

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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DREAMWORLDS 2

Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video

Transcript

Woman: Music!

Man: Television!

[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: MTV started operation in 1981 by playing this video by The Buggles called, very prophetically, "Video Killed the Radio Star." MTV was set up so the record companies would have a place to show the videos they had produced as commercials for their artists. Most videos are not made to be sold, but to help sell something else. They advertise and sell CDs and tapes. It's not surprising, then, that videos should look so much like ads, or, that like ads, they should use provocative sexual imagery. In fact, it's sometimes difficult to distinguish between ads and videos. As in this Pepsi commercial that imitates a Robert Palmer video. The biggest challenge that advertisers face is what they refer to as "clutter and noise" - the thousands of other commercials that bombard us everyday, clamoring for our attention. The challenge is to make your ad stand out from its competition. The ad-makers from Madison Avenue know that one way of breaking through the clutter is to use powerful sexual imagery. These images stand out in a crowd, and help establish an important link between consumers and products. The makers of rock videos have learned this commercial lesson well. This Duran Duran video from 1983, "Girls on Film," shows how sexual imagery was an important part of music video from the start. However, saying that videos use sex to sell only takes us so far. The much more interesting question that we should ask is, "What is the story about sexuality that videos tell as they try and sell us CDs and tapes?" There can be many different stories told about sexuality by a society. Indeed, every culture has to tell some stories around sexuality, as it is an inseparable component of human existence. Sexuality is part of being human. The real question that we should ask, then, is "Who gets to tell the story of sexuality in music video?" The credit lists of videos tell us that most of them are written and directed by men. Aerosmith videos, for example, are directed by a man named Marty Callner.

Man: Just so there's no mistake about it, this is our director, Marty Callner, who's directed thirteen of our last videos for MTV.

Sut Jhally: As we can see from the MTV Music Awards, the Aerosmith team, like that from many bands, is entirely male. What kinds of stories come out of this male

commercial culture? Where is inspiration drawn from? If we look carefully at Aerosmith videos, the answer is pretty clear. It is the sexual dreamland of these men, based it seems, on a cyberspace of adolescent fantasy that drives this vision. This is a world where a cool rejection by uncooperative women, with just the click of a button, can be modified into a passionate and intense acceptance. Or where schoolgirls sneak out to enter amateur strip contests and go skinny-dipping with a stranger they have just picked up. Callner is not alone in this way of looking at things, although he does seem to have a special thing for schoolgirls in uniform. Other videos also reflect, it seems, the fantasies of older men about younger women. Much of our commercial culture is dominated by this male sexual fantasy world, where the stories are told from a very particular perspective, as this ad for Beagle Boy Jeans makes clear.

[Bugle Boy Jeans Commercial]

Sut Jhally: They know what men like, and it is that story that dominates our society. Music videos could tell many different stories about sexuality. For instance, there is a story told about male sexuality in video. This is important to look at, also, but we are going to focus on the story of female sexuality that is told by the male authors of our commercial culture. As we examine the story, we should keep in mind whose stories are not told, whose visions of the world we do not see, who is silenced in our culture. This story of female sexuality is not limited to rock videos, but is told in thousands of commercials everyday, like this one for Jordache Jeans, or this one for Avion's Musk. The story is recounted in TV programs on many channels. The same story comes out of Hollywood movies every year, and is told through images in fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Elle* and *Bazaar*, as well as other programs on MTV. The same story is also told in many kinds of music videos, videos for country music, in hip-hop and rap, in videos for Latino audiences. Indeed MTV is no longer the only or the major outlet for showing music videos. VH1, also owned by MTV networks but aimed at an older audience, shows many videos. We're going to examine the story of female sexuality, told in this broader video world, which is summarized by MTV themselves on their tenth anniversary celebration show, and why this story may be especially dangerous for young women and girls, and how it may affect how men and women interact together sexually.

The story of femininity, that is, what it means to be a woman in this culture is told through the mythical figures of the women of the dream world, and the basic techniques by which they are introduced into videos are fairly easy to identify. For instance, they can be presented as members of the band, either as musicians or, more likely, as backup singers. Lip-syncing the words sung by someone else, perhaps less glamorous. When not directly shown as being involved in the production of the music, they can still appear as dancers. Their main function in these videos is to be looked at. This decorative role is made even more explicit when there is no pretense of singing or dancing, and where women are simply present around the artist. It is carried to extremes by artists like Tupac Shakur, but he is not alone in this. Here the geriatrics of rock, the Beach Boys, are still at it in the '90s, surrounding themselves with bikini-clad young women. An extension of this is to have women become part of the audience as they watch the band perform. Sometimes, unable to control themselves, they run onto the stage before they are carried away by bodyguards. An often used variation of this

is to enter cut shots of women into the band performance. Perhaps the most popular way, though, of getting women into a video, is to show them as part of the story or subject of the song. Although many times, the connection is not too clear. Because the story told about femininity is very narrow, not any woman has a place here. This young woman, coming to audition for a Van Halen video will learn this lesson quickly.

The message is clear – unless you are willing to fit into this male dream world, do not apply. The actresses that do appear in these videos have become stars in their own right, with their own shows on pay-per-view TV. The fact that these models and dancers have become stars, should indicate to us that the stories of music video have become significant in our culture, but the responsibility for the content of these stories does not rest with them. Like all actors and actresses within the commercial system, they are merely following the orders of the rich, powerful interests that control our commercial culture, as one of these rock video girls, herself, understands.

Woman: And I know, you know, in a lot of these rock videos that we are male fantasies.

Sut Jhally: What is it that motivates these fictional creations of video makers - the women of the dream world? What is their most characteristic behavior? This is not a difficult question to answer. In music video it seems that all women are interested in sex with any available man. Their behavior is that associated with one of the central mythical characters of male sexual fantasy – the nymphomaniac – the woman who is always sexually aroused and constantly looking to satisfy that arousal. So powerful is their lust that they attack men, even in situations where their lives may be at risk. They corner them so they have no choice but to submit. Ripping off men's clothes, female sexual desire devours men. But this is also a dangerous world for women, for there are other women in competition for these same men, and these women will fight violently for possession. It is a world characterized by competition between women, for men. Because of this competition, men have an easy freedom to decide who they will be with, and who they can dismiss without a second thought. Occasionally, women will put aside their competitive natures and combine their forces in the search for men. This is a world where women outnumber men, and where these women will serve men willingly in all ways. The male dream world is a place of instant attraction, where casual, everyday relationships develop very quickly into heated sexual encounters. For instance, it is a place where a handyman's job leads to sex with a client's young wife. There is no long drawn-out process of flirting or courtship, or even, heaven forbid, conversation. This is a world where people are driven by other instincts – deep, powerful, primal. These women are so desperate and dependent, and need men so badly that when men are absent, substitutes need to be found. Being nymphomaniacs, of course, almost anything will suffice as a substitute. At times, even the representations of men on television are enough to arouse women. When males, and their substitutes and representations, are absent, this is really a bleak world for women. They fall apart emotionally, not being able to cope, moping around endlessly on beds. Until, with a phone call, a man makes the world secure again, even if only temporarily.

Apart from telling us that women are in a constant state of sexual arousal, what other stories do the makers of music videos spin for the culture? For example, what activities do these fictional characters engage in? Given their natural turn-on state in music video, the women of the dream world spend a lot of time getting in and out of clothes, making sure that should a sexual opportunity present itself, they are ready – either stripped or dressed for action. Being nymphomaniacs, they will be looking for opportunity and stripping down anywhere, even in a phone booth on a snowy day. Or, they will get the urge when they see a photo booth. Or, simply walking by a stranger on a street, they will expose themselves to anyone, at any time. Other times, they deliberately leave the curtains open so that peeping toms, like Rod Stewart, can watch them. Once they are ready for action, they are attracted by the magical activities of no-talents, like Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew, to attend wild parties where there is lots of dancing and a chance to expose their bodies. Dancing for watching men, especially on tables, seems to be a particularly enjoyable activity for the women of the dream world. Often times, these parties take place by swimming pools or at the beach. The funny thing about these parties is that there always seem to be a lot of women available. But then, we have to remember that this is a fantasy dream world where anything is possible. Imagination is the only barrier. Other times, the women of the dream world attend parties that look a lot like sexual orgies. Like this one hosted by Prince, or rather the artist formerly known as Prince, but who has now graduated onto the title “King of Sleaze”.

Looking at these scenes, we always have to remember whose dream world this really is. Attending these parties bring it’s own risks. Women regarded as uncooperative to male fantasy are dealt with swiftly and harshly. Those who stay know that their bodies are fair game for whatever men may want to do. In the story told here, the ultimate aim of a woman is to hook up with a man. Sometimes, this means sharing him. Other times, a woman may be lucky enough to get the undivided attention of a man, although the risk is there that after he has finished with her, and left her tired and exhausted of course, he will leave for his next important appointment. This is a very hard and demanding schedule for the women of the dream world to follow, and means that at the end of the day, they have to unwind and cleanup. And not surprisingly, we are shown them showering and bathing. So concerned are they with cleanliness, that they seem to be drawn to water, dancing while it cascades on them from all directions. These images, of course, are not accidental, and are tied up with the male adolescent fantasy of the wet T-shirt contest, which here, takes on varied forms.

When the women of the dream world do consent, reluctantly, to wear clothes, they wear, of course, what boys would like their fantasy women to wear. A favorite item of visual clothing seems to be some kind of lingerie, especially stockings and guarder belts. While guarder belts are normally worn by most women under other clothing, here these private, though of course highly sexualized items are displayed with great pride. But beyond this, nothing seems to be too bizarre for the female dress code of the dream world.

What do these fantasy women do in the dream world? What roles are they shown in? Given what we know about their function in these stories, and obvious occupations for

such women, is that of strippers or exotic dancers, and there are plenty of these roaming around the dream world. The story of the dream world tells us that all women, deep down, have a desire to rip their clothes off like a stripper, even school teachers. This Van Halen video, "Hot for Teacher," reveals the inner core of the dream world - a centerfold teacher performing for her adolescent students. School days are a rich source of fantasy for the makers of music videos, with schoolteachers and schoolgirls playing important roles. There are many other characters out of male fantasy that populate the dream world. For instance, there are many depictions of hookers and prostitutes, from soliciting strangers on the street, to the geisha version shown in some videos. A related character to the hooker is the image of experience and control of the dominatrix. This character, normally complete with whip, is a popular aspect of the dream world. Looking at the other characters that video makers ask the women of the dream world to take on is revealing about male fantasy. For instance, there are a set of stories in some male culture about all-female prisons, that say something about the tension between control and submission. Other characters also reveal this tension, such as the phone sex operators of men's wet conversations, or the playmate nurse who delivers a sponge bath to an immobilized, but smiling, patient. Other characters are pretty conventional, such as the inevitable cheerleaders, or the over-sexed, bored housewife seducing the reluctant teenage pool man. A significant new addition to the cast of characters of music videos in the last few years have been women who like other women. As welcome as this break from the sheer monotony and narrowness of the conventional stories of heterosexuality is, it is significant that this alternative should emerge from one of the standard genres of straight male pornography. The voyeurism involved in watching scenes of lesbian sex.

Woman: I think women in music still have a long way to go. You know, I think a woman who can sing and write songs and have intelligent lyrics and keep herself clothed is still kind of a novelty.

Sut Jhally: The story told about women's bodies and female sexuality is not limited only to the videos of male artists. The story is a powerful influence on the image of female artists as well. Because the same men are behind the cameras here as well, it should not surprise us to see that the bodies of female artists are trapped in male ways of looking at and understanding the world, as Amy Grant expresses this dilemma.

Amy Grant: I don't want a male driven video, and a female driven video is very different. A woman is looking for a soul mate; she's not looking for a quick sex fix. If anything, that diminishes who she thinks she is, or who we think we are.

Sut Jhally: The challenge for female musicians, is that they try and tell a different story about femininity, one perhaps from the perspective of women themselves, rather than that of male fantasy, risks alienating the interests that control the industry as well as losing the audience, which is used the more conventional story. There is tremendous pressure, then, to fit into the existing stories. Integration fully into the dream world is the difference between moderate success and superstardom. For example, Janet Jackson went from being Michael's talented younger sister here, to megastar status when she retooled her image, her body, and her behavior to fit into the dictates of the dream world. Similarly, the female rap group Salt N Pepa went from

baggy clothes and respect, to fantasy images and heavy MTV rotation as they reinvented themselves between albums. Their example actually reveals the dilemma that female artists find themselves in – while their lyrics feature a strong message of female autonomy and sexual pleasure, the video images tell a different and more traditional story. Even as female musicians try and escape the story, they are dragged back in by the marketing imperative of the dream world. Even as we try and free our minds with new ideas, our imaginations remain imprisoned. The strength of this story is shown by looking at the example of Madonna. While she has done more, perhaps, than anyone else to offer different images of autonomous female sexuality, she also has told the conventional story in very powerful ways. For example, she expresses herself as strongly independent here, but in the same video, she is shown crawling along the floor to a bowl of milk, and chained to a bed. Here, she plays the role of the dominatrix, while also presenting the most extreme images of female subordination. Her descent into the utterly conventional is revealed here, where she rides around on the bed, longing for an absent male, and then making-do, like other women in the dream world, with a television image of him. For her, sex is like a bullfight, an injury done by one person to another, in this case a man to a woman, complete with bruises and blood, and flight, and cowering.

Given that the fundamental role of women in the dream world is decorative, it should not be surprising that they are frequently shown before a camera, thereby given video makers excuses for posing them explicitly for the gaze of the male audience. The issue is not simply of what women do in the dream world, not simply their behavior, activities, and roles, but of the form in which they are presented. The manner of their position before the camera, which also communicates powerful ideas. The women of the dream world like being looked at, looking into the camera, they invite the viewer to gaze at them. Even when there are no cameras present in the scene, the women of the dream world act as if they were there. They are presented as wanting to be watched, inviting it, desiring the look, enjoying being on display. This is not demure invitation, but open and willing. In the absence of a camera or a man, women turn the gaze inward and watch themselves in mirrors. They present themselves as legitimate objects of desire. It is okay to look, it is okay to desire what you see, because looking back over her shoulder, the object of the gaze is inviting the desire. It wants to be possessed by the gaze of the watcher. Far from objecting when men look at them in sexual ways, the women of the dream world revel in the attention. They want to be looked at by men, they deliberately position themselves for maximum sexual affect. But the images we see in music video are never innocent, they are never accidental. These ways of looking have been deliberately chosen. Examining them can tell us a great deal about how the thing or the person being watched is regarded by the watcher. In music video, the person being watched is regarded as a passive thing that can be used and explored at will. A common filmic technique that reflects this view of the woman as 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, moving 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 videos is to be examined, gazed at, desired, explored. Panoramic shots of women's bodies replace panoramic shots of

natural landscapes. The angles at which women are shot also helps this way of looking and being looked at. While there are examples of the camera looking from above, typically into a female cleavage, the vast amount of angled watching takes place from below, as in the manner of looking up a dress. It is a forbidden kind of watching, standard fare in male adolescent fantasy. It is important to remember that there is nothing accidental about these ways of looking. They are deliberate and conscious creations. These ways of filming women's bodies leads almost naturally to focus the looking on only one part of their bodies. The women of the dream world are fragmented and presented as a number of simple and disconnected body parts. This is a filmic technique; it is a way to present women as an object of the male gaze. Just as from the viewpoint of content, we can say that music video resembles a male dream world, then the filmic techniques that are used to show them that content also are a part of that dream world. 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 part of people, women in this case, detracts from thinking about them as real people with feelings, emotions, thoughts, intellect, their own dreams and desires. Instead, they are simply body parts to be watched and used. When you think of someone as only a body part, you deny them subjectivity – what makes them unique individuals. In this case, these ways of filming reduce women to not one part of their character or abilities, but to one part of their bodies. There are conventions here, as everywhere in music video. One of the most popular is the shot between the legs of a woman, her legs framing the action.

Notice where the microphone is being thrust up into. It is important to emphasize that there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these techniques. It is not as though it is always negative to present women as ready to be watched or wanting to be watched. We all at different times present ourselves to be watched, to be gazed at. Similarly, we all at different times watch other people with desire. Sometimes, we focus on one part of the bodies of the people we are watching. To treat another as an object is a part of human desire and human relationships. The problem in music video is that women are largely presented as objects. There is nothing else to their definition, nothing that makes them human. They are just legs in high heels. This idea is illustrated well in the video by Sir Mix-a-Lot, which suggests that the identities of black women, especially, are linked to only one specific part of their bodies.

An extension of this process of objectification is to show whole bodies of women, but in a way which denies them individuality and subjectivity. Showing women in shadow or silhouette, or under sheets, are popular ways of achieving this. Women are merely outlines, just shapes, there is nothing important, nothing unique inside. As a result, because there is nothing unique about these women, except for their physical attributes, nothing that makes them real people or real individuals, they are all essentially the same, and thus interchangeable. One is as good as the next, as long as the body meets conventions of attractiveness. Nothing inside matters. One object, one thing, is as good as another.

As the women of the dream world lose subjectivity, they become quite literally inhuman objects, almost like robots, empty inside of any real feeling. They are passively on display, open to action by others on them. They become literally objects,

lifeless, dead, waiting for the ministrations and actions of a man, like Tom Petty, to give them life and movement.

In this scene, it is only David Lee Roth who has any subjectivity, only he who can initiate action. The women, denied subjectivity, only have their objectivity to define them in this world. It then seems natural that women's bodies become the ground on which action takes place. Whether they are being written upon, tattooed, pierced. Defined in this way, it seems natural for women to be shown behind bars, locked in cages, until men are ready for them. When women try and leave this world, they are chased and pursued by men and dogs that hunt them down. They are roped and dragged back into the dream world. But the nature of this chase is quite strange. Although they are being chased, they really want to be caught. Their flight is a fake, they do not really want to leave. Their initial refusal always ends as a desire for the pursuer. Given the stories told about female sexuality and female identity in the dream world, any other conclusion does not make sense. When they say "no," they mean "yes." They are saying "no" for the sake of appearance. Their reluctance at male advances is a front for seething sexual desire that wants men to take them. They are teases who long for rough treatment. The disturbing question is, what happens when men use the story that is told in the dream world to understand their relationships with women in the real world?

[VIDEO CLIP]

Sut Jhally: A prominent aspect of the dream world of music video is the way in which women are touched, handled, fondled, in a way that presents itself as natural and even willing and deserved on the part of the women. Just as they don't really mean "no" when they say it, they really desire this type of manipulation by men. They enjoy and crave being displayed, touched, handled, fondled, squeezed, having wine poured on them and licked off them. The invasion of the body is welcomed and desired. The women of the dream world literally want to be carried away.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Sut Jhally: The last ten minutes of the film, showed a rape scene from the movie "The Accused" that depicted a real gang rape that took place in a New Bedford bar. This was intercut with scenes from music videos. Removed from their normal context, the music video images did not look too different from the horrendous images from the rape. We can be jarred into new ways of thinking when familiar images are removed from the normal situation and shown, instead, within the context of a brutal and violent assault. However, explicit images of control and violence are not very prevalent in music videos. Explicit violence is a small part of the dream world. However, it is interesting and significant that when we do see them, they do not look strange to us, they do not look out of place until the context of viewing is changed. What that should tell us is that the usual context within which they are viewed, the story told by music video and commercial culture, has the effect of making them appear normal. The accompanying story defines women in very specific ways, as decorations within a video, sex-mad. The surrounding image system shows them being filmed in ways that objectify and dehumanize them. Within the normal story

told in music videos women, especially those represented as young and attractive, are incapable of saying “no” to male advances. The invasion of their bodies then becomes normal behavior, nothing out of the ordinary. The important social question that emerges from this analysis concerns what effect these stories have on the way people understand the world and act within it. Put crudely, what affect do these images have on the real world, in terms of how men and women related to each other? What affect do the stories of the dream world have, especially on the way men think about females and sex. Our understandings of the world, the assumptions that guide our behavior, are not simply created in our heads. Our understanding of reality is a social process. The stories told in our culture are part of that process whereby we come to understand the world and learn appropriate ways to behave in it. If we accept that the stories of our commercial culture, within which music videos are located, are an important part of the process whereby young people come to understand the world, what might some of the possible consequences be? Certainly, these images do not directly cause sexual assault against women. Behavior is much too complex and multi-faceted to only pin it down to one thing. However, we do know that the stories we are exposed to influence how we think about the world. They influence what we believe to be true. The story told about female sexuality, then, influences the way in which we think about issues like sexual assault and rape. They influence our attitudes. What, then, are some of these attitudes? A survey of over 6,000 college students found that 60 percent of men agreed with the statement that, “Women provoke rape by their appearance or behavior.” To demonstrate how powerful the stories of commercial culture are, nearly 40 percent of women agreed with the statement, also. Almost a third of the men agreed with the statement, “It would do some women, some good to get raped.” Many men believed that forcing sex on a woman while on a date was justifiable if the woman invites the man out on a date, if a man pays for a date, or if she dresses suggestively. These attitudes that normalize sexual assault are being discovered in younger and younger populations in society. In another survey of 1,700 seventh through ninth graders, in answer to the question, “Under what conditions is it okay to force sex on a woman against her will?”, 24 percent of the boys said “yes” to, “If he spent a lot of money on her.” Sixty-five percent said “yes” to, “If he had been dating her a long time,” and 31 percent of the boys said “yes” to, “If she has done it before with other men.” What these attitudes reveal is that the danger and violence is inside our relationships, not outside. It is normalized in our attitudes from a young age. While images cannot cause sexual and violent assault against women, they do cultivate attitudes and values that legitimate and justify the assaults as self-deserving and provoked by the victims. The stories of our commercial culture lead us to blaming the victim. They affect, therefore, how we respond to rape, which is not a serious crime, because our stories tell us, “She was asking for it and deserved it. Hell, she most probably enjoyed it.”

If your understanding of female sexuality is mediated by the stories of music video, then this is precisely the types of attitudes that one would expect that dream world to cultivate in its male watchers. Further, all behavior is based upon certain assumptions, attitudes, and values. These images and stories, then, do not directly cause rape, but they create understandings in our cultural environment that might encourage certain violent behaviors, influenced by many other things, of course, by some men towards women. We should be careful, however, where we go with these conclusions.

Sometimes they lead to demands that we stop the production of these images, that we censor the media to block out these stories. We should resist such easy solutions and remember that the present situation is actually a result of too much censorship already. The censor here is not government, but the market. It ensures that only the voices of commercial and corporate interests are heard. In many real senses, the problem around images of sexuality is not that there is too much, but really, there is too little in that the voices of many groups and people are not heard. Discussions surrounding sexuality, male and female, are much too important for only one group in the society to monopolize that discussion through extreme fantasy images. What the culture needs, especially now in the age of AIDS, is more diversity and honesty in talking about sex, not less. Rather than calling for censorship, the demand should be for more democratic access so that the fantasy images do not work their influence without other stories also being told.

Fantasies are fun, but sometimes the line between fantasy and reality is blurred. The images of the dream world in that respect are not innocent, they are not just images. The stories they help to tell are implicated firmly in the gender and sexual power relations of our society.

[END]