

# MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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## ***Dreamworlds 3 (Abridged)*** *Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video*

Transcript

### INTRODUCTION

**[SINGING]** *I heard you on the wireless back in Fifty-Two; Lying awake intent at tuning in on you. If I was young it didn't stop you coming through. Oh-oh...*

**SUT JHALLY:** Since MTV first started operation in 1981 by playing this video from The Buggles entitled “Video Killed the Radio Star”, music videos have become a central and vital component of the music, entertainment, and media industries. No longer limited to just one channel they have spread out to the entire culture and across musical genres from pop, to rock, to metal, to rap and hip-hop, to country. They have moved from the margins of the culture and relative innocence to its very center and it’s a caldron of controversy around the nature of the sexual imagery that came to define it as a genre.

In fact from the very origins music videos, like other forms of advertising, have relayed heavily on stories concerning female sexuality to fulfill their function of selling CDs and albums for record companies. This Duran Duran video from 1983 shows how sexual imagery was an important part of music video from the start. Right up to the present it is clear that women’s bodies have functioned as an important currency through which the stories of music video are told. Across the whole range of our media culture the link between a woman’s identity, her body, and her sexuality is told in the most compelling of forms. But, nowhere in popular culture is the story more focused and told in such relentless fashion than in music video. Examining the stories that music videos tell us about both male and female sexuality, about what is considered normal, allows us to do more than just understand one aspect of our culture. It gives us a way to think about how the culture in general teaches us to be men and women. It gives us a way to understand ourselves.

## TECHNIQUES OF STORYTELLING

**[VIDEO CLIP] LFO's Brad Fischetti:** Like before the video, right, they hand us these two huge poster boards filled with Polaroids of girls in bikinis, and they're like yea, pick the one's you want.

**[VIDEO CLIP] Kid Rock:** Do we have enough girls? We never have enough girls...all about the girls.

**SUT JHALLY:** As Kid Rock notes, music videos are all about the girls and indeed, the presence of sexualized female bodies is so prevalent that the major conventions for achieving this goal are relatively easy to identify. The most obvious way is to cut in shots of women into a band performance and it seems the more bizarre, the better. In this case, not merely bikini clad, but coated in silver or in a variation, gold plated. In fact, showing women as dancers or just around the artist is perhaps the most frequent convention used across all genres. Whether it is rock music, or country music, or pop, or hip-hop, the presence of female bodies has become one of the easy solutions found by the creators of music videos to the problem of how to both get attention and tell a compelling story that connects the music to visually arresting images. Other strategies include showing them as members of the crowd at live performances, sometimes exposing themselves in the hope of getting attention. In the most obvious failure of creativity, women are also shown as simply hanging around male artists, their only function being to draw in male viewers into the fantasy created by the producers and directors of these videos. Sometimes, women play a key role in the narrative of the fantasy being told. Here, Kid Rock gets to live out one of the major fantasies of the male dream world, group sex with glamorous airline stewardesses, where he joins an exclusive and envied club. But even beyond a single video there is a consistent story about masculinity and femininity being told by the system of music videos as a whole. Identifying these stories, where they come from, and the possible effect they could have is thus an urgent task.

## CONSTRUCTING FEMININITY

**SUT JHALLY:** Our ideas of what it means to be a socially acceptable man or woman have not been genetically encoded in our biological genes. They come from the stories the cultures tells us about what is normal and what is not and music videos make clear that the most important aspect of a woman is her sexuality. In fact, women are presented as ravenous creatures who desire sex at all times and it seems with any man who happens to be around. And as they care only about one thing the movement towards sex is quick and instant and women are presented as aggressors who won't take no for an answer.

But one of the strange aspects of the world depicted in music videos is that often women far outnumber men which means that many times women have to share the men. This visual strategy, multiple women draped over a man, has become one of the more enduring techniques in music videos, something that directors and artists can go to in the absence of creativity. Told over and over and over again however, this cliché helps to construct an understanding of femininity always being defined in terms of a powerful man. And sometimes, the man can be just a boy. And when men are truly absent this becomes a really bleak world for women, they fall apart emotionally not being able to cope, disintegrating in bathrooms, moping around endlessly on beds, lamenting their loneliness and isolation until a man returns to catch a falling tear and make the world right again with his presence.

If we ask, what is the major thing that these women do the answer does not exactly need a rocket scientist. They party, endlessly it seems in every conceivable venue, on yachts or boats, swimsuit and bikini clad women dance, sunbath, and frolic carefree. At the beach, they party enthusiastically; in hot tubs they invite men to join them. By the sides of swimming pools they sway seductively. At house parties they hang out in their underwear. In clubs they can't resist stripping down and dancing on tables. When the women of this fantasy world do get around to wearing clothes the choices, given everything else we know about them, are quite predictable. Low-cut skimpy tops, stockings and lingerie of various kinds seem to be pretty standard fair.

But what do these women when they're not cavorting or frolicking at parties on the beach actually do? What roles are they shown in? Given the fantasy nature of this dream world some of these roles should come as no surprise. From the inevitable cheerleaders, airline stewardesses partying on planes, hotel maids in short skirts, sorority girls just having a great time pillow fighting with each other, or authority figures like police women or SNM chicks with whips or school girls in uniform in lust with anyone, these characters are drawn straight from adolescent sexual fantasy. In fact, peep shows and strip clubs are the main hang out for one of the major female characters who populate the dream world; the stripper. From playing a small part in the early history of music videos, they've evolved into one of its major components. The compliant stripper is of course the ultimate heterosexual male fantasy and her ubiquitous presence should tell us something about the imagination that propels this part of popular culture.

## THE PORNOGRAPHIC IMAGINATION

**SUT JHALLY:** While in the early years of music video black women were virtually invisible, the widespread popularity of hip-hop has allowed their entry into this part of the culture. But the price of entry is very high indeed, as they have literally

been reduced to one part of their bodies. This is the essence of the commercial, male, heterosexual pornographic imagination, thinking of women as being defined only through their sexuality and that sexuality to be at the service of men's desires.

Indeed, many hip-hop videos are full of shots where money is showered on women's bodies signally that they are regarded with a contempt reserved for prostitutes or strippers, that their bodies and sexuality can be bought and controlled by men. And while black men in mainstream rap and hip-hop videos are largely presented as violent, savage, criminal, and drunken thugs we have to remember that these representations do not reflect the reality of African-American masculinity but how someone has chosen to represent it at this point in history. As such, they constituted the most racist set of images found in decades in American media and resemble most closely D.W. Griffith's 1915 white supremacist film *The Birth of a Nation* where blacks are portrayed as irresponsible, drunken buffoons and as out of control, lust filled rapists of white women and just as there was a powerful white man who created and controlled those images as an argument for white supremacy and the glorification of the Ku Klux Klan we have to focus our attention on these contemporary images of a threatening and out of control, black masculinity and the role played by the largely white men who control our current media empires. We have to ask what functions do the racist and sexist images in hip-hop and rap perform for the corporations who control our media culture and why are these images of black masculinity so connected to the abuse of women and what role does the pornographic imagination play in this? In fact the link between the sexist images in hip-hop and pornography has been made quite directly by rap artists such as Snoop Dogg and his best selling DVD *The Diary of a Pimp* produced in part with Hustler and the porn entrepreneur Larry Flint.

While hip-hop has the most obvious and direct connection to pornography it is far from being the only musical video genre to have this relationship. In fact, historically rock music has lead the way as this playboy issue shows and VH1 pointed out the porn and rock connection as early as 2001.

**[VIDEO CLIP] Reporter:** Rankin' File, rock and porn.

**SUT JHALLY:** The worlds have intertwined in many ways from female porn stars appearing in music videos to directors such as Gregory Dark who switched from making films like *Hootermania* and *New Wave Hookers* to shooting videos for artists such as Britney Spears, Mandy Moore and Counting Crows.

It is important to be clear about the nature of this analysis. This is not a critique or dismissal of sexual images. It is not a moralistic point of view that regards all sexual representation in a negative manner. The question is not whether an

image is good or bad, the question is whose story is being told? Who's eyes do we see the world through? Who's eyes do we not see the world through? Who is behind the camera? Who's visions and values guide us through the process by which we learn what it means to be a man or woman? And whose fantasies are these? Are they supposed to be ours? Given the narrow story about sexuality that is repeatedly told in mainstream culture the real issue is not that there is too much discussion of sex but that there is not enough. That is, there is simply not enough diversity in the stories of sexuality that circulate in the culture because the commercial, male, heterosexual pornographic imagination monopolizes virtually all of our media terrain.

## WAYS OF LOOKING

**SUT JHALLY:** The stories of the dream world are told in many ways. The explicit images of what men and women are shown doing is just one way. There is also a story told by the visual techniques and forms that are used by the makers of music videos. That is, there is a story of the camera itself, which tells us that femininity is connected to sexuality and the body and that women find their own identities in terms of how pleasing and desirous they are to men. The most obvious strategy to communicate this is by actually showing them posing before a camera, inviting the viewer to gaze at them. Even when there are no cameras directly present in the scene, the women invite the look from the viewer behind the camera that is filming them. They are presented as wanting to be watched, inviting it, desiring the look, enjoying being on display.

Even walking away, looking back over her shoulder, the object of the gaze explicitly invites the desire. She wants to be possessed by the gaze of the watcher. Far from objecting when men look at them in sexual ways, the women of dream world revel in the attention. They want to be looked at by men. They deliberately position themselves for maximum visual affect. But the images we see in music video are never innocent; they are never accidental. These ways of looking have been directly chosen by writers and directors and editors. Understanding them can tell us a great deal about how the person or thing being watched is regarded by the viewer. In music video, the person being watched is regarded as a passive thing. A common filming technique that reflects this view of the woman is a passive thing to be consumed by watching males involves the camera panning the willing and exposed bodies of these women. The camera roams over it, scanning up and down at will, exploring it in detail. The assumption behind this way of looking at someone is that it is perfectly legitimate to watch in this fashion. Women's bodies are surveyed, looked at, analyzed in the same way that one might examine a landscape or an object. Their function in the video is to be examined, gazed at, and desired by men.

These ways of visually representing femininity seem to lead almost naturally to focus the gaze on only one part of women's bodies. The women of the dream world are fragmented and presented as a number of simple and disconnected body parts. This is a common filming technique. It is a way to present women as an object of fair gaze. Just as from the viewpoint of content, we can say that it reflects the pornographic imagination, the filming techniques that accompany it are a reflection of what we call the pornographic gaze. The point here is that the way in which women are filmed, not simply what they are doing or wearing, communicates messages and ideas about them. Specifically, focusing on only one aspect of people, women in this case, detracts about thinking about them as real people with feelings, emotions, thoughts, intellect, their own dreams and desires. Instead, they are just legs in high heels. When you think of someone only as a body part you deny them subjectivity and what makes them unique individuals. In this case, these ways of filming reduce women to one part of their bodies and only to the sexual part of their multifaceted characters. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these techniques in and of themselves it is not that it is always negative as always ready to be watched and wanting to be watched. We all, men and women, present ourselves to be watched and gazed at. We all, men and women, watch attractive strangers with sexual desire. To treat another as an object of our desires is part of what it means to be human. The problem in music video and the culture in general is that women are presented as nothing else. If the story told about femininity could be widened beyond sexual objectification to include many other qualities of individuals: intellectual, emotional, spiritual and religious; creative, athletic, familial, political, occupational, the desire for autonomy and independence, for pleasure and deeper meaning then there would be no problem with a little bit of objectification as a sexual aspect of femininity would be balanced out and integrated with many other human qualities. The problem is that in our contemporary culture this complexity gets crowded out by a one dimensional definition of femininity based on a single story of the body of objectification of a passive sexuality whose only goal is to please men being told over and over again so it becomes the only way in which femininity is thought of. In that way, a lot of objectification is extremely damaging as it narrows how we think of femininity emptying out all of the complexity of human existence. Women become nothing but shadows or silhouettes, merely outlines; just empty shapes that men can fill with their own desires. There is nothing important and unique inside, nothing that makes them human. They are merely shadows of real people.

## **FEMALE ARTISTS: TRAPPED IN THE PORNOGRAPHIC GAZE**

**SUT JHALLY:** To gain entrance into this world, female artists have to fit into the existing set of stories and use the visual language that has already been established as the norm. Musical ability is only one of the talents that is needed

to establish a presence in the dream world and it is clear that many female artists thoroughly understand the requirements of the pornographic imagination. To navigate the barriers that this way of looking at the world erects, female artists are compelled to use the only visual language the culture allows, the central aspect of which is that women have to present themselves as primarily sexual beings. So predominant has this image of the female artist become that it is difficult to even imagine what an alternative might look like. The challenge of female artists is to try and stay true to their own vision of themselves but the pressures to conform are relentless and the conventional techniques that are adopted are easy to identify no matter the genre. Female performers must take on the fantasy roles that the pornographic imagination dictates. They perform for the camera and the male gaze, presenting themselves invitingly. They touch themselves suggestively, undress for the watching audience, allowing the camera to pan up and down their bodies, looking at them from above as well as from below. Like all women in the dream world their bodies are fragmented and they become defined through their various body parts. Even artists such as Madonna, who want to present themselves as assertive, independent and powerful have to do it from within the conventions of the dream world when it comes to highlighting their sexuality and as the codes of female sexuality define it as passive and submissive, they find themselves in a strange paradox.

In more recent years Gwen Stefani reveals the same contradiction. On the one hand independent, energetic, in control, but always at the same time soft and safe within the conventions of the pornographic imagination. These pressures to conform can also be seen if we look at the representation of some artists over time. For example, the singer/song writer Jewel had for many years carved out an image of herself as a serious and authentic artist who made headlines with her video Intuition where she very knowingly and skillfully, perhaps “tongue in cheek” recreated many of the conventions of the dream world knowing what is necessary for survival.

**[VOICEOVER] Jewel:** This video is really over the top. I’m doing things in this video I never thought I’d do like, you know, I’m dancing, sprayed down with fire hoses (laughing) It’s silly, you know, it’s silly and completely over the top and something you would absolutely see in a music video, you know, (laughing) it’s just an insane thing.

**SUT JHALLY:** It is instructive to remember that Mariah Carey’s original image was much more innocent before it seems she threw herself whole heartedly into the stories that the culture seems to demand from female artists to ensure success. Early in her career Christina Aguilera, too, was marketed in a gentle manner to young girls. That changed dramatically with the video that marked her full-scale immersion into the adult dream world of music video. Similarly, Jessica Simpson went from tamed pop star to mega publicity and heavy rotation with a



video that presented her in quite explicit sexual terms. All these cases make clear that the price of female entry into what is considered the mainstream of the culture is to accept the vision of the pornographic imagination; that the only things of value about women are their bodies and their sexuality and their willingness and desire to act out male fantasies.

## MASCULINITY AND CONTROL

**SUT JHALLY:** Another female artist who reflects this sexual imperative is Janet Jackson who in the 1990s went from relative obscurity to superstardom when she abandoned her somewhat tame image for a hyper sexualized one that met the requirements of the pornographic imagination more fully. This journey to objectification was completed in the 2004 Super Bowl Halftime show where she literally became defined to the world by one part of her body. However, Janet Jackson was just half the story of that event and almost no mention was made of the moments leading up to it where she plays the role of a tease and Justin Timberlake plays the role of a man who wants to control her and her body...

**[VIDEO CLIP] Justin Timberlake (singing):** *See I've been watching you, and I like the way you move, so go 'head, girl, just do it, that ass-shaking thing you do... No disrespect, I don't mean no harm, I can't wait to have you in my arms, hurry up 'cause you're takin' too long, bet I'll have you naked by the end of this song.*

**SUT JHALLY:** The dramatic conclusion of the incident is in a microcosm the essence of the dream world played out in front of the whole world. She (Janet Jackson) has become nothing more than a body part and he has demonstrated his sexual control over her. In fact, Justin Timberlake had already explored this theme in a previous video based on the end of his real life relationship with Britney Spears, which shows him breaking into her house and surreptitiously watching as she undresses and takes a shower. This behavior of glamorizing this instance mimics precisely the structures of real life stalking and domestic abuse where a man who cannot accept a woman's rejection of him and attempts to assert control over her life.

In fact, just as music video tells us a story of female passivity, it tells an equally powerful story of masculinity being tied to power, intimidation and force. And in this story of powerful and out of control masculinity women play a key role. They are shown repeatedly in cages, exhibiting themselves for watching males. They are shown tied up and writhing seductively on beds waiting for a man's attention. Chased and pursued by men, they are carried away and handled like children, their bodies explored and used as men please. This sense of male entitlement has an unmistakable aggressive edge. Women are pushed aside, slammed



against walls, and held on the floor, water and alcohol poured over them and on them and finally, spread out on a pool table. In the pornographic imagination even a woman's apparent refusal to male advances ends in their acquiescence to his desire. Even when men unexpectedly attack them, women's arousal wins out over fear. In the dream world women never say no and passionately welcome masculine aggression. They even enjoy being forcefully kidnapped in a dark garage, blindfolded and made to perform for their attacker. In these ways, men's violence against women takes on an erotic quality. Perhaps the clearest and more aggressive articulation of this sense of male control of female bodies is reflected in this video with Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit kidnaps a woman he's obsessed with and forces her to watch as he both expresses his anger at her for rejecting his advances and demonstrates his ability to control her in line with his desires.

**[VIDEO CLIP] Fred Durst (singing):** *Hey you, Mrs. Too-good-to-look-my-way and that's cool you want nothing at all to do with me but I want you and ain't nothing wrong with wanting you 'cause I'm a man and I can think what the hell I want, you got that straight?*

*No doubt I'd love to sniff on them panties now...I'd eat you alive! I'd eat you alive.*

**SUT JHALLY:** As these ideas of male entitlement and power have become glamorized and normalized in the culture, we have to ask, what affect do they have on real life behavior of men and women?

**[VIDEO CLIP]** From the documentary War Zone

**Man:** (makes a kissing noise as she walks by)

**Maggie Hadleigh-West:** Who did that?

**Man:** What? (makes the noise again)

**Maggie Hadleigh-West:** Did you do that? Do you always do that?

**Man:** Oh I do it all the time; I do it to all the pretty girls on the street

**SUT JHALLY:** The documentary film War Zone is a real life demonstration of this sense of male entitlement and shows the harassment and verbal abuse that many women experience simply walking around their communities.

**[VIDEO CLIP]** War Zone

**Man:** I said good morning, baby, I like your style.

**Man:** I said have a nice day, you're very attractive

**Man:** Do you mind if I walk with you?

**Man:** Say, yo, baby.

**Man:** Happy mothers day, happy mothers day, happy mothers day, happy mothers day

**Man:** I said you're good, that's all.

**Man:** You're looking old

**Man:** She got big legs

**Man:** She needs to get laid

**Man:** You ain't got it like that

**Man:** Ah, forget it, forget it.

**SUT JHALLY:** And sometimes, this verbal abuse very quickly transforms into physical abuse. [Video from Central Park, NYC June 11, 2000] During the 2000 Puerto Rican day pride parade in New York City, the public space of central park turned into a literal war zone for scores of women who were doused, sexually assaulted, and stripped of their clothes by groups of men who felt they had an entitlement to act their desires on any female body. This footage, used by the police to identify and prosecute the assailants shocked and outraged the country when it was broadcast. When virtually identical images have been played out over and over again on our television screens with virtually no comment, why should we be shocked? In fact, what was most striking about these images was how familiar they were.

**[VIDEO CLIP]** Montage of women in music videos and police video being sprayed with water.

**SUT JHALLY:** While there are chilling similarities between the popular culture images and the real life attacks in Central Park, there is a major difference. The women in the real world were not enjoying it. They weren't smiling. This wasn't their dream world. It was someone else's, which had turned into their nightmare.

While disembodied and fragmented images of women cannot directly cause sexual and violent assault they do rob women of their humanity and create an environment where a tax against them is not treated seriously. They cultivate attitudes and values that legitimate and justify the assaults as self deserving and provoked by the victims. If your understanding of female sexuality is mediated by the stories of music video then these are precisely the types of attitudes that one would expect that dream world to cultivate in it's male watchers. Further, all behavior is based upon certain assumptions, attitudes and values. These stories of the pornographic imagination, then, do not directly cause sexual assault but they create understandings in a cultural environment that might encourage certain violent behaviors, influenced by many other things, of course, by some men towards women. Fantasies are fun but sometimes the line between fantasy and reality is blurred and the images of the dream world in that respect are not innocent, they are not just images. The stories they tell are firmly implicated in the gender and power relations in our society.

[END]