as the ultimate fashion icon, and only occasionally does she appear outside of the safe role as the attractive, female pop star.

The vast gallery of characters which GaGa performs in the video, is supported by the extensive editing which shows GaGa as several conflicting personalities through every segment of the song. This allows GaGa a certain flexibility, ensuring that she does not have to fully commit to the monstrous body she occasionally inhabits. Many of the personae which GaGa portrays are presented as very beautiful, and the video picks up on strategies that are reminiscent of those employed in the videos previously discussed, most notably the construction of physical perfection through technology. This is reflected in how most of GaGa`s characters are presented with spotless skin, how cameramovements and editing accentuate the lines of the body, and how the smooth, digital production of the music functions as a backdrop for it all. The airbrushed images are most evident in the close-up shots of "the real" GaGa, who is presented with flawless complexion and

[62] See discussions on "Womanizer" in chapter two.

clean, generic facial features. This strategy contrasts the monster-references, and there is an interesting dialogue between these oppositional parts of her representation. The result is an artist who comes across as hyperembodied over a large spectrum of images and styles, sown together seamlessly by the compelling, electronic pulse of the music, which inscribes even the monstrous characters with a digitalized beauty. One might ask: after watching the video, is it the picture of the monstrous GaGa that would stay in your mind? Or does this occasional display of monstrosity work more like an attention grabber than a destabilizer, somewhat sensationalizing GaGa`s persona without compromising her sexual appeal? Because even though she toys with the norms for beauty in terms of female representation, she is still very fuckable.[63] With this in mind, GaGa`s body on display in "Bad Romance" does not cross the line of acceptable codes of representation, as the digitally edited images and music make the representation compelling, even in spite of the occasional disturbing departure from conventionalized beauty.

## CONCLUDORY THOUGHTS

Thoroughly entertaining, the "Bad Romance" video bombards the viewer with both vivid imagery and alluring sound. The powerful musical expression of the song gains momentum by the dazzling array of images, with GaGa`s representation projected through a sexualized display that references both S&M and the post-human. GaGa`s appropriaton of S&M is particularly significant, raising the issue of the motives behind the spectacularization of sexuality, the signs and symbols of S&M enticing the viewer into a web of danger and pleasure. Nonetheless, GaGa`s S&M play on signifiers in both lyrics and images, made accessible to the viewer through the familiar spectacle of music, contributes to exposing the constructed structures of power in gender relations by exaggerating and parodying them. Willemen notes that S&M "publicly exposes the possibility that manhood is not *naturally* synonymous with mastery, nor femininity with passivity" (Willemen 2004: 247), and this implies that social identity "becomes

[63] See Hawkins (2007) for a theorization of beauty that involves discourses that are challenging the dominant paradigm.

commutable, and the boundaries of gender and class open to invention and transfiguration" (ibid). From this perspective GaGa`s representation in "Bad Romance", as articulated through the use of signs from S&M and the approximation of the post-human, is arguably a challenge to the uneven distribution of power in gendered- and sexual relations. Though, as I have argued, this is not a one-sided affair.

How does Lady GaGa`s representation in "Bad Romance" reveal what is at stake in negotiations between the female artist and the monstrous/post-human? Much like the robo-diva inhabited by Beyoncè, Lady GaGa`s monster-diva is a fresh breath in pop videos` realm of oh-so-familiar assertions of gendered bodies, though I have a hard time making up my mind regarding the monster-diva`s agency. While this representation certainly has the potential to criticize the conventionalized ideals of the gendered body, and by extension contribute to overthrowing the fixity of gender categories, I can`t escape the feeling that GaGa does not *commit* to this transgression of normality. Rather, these images of monstrosity are appropriated within the stylized sexual display of a video which by and large accommodates the current trend of hyperembodiment through glossy images and highly processed digital sound. Particularly relevant from a musicological point of view, is how music and sound are crucial elements in keeping the performance grounded, and, moreover, sustaining continuity in GaGa`s stylistic expression. The result in "Bad Romance" is a representation that arguably both objectifies and empowers the female through a spectacularization of ambiguous sexuality. GaGa`s representation is further complicated by the link to the femme fatale, tying the monstrous up with seduction and desire, and also by the way she references drag through her over-the-top glam aesthetics.[64] The sexualized display articulated in "Bad Romance" is, in the end, not notably disrupted by occasional disturbances. That said, GaGa needs to be recognized for introducing disruptive elements into mainstream pop, the effect of which tracks the developments in sexuality and gender roles at the beginning of the 21st century.

---

[64] Drag will be discussed shortly in my reading of "Telephone", where the notions of both the drag king and the drag queen (Halberstam 1998) will be linked to Lady GaGa`s visual aesthetic. In "Bad Romance", though, GaGa`s representation seems more connected to the category of the drag queen, her exaggerated make-up and ironic poises arguably resembling a man impersonating a woman.

# CHAPTER 5

## YOU`RE NOT GONNA REACH MY TELEPHONE

Pop music videos have become increasingly elaborate, both in terms of costumes and props, as well as in terms of effects and sensationalization of the star, and a superb example of this trend must be Lady GaGa`s "Telephone". The video unfolds in a now familiar GaGa-esque campness, marked by parodic excess and raunchy twists, and the viewer is given plenty of time to take it all in, as the video just falls short of ten minutes in terms of running time.[65] "Telephone" was one of the biggest hits from GaGa`s second album, and Beyoncè is featured in a guest appearance both in the song and in the video.

This chapter takes on several aspects of both Lady GaGa and Beyoncè`s representations that have not been discussed previously in this thesis, mainly focusing on their performance of gender. The video to "Telephone" greatly exemplifies the two artists` contrasting articulations of the female. In terms of images and costumes Beyoncè seems to settle comfortably within a rather conventional projection of the female, while GaGa struts around in an excessive display of the androgynous. Discussions in this chapter centre around androgyny, drag, and parody. In engaging androgyny I lean on studies into this by Whiteley (2000), while drag is approached through Butler (1999) and Halberstam (1998). Discussions on the artists` visual appearance are put in relation to signifiers in music and sound. Given the short-film like qualities of the video, much emphasis is put on how the visual images and aesthetics relate to discourses regarding gender and sexuality, and how this is fueled by the musical arrangement and production. In this chapter I also put emphasis on parody as a performative strategy, and discuss how this is evident in both musical and visual elements of "Telephone". Due to the length of the video, and because of a somewhat clear demarcation of the story right down the middle, I have decided to engage androgyny mainly in regard to the first half of the video

[65] The video contains a high amount of signifiers and symbols, and there are several obvious discussions that I cannot address on account of space, of special note being the significance of the murder scene, and the final dance routine in terms of national identity. Though these aspects are both interesting and important, I choose to prioritize analyzing the aspects of the video that relate more directly to gender and sexuality.

(the prison part), and questions of parody in regard to the second half (from the point Beyoncè appears on out). Many discussions will overlap, of course, and I will not restrict myself to this strategy, but because of the difference in aesthetics and costumes between the two parts of the video, approaching the parts seperately makes the material more manageable.

## PLOTTING INTERTEXTUALITY

The video to "Telephone" is rather long by conventional standards, and at 9 min 31 sec it far exceeds the length of the original song at 3 min 40 sec. The video has an almost three minute long introduction before the song even starts, following the recipe of many of GaGa`s videos,[66] and the original song is frequently interrupted by theatrical scenes that form part of a strong narrative which is packed with intertextual references.[67] In many regards the video feels more like a short film, particularly given that the original song does not run from start to finish, but rather, is scattered throughout the video and covers about a third of the video all in all. The story that unfolds in the images of the video seem quite unattached to the content of the lyrics, though there are exceptions from this, for example at the start of the first verse where the video shows GaGa answering the telephone while singing "Hello hello, baby, you called?". Most of these exceptions are quite literal visual interpretations of the lyrics, and I attribute them little meaning besides the effect of forming small hooks linking the video to the lyrical content. The lyrics form descriptions of nightclubs and parties, claiming that you will not reach the narrator`s telephone, as she`s "up in the club, sippin` that bubb`", while the video tells a whole different story. The video`s story is unfolded chronologically, and involves a prison, as well as the two main characters driving across the desert and poisoning an entire diner. The result is that the video forms a narrative of its own, and the clubs and dancefloors of

[66] See "Paparazzi", "Alejandro", and "Born This Way".
[67] During the scenes of the video that interrupt the structure of the original song the volume level of the music is turned down, and the main chordprogression (see figure 9) is looped in the background.

the lyrics seem far removed from the environment of the video.[68] Based on this evaluation I do not put particular emphasis on how lyrics and images work together. Rather, I focus on the images of the video in relation to musical codes. The song is shaped around a main chordprogression (see *figure 11*) that is repeated throughout its length, and the dynamics and progression in the song is ensured mainly by instrumentation and vocal phrasing.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Em | G | A | Em |

**Figure 11: Main chord progression in "Telephone" (4 bars).**

"Telephone" is directed by Jonas Åkerlund, who also directed the video to the GaGa-hit "Paparazzi",[69] and the story of the video is written as a sequel to "Paparazzi", with GaGa playing herself in both videos. "Paparazzi" ends with GaGa being arrested for poisoning her boyfriend, and "Telephone" picks up with her being escorted to a prison cell. After enduring prison life in a pair of cigarette-covered-sunglasses, GaGa is bailed out by Beyoncè. The latter picks GaGa up in "The Pussywagon", borrowed from Quentin Tarantino`s "Kill Bill" movie, and we learn that Beyoncè`s character in the video is called Honey Bee. The two singers end up at a desert diner, where Honey Bee meets up with her no-good boyfriend (presumeably the caller in the lyrics of the song?). Honey Bee tries to poison her boyfriend`s coffee, but it is ineffective, so GaGa steps in with poisoned sandwiches, not just for the no-good boyfriend, but for all the customers at the diner. When all the customers have perished, Honey Bee and GaGa indulge in an extravagant dance routine, with both of them dressed up in sexy outfits referencing the colors and symbols of the American flag. The outro shows a news broadcast reporting

[68] This is a personal evaluation that does not necessarily hold true for every viewer. Nonetheless, choosing to disregard the lyrics in this specific analysis helps to constrict my discussions throughout the interpretation, allowing for greater detail on the perspectives I do engage.
[69] This is a very intruiging video, in which GaGa, like Rihanna, Christina Aguilera, and Beyonce, references robot aesthetics. This is particularly evident in the scene subsequent to her accident, where she is dressed up in studded gold plates, which is topped off with a pair of studded crutches.

that two women are wanted for the diner murders, and the video ends with GaGa and Honey Bee driving into the desert with the police on their heels. All in all the story of the video ends up feeling much like a music short film take on the americana-style fugitive/gangster roadmovie, such as *Natural Born Killers*, *Thelma and Louise*, *True Romance*, and *Wild at Heart*. "Telephone"`s story is articulated through a style which is drenched in evident self-irony, supplying a particular parodic feel, a campness, which comes from the way in which the images add to the existing song, and this will be discussed further later on in this chapter. GaGa herself has commented on the video, and stated that the idea was that "America is full of young people that are inundated with information and technology and turn it into something that was more of a commentary on the kind of country that we are" (Cady 2010). The video is certainly interesting, and invites the viewer to indulge in a variety of signs and symbols, which are thrown around playfully in both image and sound throughout the video.

**Figure 12: Beyoncè`s similar hairstyle and lipstick in "Video Phone" (left) and "Telephone".**

Worthy of commentary is the video`s countless intertextual references, incorporating many more or less well known props and images from popular culture. This relates to how the music video *as text* exists in relation to other texts, and Richardson & Hawkins note that a pop video "is not only related to other pop videos of a similar genre, but to all audio-visual texts, to films, musicals, commercials, political documentaries, to academic discourses, and so on" (Richardson & Hawkins 2007: 17). This is evident in the imagery of "Telephone", particularly excessive in references to films, and a key aspect of

intertextual references is how they operate as hooks for substituting and differentiating meaning (ibid). This entails that the perceived meaning of "Telephone" relates to the viewer`s recognition of other texts, seeing that "textual allusion is dependent on a currency of knowledge that assembles units of information" (ibid). The most obvious intertextual reference in "Telephone" is arguably the already mentioned style of American roadmovie, with the diner and desert environment being key to this. The video also references movies such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill*, [70] both directed by Quentin Tarantino who actually lent them "The Pussywagon" from *Kill Bill* (ibid). [71] Referencing these kinds of movies lends certain dimensions of popular culture to the video, and roots it in a violent atmosphere which is well-known to many viewers. At the same time, this atmosphere is articulated by a sense of parody in "Telephone", and as the familiar signs and symbols are inverted and toyed with, the content of the original material, as well as the content of the video, is deemed somewhat harmless. The video is also high on branding, or product placement, referencing several products which have their particular place in popular culture; for example GaGa uses Diet Coke cans in her hair and photographs Honey Bee with a Polaroid camera.

"Telephone" also contains several intertextual references to GaGa and Beyoncè`s previous collaboration "Video Phone", the most notable being the similar title. Also, Beyoncè`s costume and style are noticeably similar in both videos (see *figure 12*),[72] which somewhat bridges the gap between them. GaGa is also self-referencing in several other ways, for example an inmate wears a pair of Lady GaGa signature Monster Heartbeat earbuds, and a boomblaster is playing one of her own songs "Paper Gangsta". All these references amount to a style and environment that grounds the video in popular culture, more so than most of GaGa`s other videos. Thus, the video provides a familiar

---

[70] The character name Honey Bee seems inspired by the character Honey Bunny in "Pulp Fiction".
[71] The Pussywagon is arguably one of the most recognizable props from "Kill Bill", and is a car that belonged to the character Buck, who raped the film`s main character repeatedly while she was in a coma. It has a quite excessively styled look, with "The Pussywagon" written on it in pink letters.
[72] Seeing that artists usually change their look and style drastically from video to video, it is worth noting that this is probably not coincidental.

setting for most viewers, and this allows GaGa to toy with signs and symbols in a way that is easily recognizable, calling attention to the parody of the performance.

## IMPRISONED: ANDROGYNY, DRAG, AND BISEXUALITY

Some of "Telephone"`s most noteworthy images and sounds are presented in the part taking place in the prison, which starts the video off and extends about 4 min 40sec into it, making up about half of the video as a whole. These scenes have a lot going on in terms of signification. Most notable is GaGa`s engagement of gendered identity and sexuality, particularly her playing about with androgyny and drag,[73] and I feel that this is a part of GaGa`s representation that must be theorized. Whiteley notes that androgyny initially appeared to offer a space for challenging traditional representations of femininity (Whiteley 2000: 165). Following this, let`s consider the commonly held notion that femininity is natural, and that said femininity is recognized through certain conventionalized traits, gestures, and attributes. Furthermore, these naturalized traits of femininity is most often linked to notions of heterosexuality. Butler suggests that normative gender binaries are contingent on the institutionalization of naturalized heterosexuality (1999: xxx-xxxi), and this endorses the relevance of GaGa`s articulation of homo- or bi-sexuality as a factor in her display of androgyny, and further implies a stretching of the boundaries surrounding gender. Also relevant in these discussions, is the music`s role in constituting GaGa`s gendered and sexualized performance in "Telephone".

While music is not foregrounded in the video until almost three minutes into the prison part, that does not mean that music is not employed, or that the sounds that are there have no significance. The video starts off with images of the prison fences and barbed wire, and these images are accompanied by an ominous instrumental loop, which

[73] GaGa`s representation in "Telephone" reminds me somewhat of Annie Lennox`s gender play throughout the 80`s and 90`s. Lennox and androgyny is discussed in studies by Whiteley (2000) and Hawkins (2002).

starts off subtle but builds in tension, and extends into the scene where GaGa is led to her cell. The start of the loop is marked by a single kick drum, along with a deep, pulsating electronic bass-sound, and we are introduced to more intricate percussion, increasing the tension of the mood, and adding interest to the rather static and trifling images by articulating each eight-note, as the loop increases in volume from approximately ***p*** to ***mf***. This sets the stage for the first images of GaGa, and as we are introduced to her being led to the cell, the percussion fades out, leaving the kick drum and ominous bass sound. This strategy underlines the arrival of the star, and the mood of the prison becomes evident, as the shouts and noise of the inmates are faded in.

Already at this stage do we become aware of the mystery and ambiguity surrounding the politics of GaGa`s gendered representation; two masculinized, strong, and bulky female guards, caricatured by their open shirts showing off their bare stomachs and bras, strip GaGa from her clothes and grunt “I told you she didn't have a dick", putting fuel to the fire of one of the most persistent rumors surrounding Lady GaGa – that she is a hermaphrodite. In an interview with Barbara Walters, GaGa comments on the rumour, deeming it false, but adding that “I portray myself in a very androgynous way, and I love androgyny” (Walters 2010), and that “I like pushing boundaries” (ibid). This demonstrates that GaGa is conscious about her representation, and that displaying the androgynous might be a deliberate strategy. In the same interview, Walters asks GaGa about her sexuality, and the artist replies that she likes both women and men, specifying that while she has been in love only with men, she has had sexual relations with women (ibid). Considering that femininity is closely linked to heterosexuality, GaGa`s expressed bisexuality might be a particularly powerful component in constructing her androgynous image.

The video cuts to the prison courtyard, and GaGa enters the yard wearing chains and sunglasses covered in lit cigarettes. This scene is underscored by GaGa`s own song “Paper Gangsta”, which results in a humourous self referencing effect. Music is also used as a creative effect here, for example where images show one of the inmates wearing Lady GaGa signature earbuds: as the camera cuts to a close up of the earbuds, the mix foregrounds some inrecognizable music that the inmate assumeably is listening to, thus

emphasizing the presence of the earbuds by demonstrating their function. Upon entering the prison yard, GaGa struts confidently over to a bench, where she is approached by another female inmate who starts kissing her. GaGa kisses her back, establishing her assumed bisexuality, but one might wonder if she has another agenda when she reaches out and steals the inmates cellphone.

**Figure 13: Masculine GaGa vs. feminine Beyoncè.**

The camera cuts to inside the prison, where GaGa has changed outfits, now sporting a rather masculine look in a big leather jacket (see *figure 13*), and this appropriation of masculine traits gives her look a sense of drag.[74] The way GaGa plays around with masculine traits brings to mind Judith Halberstam`s discussion on the *drag king*,[75] the term describing a female "who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs

[74] By drag I am referring to a playing with "the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler 1999: 187). Drag and camp is also discussed by Hawkins in his study into narrative agendas in Madonna`s musical production, where he notes that her "texts are about a narcissistic masquerading which exhibits a sense of self-mockery that is excessive in many ways" (Hawkins 2004: 4). This perspective seems relevant to GaGa as well.
[75] It might be argued that GaGa`s representation in "Telephone" is more reminiscent of the *drag butch* (Halberstam 1998: 232), not least on account of her flirting with lesbianism. I categorize GaGa as a drag king on account of the obviously parodic qualities of her representation.

theatrically in that costume" (Halberstam 1998: 232). Halberstam notes that the drag king usually performs masculinity parodically, and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity the mainstay of her act (ibid). This seems to hold true for GaGa`s articulation of gender in "Telephone". Lady GaGa`s appropriation of masculine traits are exaggerated and parodic, this theatrical portrayal of masculinity also extending into several other characters of the video, such as the two female guards bringing GaGa to her cell. There is no music at all at the beginning of this scene, and the noises of the inmates are foregrounded as a fight breaks out between two inmates, all the while a telephone starts ringing in the background. This scene leads up to the start of the song, and the absence of music here cleverly emphasizes the start of the song, as the main chord progression fades in at 2 min 46 sec over the background noise of the fight. The prison noise fades out quickly as GaGa answers the telephone and begins to sing, and this puts great emphasis on her voice, which marks the beginning of the first verse. See *figure 14* for detailed reading.

| Part | Visual narrative | Music |
|---|---|---|
| **Verse 1** **(2:47-3:09)** | Various shots: GaGa in her studded leather jacket answers the phone and sings into it. The reverb and delay effects in the vocals are emphasized by a close up of GaGa`s mouth as the effects occur, and the glitch in the music is complemented by glitching images, establishing coherence in the audiovisual expression. | Main chords are softly arpeggiated and ornated – making up the main instrumental hook of the song, played softly on what sounds like a sampled plucked instrument. GaGa`s voice is foregrounded, light use of reverb and delay effects. At a point the voice starts to break up digitally/glitch. She sings in a low register that contributes to a tranquil but increasingly tense feel, as we build towards the inter-verse |
| **Inter-verse** **(3:10-3:17)** | Mid shot: GaGa drops the phone and starts dancing. We see GaGa from the waist on up, and the dancing consists of a series of shoulder shrugs and rapid, punch-like arm movements. This dance routine has a certain aggression | The beat kicks in, introducing the electro-dance-club-like feel that characterizes most of the song, and I get the feeling that the song has now really started. Joining the beat is a grainy synth, which follows the main chordprogression by playing their |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | to it, which is emphasized by GaGa`s intent facial expression in occasional close shots, and this comes over as a display of masculine gestures, adding to GaGa`s expression of androgyny and drag. | octaves in eight notes (keynote on the beat, octave on the offbeat). The octave synth gives the song a pulsating sense of drive, and adds to the thickness of the soundproduction, so that the listener almost feels engulfed in the electronic musical arrangement. |
| **Verse 2** **(3:18-3:33)** | Various shots: GaGa appears without her big leather jacket, sporting fishnet stockings and a studded, leather bikini. She is joined by a group of similarly dressed dancers, performing what looks like a rather spontaneous dance routine. GaGa`s short, wild hair and thick-drawn eyebrows work as masculine traits mapped onto her slender, scantily clad female body. | The octave synth drops off, and the absence of the eight-note octaves decreases the intensity of the accompaniement of the second verse. The beat remains, and with the loud octave synth gone we hear that the beat marks the offbeat on the hi-hat. A deep bass synth marks each chord in a staccato stab. The song remains up-beat and danceable throughout the verse, despite the dynamic decrease in intensity. |
| **Chorus 1** **(3:34-4:04)** | Various shots: Dance routine continues. GaGa`s short hair and slender body lends her a boyish look which is emphasized by her coarse, aggressive movements, contributing to her androgynous expression. | A climax is reached as the release of the first chorus washes over the listener, this is emphasized by GaGa`s vocals shifting into a higher register and rhythmically emphasizing the downbeats, as well as by the return of the octave synth. Same chords as verses, but a wide array of synths and vocal tracks articulate a busy refrain-feel. |
| | Various shots: Dance routine continues. Short, rapid movements emphasize each fourth in the beat, and GaGa claps her hands in sync with the handclaps of the song, grounding the images in the music. Aggressive movements continue, and GaGa snarls at the camera. | Soft, arpeggiated synthline from verses returns in the background of the mix, somewhat blunting the drive of the song. This is contrasted by the ”eh eh eh eh eh” in the vocals, marking eight-notes and rushing the song forward, and this strikes up a tension between the synthline and the vocals. Frequent pitch-shifting, effect-ridden vocal tracks ad-libbing over the lead vocals. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Post-chorus 1** **(4:05-4:21)** | Various shots: continued dance routine. A new GaGa is introduced, wearing nothing but yellow crime scene tape, stretched out in her cell in several crude positions, emphasizing the sexual display of the body. | The octave synth disappears creating the effect of decreasing intensity, though the beat remains statically the same. A busy, somewhat monotonous vocal phrase is joined by the chaotic mess of a multitude of ringing phones. This part has a more minimalistic feel over all, and the emphasis falls on the drive of the beat. |

**Figure 14: Table of the relationship between image and music in the prison-parts of "Telephone".**

GaGa`s androgynous display in "Telephone" questions the assumed validity of naturalized gender roles and culturally policed gendered and sexual behavior. This is wrapped up in a video aesthetic which presents the viewer with mysterious, dirty, and at the same time intruiging images from within the familiar (through films and tv-shows) setting of a prison, which first and foremost foregrounds GaGa as the star of the show. Hawkins notes that in pop performances "androgyneity and difference have become fashionable in a media-driven cultural climate which thrives on the slightest variation in sexual orientation while still adhering to the male/female dichotomy of gender" (Hawkins 2002: 188). From this perspective, displaying the androgynous is a performative strategy which showcases the star at the same time as it raises questions regarding gender relations and sexuality. One might question, however, to which degree this strategy subverts normative gender categories in terms of sexuality, and Whiteley comments:

> Androgyny initially appeared to offer a space for challenging traditional representations of femininity through the presentation of a non-conforming sexuality. However, while the masquerade of cross-dressing revealed that gender identity is inseperable from its performanee, lesbianism itself is still regarded with vitriolic suspicion (Whiteley 2000: 165).

Emphasizing the close relationship between gendered identity and sexuality, Whiteley doubts the acceptance of overt homosexuality within an industry (pop music) which predicates female heterosexuality (ibid: 152). One might argue that this normalization of female heterosexuality is challenged by GaGa in "Telephone", through the woman on woman kissing scene in the prison courtyard, and particularly through the way this scene strikes up a balance with her assumed subjectivity, which she herself links to bisexuality

through interviews (see Walters 2010). Negotiating sexuality is a key point in GaGa`s display of androgyny, as it is clear that GaGa`s articulation of gender is not only influenced by a flirtation with masculine characteristics, but also by a transgression of heterosexuality. The approximation of bisexuality adds to the articulation of androgyny by undermining one of the key traits of femininity - heterosexuality, and thus opening up a new sexualized space for negotiating gendered identity. A key point of GaGa`s representation in "Telephone" is how every aspect of her sexualized and gendered display is played out through a characteristic playfulness, which relates to how "the political impetus of irony lies in its ability to destabilise through a rhetorical strategy of serious play" (Hawkins 2002: 21). Notably, such a sense of playfulness is endemic in most pop styles found today (ibid: 19). My study into "Telephone" turns its focus towards parody and playfulness upon engaging the diner-scenes, soon to follow.

Important to note in terms of GaGa`s representation, is that the music is key to how we experience and process the images we see, and in "Telephone" GaGa`s androgynous visual display is accompanying by an excessive electronic dance-pop song. The negotiation of gendered and sexualized identity strikes up a balance with the negotiation between GaGa`s human voice (see discussions on Aguilera and Beyoncè) and the electronic accompaniement, a negotiation that is emphasized by the mapping of digital effects and obvious editing onto the vocal track (see discussions on "Bad Romance" and "Not Myself Tonight"). Both GaGa`s visual display and the evidently digitally produced music directs attention to the construction of the performance, overting the *signs* that constitute it. This might extend to alerting the viewer of the signs that constitute the performance of gender on a daily basis, and to how these signs influence gender relations. GaGa twists and turns signs in a manner which calls attention to the flexibility of the categories they constitute, and by extension she opens up a space for negotiating categories of gender and sexuality. It should not be forgotten, though, that this strategy is played out within the secure boundaries of the music video, allowing complete control over GaGa`s representation. This representation, while challenging, is careful not to overstep any definite boundaries. After all, it is the acceptance of GaGa by a mainstream audience that ensures her success.

## CAUGHT DEAD AT THE DINER: PARODY AND THE SPECTACLE OF SOUND

Beyoncè`s arrival, in the role of Honey Bee, marks the start of the second part of the video, and after a brief Tarantino-esque chat with GaGa,[76] Beyoncè launches into her verse. At this point I find it relevant to discuss the original song instead of the video, as the structure of the former has been interrupted by the film-like scenes of the latter. The following few paragraphs concerns the original recording specifically.

Up to Beyoncè`s verse, the song has been characterized by an up-tempo, danceable beat, emphasizing each fourth with the bassdrum and snaredrum alternately, but Beyoncè`s verse departs from this, and leaps into a busy, more syncopated groove (see *figure 15*).[77] While the hi-hat simply doubles into sixteenth-notes, the bass drum and snare comprise a syncopated pattern that emphasizes the first and third beat, with the snare appearing on the third beat only as opposed to the second and fourth. The slow, steady drive of the bass – snare figure is contrasted by the busy sixteenth-note hi-hat, emphasizing a half-time feel.

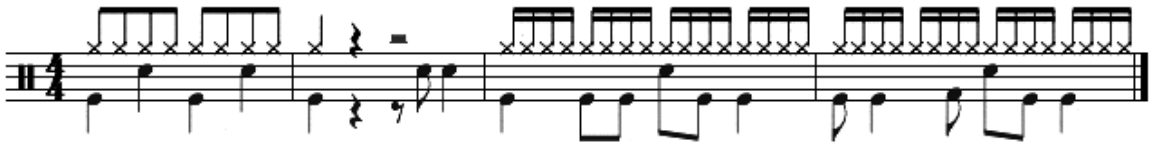

**Figure 15: Drum pattern in the transition between post-chorus and third verse.**

The transition from post-chorus to third verse is also emphasized by GaGa`s monotonous vocals being replaced by the thick, intent vocals of Beyoncè, and the introduction of a dirty, vocal-sounding synth which emphasizes each fourth in the bar. The overall result sees "Telephone" departing from the electro-dance style into a musical landscape which brings to mind hiphop. This change in feel is hardly coincidental, and it seems like a

[76] The banter between the two artists resembles the dynamic between Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta`s characters in "Pulp Fiction".
[77] In the video, the post-chorus and Beyoncè`s verse are separated by a long film-like scene, but in the original song the transition and change of beat/feel is very noticeable.

deliberate strategy to make a musical distinction between the two artists. What is interesting here is how musical signifiers are used to distinguish between them, and how these signifiers relate to expressions of ethnicity.

Granted that genre-specific musical codes can signify either blackness or whiteness, through a genre`s association with a certain ethnic group (see discussion in chapter three – B(l)ackdrop), the aspects of groove in "Telephone" can be linked to notions of ethnicity.[78] One might interpret the euro-dance feel of the post-chorus as a constituting part of GaGa`s whiteness, while the hiphop beat introduced in the third verse has the same effect on Beyoncè and blackness. Ethnic significance can also be read into the artists` contrasting vocal expressions: GaGa`s staccato, monotonous vocals in the post-chorus is highly edited and sounds almost programmed in its rigidity, and this is contrasted by the gritty, full-throated, grainy voice of Beyoncè. Interestingly though, Beyoncè`s vocals are also somewhat monotonous, but she articulates and punctuates her phrases in a way that closely resembles, if not crosses the line into, the territory of rap, further linking Beyoncè to the stereotypically labeled "black genre" of hiphop. One is not fully aware of the extent to which Beyoncè`s verse is framed within the hiphop aesthetic, like an oasis in the desert, before GaGa reclaims the microphone in verse 4. The beat disappears entirely, leaving the song suspended in mid-air, as GaGa returns with the melodic phrases from the first two verses. Reconsidering Danielsen`s assertion regarding the othering of rhythm in relation to melody and harmony (see chapter three of this thesis, p55), this sudden shift from the foregrounding of rhythmic elements to the absence of them, resulting in an obvious dominance of melody and harmony, resonates within the shift from a black vocalist to a white one.[79] Thus, Beyoncè`s appearance in the song is not entirely unproblematic, and raises questions of ethnic representation, as well as of the

[78] See Danielsen (2006) for a useful investigation of rhythmic coding and ethnicity, where funk-based grooves are situated within discourses involving blackness and Western culture.
[79] Though this is a somewhat reductionist assumption, this relates to my personal interpretation of the musical signs, and this slight neglect of complexities efficiently gets the point across.

ethnic siginificance of musical codes and stylization.[80]

Returning to the video, the post-chorus and Beyoncè`s verse is seperated by an over one minute long scene that overshadows the music, blurring the effect of the musical signifiers. Honey Bee`s appearance marks the departure of the prison aesthetics, and from here on out the video unfolds in visual imagery which leans heavily on parody. This approximation of parody is contingent on an overstating of images and poises (see Hawkins 2002: 19-20 on ironic intent), reminiscent of the *exploitation* film-genre.[81] GaGa`s visual representation in the second part of the video is slightly less masculinized than in the first part, but still her expression of gender remains problematic in relation to normative categories. While Honey Bee`s articulation of gender is constructed through a transparent naturalness, such as moderate and feminine use of make-up, GaGa`s make-up is exaggerated and smeared on thickly. GaGa`s excessive make-up is complemented by a yellow wig, which strengthens the implication that she poses as a man in drag.[82] Butler notes that in imitating gender "drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (Butler 199: 187), and this refers to how certain traits are naturalized as essential to respective gender categories. From this perspective GaGa`s expression of drag might reveal the aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized, by mapping traits associated with the male gender category onto the female body. Honey Bee`s visual appearance reflects Beyoncè`s usual ethnic ambivalence (see chapter three), which is emphasized by her first costume: a black hat, black top, and black lipstick contrasts and calls attention to the lightness of her skin. Also, throughout the video Honey Bee`s hair is styled in a short fringe that brings to mind the rockabilly

---

[80] The musical distinction between the two artists might in part be accounted for in relation to continuity of representation, and it is true that artists depend on a consistency in both musical and visual representaion to come across as credible to their audiences. Beyoncè and GaGa have a different history of musical expressions, and also, they inhabit different ethnic categories, and these categorise are inevitably experienced culturally by their audience.

[81] Exploitation films depend on something to exploit, usually a movie star, sex, violence, or special effects, and are characterized by blatant overstatements of issues. A subgenre here is blaxploitation, featuring mainly black actors and made for a black audience, a genre that received tribute `recently´ by Tarantino`s film "Jackie Brown". Notably, "Jackie Brown" is referenced in "Telephone" by the use of similar pink and yellow font in the written credits of "Telephone"`s introduction.

[82] This links GaGa`s articulation of gender in the second half of the video to the drag queen, as opposed to the drag king she performs in the first half. See Halberstam (1998: 231-242).

culture of the 1950`s, which was part of a predominantly white fashion trend.[83] Honey Bee, in contrast to GaGa, adheres to conventional stereotypes of women, both in terms of costumes and make-up, and in terms of body language and poises, for example when she appears as clumsy and submissive upon encountering her boyfriend, all portrayed in an evidently parodic manner. An articulation of gender through parody can be read as a challenge to the naturalness of gendered categories, by calling attention to the signs that constitute gender performance by overstating them. A relevant point in this regard is raised by Butler, in noting that the notion of gender parody does not necessarily assume that there is an original:

> […] the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; […] gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect - that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation. […] Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization (Butler 1999: 188).

Butler sees parody as a resistance and challenge to the naturalness of established gender categories. Following Butler`s argument, I propose that "Telephone" brings this challenge into mainstream culture.[84] The parody of the video is wrapped up in a playfulness which is very familiar within the pop context. On this point, Hawkins has argued that playfulness is "cleverly attached to the spectacles and sounds of performance" (Hawkins 2002: 19), and when considering its function as part of *the spectacle of sound* (misinterpretation intended), how does the music in "Telephone" enhance this construction? If one of the traits of parody is, indeed, hyperbole, it would seem that the imagery found in "Telephone" has its corollary in the music. Allow me to explore this assertion.

Formally, the song is quite simplistic, yet in terms of its arrangement and production excessive: the main chordprogression (see *figure* 11) dominates throughout the song with little harmonic changes to seperate the parts, while this is wrapped up in layer upon layer with synths and samples. There is a certain naivety to the thrusts of the

---

[83] Try typing "fringe" and "hair" into google images, and the search comes back with an overwhelming amount of pictures of white or ethnically ambivalent women.
[84] Similar points have already been argued regarding "Womanizer" and "Bad Romance", and all three videos arguably demonstrate pop`s potential in challenging cultural norms and regulations.

octave synths and the rigid beat, and the choruses are filled to the brim with vocal tracks, synth sounds, and samples, spelling out EXCESS in huge letters across the mix and arrangement of the song. When some of the synths are relieved from duty in the post-chorus, a cacophony of ringing phones take their place, referencing the lyrics in a way that is parodically obvious and blunt. Throughout the final, repetitious chorus the listener is bombarded with vocal tracks, synths, effects, and samples. Timestretching and pitchshifting is added to the vocals, a multitude of synths are fighting for attention, and several samples are tossed around in the mix, making up a dense and chaotic collage of sounds – trying to keep track of and pay attention to all the elements is exhausting in the least. The final chorus of the song is accompanied in the video by images of GaGa and Beyoncè in a final danceroutine, wearing costumes referencing the American flag. This recontextualization of the American flag to within popular music brings to mind Bruce Springsteen`s notoriously parodic "Born in the USA",[85] and GaGa`s headwear, a scarf tied around her head, can be seen as a direct reference to Springsteen, as this was one of his trademarks during the 1980`s. This reference ties "Telephone" up with a discourse on musical parody that is widely known to a mainstream audience, perhaps particularly an American one, and thus the parodic traits of the video are further revealed. All in all, the video comes across as a playful parody on gender categories and sexuality, and the overstatements in both images and music is part and parcel of this articulation of parody.

## CONCLUDORY THOUGHTS

This chapter has involved discoursing on Lady GaGa`s "Telephone" from a variety of positions, and as I`ve argued, the video extends its playful utilization of signs into categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity alike. Throughout the video, there is a sense that GaGa refuses to lock into a rigid expression of gender, insisting on the flexibility of such categories through a variety of gendered displays, wallowing in the possibilities of postmodern construction. The restlessness of GaGa`s gender-fucking is fuelled by an explicit exploration of sexuality that is balanced out by the suggested stability of

[85] See Frith (1996: 165-166) and Palmer (1997: 114-115) for discussions on "Born in The USA".

Beyoncè`s character. However, the representation of Honey Bee turns out to be as unstable as GaGa`s gender play, the overstatement of gendered gestures and traits calling attention to the construction of the feminine as mobile category (read: not natural). I have argued that such negotiations implied in the images of "Telephone" are closely linked to the music, guiding the viewer`s attention and responses. Considering the original sound recording of the song, it seems that the music impacts greatly on notions of ethnicity, framing both artists` ethnic expressions in differing ways, and this relates to how musical codes are read culturally, gaining significance against a backdrop of cultural stereotypes and assumptions.

Looking at the video`s parodic character, it seems that GaGa and Beyoncè`s contrasting representations are about reinventing gender categories that chip away at normative perceptions of sexuality. Though GaGa`s playing with masculine traits is somewhat toned down in the second half of the video, the distinction between her and Beyoncè is still striking. Lady GaGa can be connected both to the drag king and the drag queen, and her extravagant, parodic gendered display arguably calls attention to the falsely naturalized aspects of gendered experience. Halberstam argues that men derive enormous power from assuming and confirming the nonperformative nature of masculinity (Halberstam 1998: 235), which involves that masculinity adheres naturally to men, and cannot be impersonated. GaGa`s drag display of masculinity, then, through its theatrical exaggeration makes the construct and performance of masculinity visible, and thus challenges the distribution of power which is based on the assumption of masculinity as natural. Where GaGa seems to be throwing signs around effortlessly, Beyoncè`s sign-play is grounded in a normative perception of the "real".[86] The distinction between the two artists in terms of gender-representation gives rise to a tension in regard to gender categories, and through parody and exaggeration the signs on which the artists` representations are contingent become visible to the naked eye (and ear) of the viewer. Thus, what might at first glance seem like little more than a chaotic venture into caricatured pop aesthetics, could very well leave the viewer with an experience that impacts on perceptions regarding gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity.

---

[86] Note that signs and symbols must be read against a context, and can never be interpreted on a fully objective basis.

# FINAL REFLECTIONS

Throughout this thesis I have argued the influence of pop performances on our everyday lives, and studied how representations in pop videos inform our perceptions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity through an abundance of images and sounds. Given my concludory thoughts after each chapter, I will not go into further detail as to the specifics of my readings of the videos I have studied. Rather, I wish to reflect on some of the overarching questions, which have guided my work during this thesis.

First and foremost I have attempted to shed light on the dynamics of female representations in contemporary pop videos. It seems that a key point here entails how pop videos are strategically constructed to provide entertainment value, and showcase the artist, through the use of compelling images to ensure multiple viewings. Certainly, pop videos "are about utopian escapism that cunningly turn the present into virtual reality, signifying a hedonistic fantasy that becomes a foil for everyday life" (Hawkins 2011). But this virtual reality is not just a place for entertainment, but rather a space where pop artists perform out strategies of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, both reflecting and engaging perceptions of and expectations to these categories. During this process, the body surfaces as a key factor for consideration. It seems that this new generation of pop stars, marked by artists such as Rihanna, Spears, Aguilera, Beyoncè, and GaGa, are characterized by an approximation of the post-human, largely through hyperembodiment facilited by technological construction. This implies a corrollation between the advancement of gender representations and technologic advances, both taking giant strides into the new millenium. It is important to note that the body is constructed not just by visual images but by sounds and production, and from this perspective, there is a multitude of signifiers that contribute to extracting meaning from representations of the body within the context of music video. A key part of constructing the body within the audiovisual text lies in technologization, and most current pop videos rely heavily on digital editing of both image and sound to project beautiful representations of perfection. The artists we encounter in pop videos, then, have clearly not just wandered onto the set to perform their song for the cameras, but the performance, and more importantly the result, is mediated by decisions and ideas of several "invisible" (to the viewer) forces,

perhaps most notably the video director. This is a part of the video creation process which fans don`t see, and many are probably not aware or conscious of, but it has a vital importance for the end result. This adds to the spectacle of pop representation, and it is important to note that in the realm of pop videos each new spectacle has to outdo the last, this relating to the sensationalization of the pop star.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, pop videos are contingent on luring the viewer in with gendered and sexualized dislays , and this reflects the expectations of a Western culture which is becoming increasingly familiar with explicit imagery, perhaps particularly in light of how pornography is resituated within the frames of an ever-available world wide web. The videos included in this thesis have been explored through my musicological approach, which emphasizes the relevance of musical coding. This includes both technical and stylistic coding, and the latter might be more easily identified by the average listener, finding the aesthetic of the music more available than technical details. A possible conclusion, then, might be that it is the aesthetics of musical production that first and foremost inform how we visualize gender in context of music video. Pop videos are constructed through digital production and editing processes which offer up new posibilities in terms of representation, and viewers are bombarded with both vivid imagery and alluring sound, both equally important in constituting the sexualized displays that are part and parcel of these videos. This relates to representations of hyperembodiment and the approximation of the post-human, and both these categories have implications for gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In my reading of "Single Ladies", I have found that it is the *technological construction* of Beyoncè`s body, introducing the robo-diva, that mediates her position in terms of blackness, which also relates to her sexuality. Experimenting within the framework of both ethnicity and sexuality, Beyoncè proposes new perspectives on understanding and interacting with ethnicity and sexual stereotypes, contributing to the disempowerment of patriarchal hegemony, as well as its equivalence on ethnicity and race. This is arguably achieved through a technological construction that thrives on the synergy of music and image.

As already stated, a key point of my discussions on Beyoncè is how the technological construction of the body mediates her position in terms of blackness and

sexuality, and underlines the ethnic ambivalence which is already implied in her light, digitalized skin. Similarly, GaGa`s monster-diva offers a reframing of gender, mapping monstrosity onto the female body. Such an employment of the post-human offers artists a new context for negoting notions of gender, overting the construct of gender roles in the first place, and therefore defying the naturalization of them. Similar challenges to normative categories of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality can be found in all of the videos that I`ve discussed in this thesis. Though, these challenges are problematized when situated within a framework which, both aesthetically and in terms of representation, is careful not to alienate a mainstream audience.

Admittedly, my readings throughout are characterized by a series of contradicting observations. My conclusions are therefore cautious and at times contracted in claiming the emancipatory effects of the gendered representations that I`ve observed. What I have gained from this study is a realization that representations in pop videos are deceptive, constantly balancing between subverting and accommodating norms, stretching and upholding boundaries, and discouraging and reassuring the expectations of a mainstream audience. What I have discovered in studying representations in pop videos is the relevance of negotiation: the gendered and sexualized displays that are staged within pop videos offer up a site for negotiating gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity, both in the very existence of the representations themselves, as well as in our responses to them. Often what grounds these negotiations, in reality, is the familiar spectacle of music and sound. Ultimately, what makes these representations magnetically powerful and yet troublesome is that they prompt such varied responses in an incredible variety of ways. This assumption directly relates to my own empirical findings in interpreting the texts discussed in this thesis from a variety of positions. Notably, signification is always bound up with reception and subjectivity, and as Välimäki notes, "poststructural semiotics approaches sign systems as signifying, representational practices imbued with contents; the problem of meaning and signification is that of subject and subjectivity, and vice versa" (Välimäki 2005: 7). To attempt to approach my interpretations critically I have had to constantly check my own perceptions, prejudices, and assumptions regarding gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Self-reflectivity is of particular importance, especially

when writing from a male perspective about female representations, and entering the vast problematics of feminist debates.

And this leads me back to the main objective of this thesis: to undertake an investigation of the politics of representation within pop videos through a variety of musicological readings. Even though their primary appeal might be closely linked with escapism and entertainment, much of pop videos` entertainment value arguably lies in their contribution to a growing tension in perceptions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Because, part of the attraction of these videos must surely be how they have the ability to provoke and engage us. Speaking only for myself in this evaluation, I certainly feel that the videos I have discussed in this thesis have challenged my perceptions, and altered my expectations. While the work on this thesis was sparked by a curiosity as to how pop artists` gendered and sexualized displays operate culturally and socially through music video, what now strikes me as most remarkable is how audiences respond to pop representations in incredibly varied ways. Most of all, this reflects personal discoveries related to my own varied responses, seemingly indefinite in their multitude and enriching in their complexity.

## INDEX OF WORKS CITED


Attwood, Feona 2009. *Mainstreaming Sex – The Sexualization of Western Culture.* London: I.B. Taurus.

Barthes, Roland 1977. *Image – Music - Text.* London: Fontana.

Beauvoir, Simone de 1952 (2008). "Introduction from The Second Sex". In Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (eds.): *Identities – Race, Class, Gender and Nationality.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Bent, Ian D. "Hermeneutics". In *Grove Music Online/Oxford Music Online*. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/12871 (Retrieved 03.01.2011).

Brackett, David 1995. *Interpreting Popular Music.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Breihan, Tom 2007. "Rihanna: Good Girl Gone Bad". Review in *Pitchfork.com.* http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10320-good-girl-gone-bad/ (Retrieved 24.01.2011).

Brett, Philip; Thomas, Gary C.; Wood, Elizabeth (eds.) 1994. *Queering the Pitch.* New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith 1999. *Gender Trouble.* New York: Routledge.

Cady, Jenniffer 2010. "Lady GaGa on `Telephone´ and its Hidden Meaning". In *Eonline.com.* http://uk.eonline.com/uberblog/b171259_lady_gaga_on_telephone_its_hidden.html#ixzz0hwFTgb17 (Retrieved 14.03.11).

Cashmore, Ellis 1997. *The Black Culture Industry.* London: Routledge.

Cook, Nicolas 1998. *Analysing Musical Multimedia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlè 1995. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color". In Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas (eds.): *Critical Race Theory – The Key Writings That Formed the Movement.* New York: The New Press.

Danielsen, Anne 2006. *Presence and Pleasure – The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Derrida, Jacques 1998. *Of Grammatology.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fast, Susan 2001. *In The Houses of The Holy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Foucault, Michel 1998. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I - The Will to Knowledge.* London: Penguin Books.

Frith, Simon 1996. *Performing Rites – Evaluating Popular Music.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fynes-Clinton, Jane 2010. "Lady GaGa`s Grab for Attention Enough to Make You Gag". In *Couriermail.com.* http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/lady-gagas-grab-for-attention-enough-to-make-you-gag/story-e6freri6-1225923966643 (Retrieved: 23.01.11).

Gibson, Pamela Church (ed.) 2004. *More Dirty Looks – Gender, Pornography and Power.* London: British Film Institute.

Gilroy, Paul 1991. *There Ain`t No Black in the Union Jack – The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Gilroy, Paul 1993. *The Black Atlantic – Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Goffman, Erving 1959 (1971). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Grossberg, Lawrence 2000. “The Media Economy of Rock Culture: Cinema, Postmodernity, and Authenticity”. In Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.): *Sound and Vision – The Music Video Reader.* London: Routledge.

Guertin, Carolyn G. 2003. Doctoral dissertation: *Quantum Feminist Mnemotechnics: The Archival Text, Digital Narrative and the Limits of Memory.* http://www.mcluhan.utoronto.ca/academy/carolynguertin/diss.html (Retrieved 15.02.2011).

Halberstam, Judith 1998. *Female Masculinity.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Haraway, Donna 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women – The Reinvention of Nature.* London: Free Association Books.

Hardy, Simon 2009. ”The New Pornographies: Representation or Reality?”. In Feona Attwood (ed.): *Mainstreaming Sex – The Sexualization of Western Culture.* London: I.B. Taurus.

Harris, Cheryl I. 1995. “Whiteness as Property”. In Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Keldall Thomas (eds.): *Critical Race Theory – The Key Writings That Formed the Movement.* New York: The New Press.

Harris, Chris 2008. “Lady GaGa Brings Her Artistic Vision Of Pop Music To New Album - And A New Kids Song”. In *Mtv.com*. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1589013/20080609/lady_gaga.jhtml (Retrieved 11.11.2010).

Hawkins, Stan 1996. “Perspectives in Popular Musicology: Music, Lennox and Meaning in 1990s Pop”. *Popular Music*. 15(1), Pages 17- 36.

Hawkins, Stan 2001. “Musicological Quagmires in Popular Music – Seeds of Detailed Conflict”. In *Popular Music Online.*

http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/01/hawkins.html (Retrieved 07.03.11).

Hawkins, Stan 2002. *Settling the Pop Score – pop texts and identity politics.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hawkins, Stan 2004. “Dragging Out Camp: Narrative Agendas in Madonna`s Musical Production”. In Santiago Fouz-Hernández and Freya Jarman-Ivens (eds.): *Madonna`s Drowned Worlds – New Approaches to Her Cultural Transformations, 1983 – 2003.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hawkins, Stan 2006. “On Male Queering in Mainstream Pop”. In Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (eds.): *Queering the Popular Pitch.* London: Routledge.

Hawkins, Stan 2007. “Aphex Twin – Monstrous hermaphrodites, madness and the strain of independent dance music”. In John Richardson and Stan Hawkins (eds.): *Essays on Sound and Vision*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Hawkins, Stan 2009. *The British Pop Dandy.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hawkins, Stan 2011. “Aesthetics and Hyperembodiment in Pop Videos: Rihanna`s `Umbrella´”. Forthcoming chapter in Claudia Gorbman, Carol Vernallis & John Richardson (eds.): *Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics.* Oxford University Press.

Hawkins, Stan & Richardson, John 2007. ”Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation”. In *Popular Music and Society.*

James, Robin 2008. “Robo-Diva R&B: Aesthetics, Politics and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music”. *Journal of Popular Music Studies,* Volume 20, issue 4. http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/121632270/PDFSTART (Retrieved 25.09.2010).

Jarman-Ivens, Freya (ed.) 2007. *Oh Boy! – Masculinities and Popular Music.* London: Routledge.

Leach, Ben 2008. “Beyonce renames herself 'Sasha Fierce'”. In *Telegrapgh.co.uk.* http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/celebritynews/3246132/Beyonce-renames-herself-Sasha-Fierce.html (Retrieved 25.09.2010).

Liepe-Levinson, Katherine 2002. *Strip Show - Performances of Gender and Desire*. London: Routledge.

Macionis, John C & Plummer, Ken 2005. *Sociology – A Global Introduction.* Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

McClary, Susan 2002. *Feminine Endings – Music, Gender and Sexuality.* Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

McClintock, Anne 2004. "Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power". In Pamela Church Gibson (ed.): *More Dirty Looks – Gender, Pornography and Power.* London: British Film Institute.

Middleton, Richard 2000. "Work-in(g)-Practice: Configurations of the Popular Music Intertext". In Michael Talbot (ed.): *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Middleton, Richard 2002. *Studying Popular Music.* Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Middleton, Richard (ed.) 2003. *Reading Pop – Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moe, Jon Refsdal 2007. "Aesthetic and performative considerations of Christina Milian`s music video Dip It Low". I Stan Hawkins (red.) & John Richardson (red.): *Essays on Sound and Vision.* Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Moore, Allan F. 2007. *Rock: The Primary Text – Developing a musicology of rock (2nd edition).* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Moore, Allan F. (ed.) 2008. *Analysing Popular Music.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mulvey, Laura 1975 (1999). "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema". In Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.): *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Nagel, Joane 2003. *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality - Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Negus, Keith 1996. *Popular Music in Theory.* Oxford: Polity Press.

Oakes, James Lee 2006. ”Queering the Witch – Stevie Nicks and the Forging of Femininity at the Night of a Thousand Stevies”. In Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (eds.): *Queering the Popular Pitch.* London: Routledge.

Ogunnaike, Lola 2004. ”Beyoncé's Second Date With Destiny's Child″. In *The New York Times Online.* http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/arts/music/14ogun.html (Retrieved 09.10.2010).

Palmer, Gareth 1997. ”Bruce Springsteen and Masculinity”. In Sheila Whiteley (ed.): *Sexing the Groove – Popular Music and Gender.* London: Routledge.

People 2008. ”Britney Spears Calls New Song 'A Girl Anthem'”. In *People.com*. http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20229574,00.html (Retrieved 24.01.2011).

Popjustice 2008. ” Everybody calm down: we've heard the Britney single in full and it is literally quite good”. In *Popjustice.com.*

http://www.popjustice.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2982&Itemid=9 (Retrieved 15.02.2011).

Richardson, John 2007. ”Double-Voiced Discourse and Bodily Pleasures in Contemporary Finish Rock: The Case of Maija Vilkumaa”. In John Richardson and Stan Hawkins (eds.): *Essays on Sound and Vision.* Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Richardson, John & Hawkins, Stan (eds.) 2007. *Essays on Sound and Vision.* Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Schwartz, Laura M. 2007. *Making Music Videos*. New York: Billboard Books.

Scott, Derek B. (ed.) 2009. Introduction to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Shaw, Andrea Elizabeth 2006. *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women`s Unruly Political Bodies.* Oxford: Lexington Books.

Snead, James A. 1984. “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture”. In Henry Louis Gates Jr. (ed.): *Black Literature and Literary Theory.* New York & London: Metheuen.

Steinskog, Erik 2008. ”Skeiv musikk – konstruksjon av kjønnsbilder”. In Astrid Kvalbein and Anne Lorentzen (eds.): *Musikk og kjønn – i utakt.* Bergen: Norsk Kulturråd/Fagbokforlaget.

Tagg, Philip 2003. ”Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice”. In Richard Middleton (ed.): *Reading Pop – Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vena, Jocelyn 2008. ”Britney Spears' 'Womanizer' Director Joseph Kahn Talks 'Toxic' Comparisons” In *Mtv.com.* http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1597273/womanizer-director-talks-toxic-comparisons.jhtml (Retrieved 15.02.2011).

Vernallis, Carol 2004. *Experiencing Music Video – Aesthetics and Cultural Context.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Välimäki, Susanna 2005. *Subject Strategies in Music – A Psychoanalytic Approach to Musical Signification.* Helsinki: International Semiotics Institute.

Walser, Robert 1993. *Running With The Devil – Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Walser, Robert 2000. “Forging Masculinity: Heavy-Metal Sounds and Images of Gender”. In Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Sound and Vision – The Music Video Reader.* London: Routledge.

Walser, Robert 2008. “Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances”. In Allan F. Moore (ed.): *Analyzing Popular Music.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walters, Barbara 2010. ”Lady GaGa: `I Love Androgyny´”. In *Abcnews.com.* http://abcnews.go.com/video/playerIndex?id=9640579 (Retrieved 14.03.11).

West, Cornel 2001. *Race Matters.* Boston: Beacon Press Books.

Whiteley, Sheila (ed.) 1997. *Sexing the Groove – Popular Music and Gender.* London: Routledge.

Whiteley Sheila 2000. *Women and Popular Music – Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity.* London: Routledge.

Whiteley, Sheila & Rycenga, Jennifer (eds.) 2006. *Queering the Popular Pitch.* London: Routledge.

Whittall, Arnold. "Hermeneutics." In Alison Latham (ed.): *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e3224 (Retrieved 03.01.2011).

Willemen, Paul 2004. ”For a Pornoscape”. In Pamela Church Gibson (ed.): *More Dirty Looks – Gender, Pornography and Power.* London: British Film Institute.

Ålvik, Jon Mikkel Broch 2008. *Modalities of Desire – Traits of sadomasochism in popular music.* Master thesis in musicology. Oslo: University of Oslo.

## VIDEOGRAPHY


Beyoncè – Single Ladies. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m1EFMoRFvY

Beyoncè feat. Lady GaGa – Video Phone. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGkvXp0vdng

Britney Spears – Toxic. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOZuxwVk7TU

Britney Spears – Womanizer. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ2IpTtGI-4&feature=fvwrel

Christina Aguilera – Not Myself Tonight. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wt-tHcQR67Y

Christina Milian – Dip It Low. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z5Mvyp1QHw

Lady GaGa – Alejandro. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niqrrmev4mA

Lady GaGa – Bad Romance. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeyl0I

Lady GaGa – Born This Way. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw

Lady GaGa – Paparazzi. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2smz_1L2_0

Lady GaGa feat. Beyoncè: Telephone. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVBsypHzF3U

Madonna – Human Nature. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS6FCoq349o

Rihanna – Umbrella. Accessed on You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvBfHwUxHIk