

MTV and THE MADONNA PHENOMENON

"Madonna's intuitive grasp on the televisual world in which we live- of the medium's possibilities for engaging spectators in diverse ways- that in part accounts for her success. She is the supreme television heroine." (E. Ann Kaplan 271)

"What are the main theories which we have studied so far and how have they affected how you view television?"- This is the question which this paper is supposed to answer. Obviously there is not enough time or space in which to discuss every theory which we have touched on. As a compromise I decided to write about a topic to which almost every theory that we have discussed can be applied: MTV and the "Madonna Phenomenon".

As E. Ann Kaplan stated in her article on feminist criticism, Madonna is truly the ultimate television heroine. A discussion on contemporary popular culture and especially on media culture could never be complete without bringing up Madonna. She can be discussed in terms of feminism, ideology, hegemony and commercialism as seen in both Kaplan's as well as in John Fiske's article on British Cultural Studies.

In order to properly explain how the "Madonna Phenomenon" has become such an important concept in media studies, one must look first at how influential MTV (music television) has become in the last decade. MTV addresses the "desires, fantasies, and anxieties" of young people (Kaplan 270) who have, like myself, grown up in a decade when all the traditional institutions and theories that were always respected, are being questioned. It has become the center of discussions of many young people who have grown up idolizing the figures shown on the network. MTV is a culture in itself. With it's own news, fashion and music programs it can easily be considered the basis for the formation of thought of an entire generation.

The images depicted in music videos, of androgynous stars and situations have aided in rendering the clear line between the genders rather blurry. This makes MTV an important aspect in the study of post-modern theories. Videos are often quite abstract and it is hard to figure out their true meanings. Unlike other television programming, videos are usually not made up of clear parts or scenes which produce an easily identifiable and readable image. It is often hard to tell, for example whether a music video is sexist or whether it is simply making a parody of earlier, sexist, Hollywood productions. Looking at videos of fully clothed men , singing about love while bleach-blond girls in bikinis dance around them can be quite confusing at times.

Is it possible that these videos are actually daring to be so blatantly sexist? It is highly doubtful.

The people behind the Music Video industry have quite brilliantly built up an entirely new television and music empire, complete with its own stars. They have managed to use a form much like that of television commercials to glorify their products which are in this case the singers. There are those stars who are now known more for their videos than for their music. At times these video stars are not even close to being good singers but have such strong innovative videos that they manage to become successful without the possession of talent. These stars must be analyzed not only as people but also as industries. Their personas have been meticulously constructed and they have been promoted as well as a can of "Coca-Cola Classic".

This brings us to the world of Madonna Veronica Louisa Ciccone Penn, or rather Madonna- the most powerful woman in the Music Video world. Madonna is the perfect object of analysis, if one wishes to look inside the MTV world. She is the subject of numerous discourses. There are both differing feminist constructions of Madonna as well as Madonna's constructions of herself.

The main topic which will be dealt with in this essay is Madonna's place in the world of feminism. There are four categories of feminism which are usually considered: Liberal feminism, Radical feminism, Marxist feminism and Post-Modern Feminism. The "Madonna Phenomenon" can be looked at in terms of both the third and fourth categories, and is often criticized by those who follow the radical feminist theory. Madonna herself said, in bashing her radical feminist critics: "Tell Gloria Steinem and the gang...to lighten up, get a sense of humor. And look at my video that goes with Material Girl. The guy who gets me in the end is the sensitive one with no money."

The first theory which I am going to discuss in relation to Madonna is Marxist Feminism. Marxist feminism is based on the principle of how women as a group are manipulated by economic and political factors which are out of their control. In terms of television viewing, Marxist feminism explores the portrayal of women on television focusing on how they are shown in the workforce. The theory behind Marxist feminist television analysis is that if women are needed in the workforce at a given time then television will portray women in the workforce. On the other hand if women are not needed in the work force then it will be economically beneficial to portray women as housewives or holders of mediocre or "unimportant" jobs.

One may ask how Marxist feminism relates to Madonna. In plain terms, Madonna has defied the constraints which usually define how women are portrayed on television. In times when many women on television and especially in music videos are shown as mere sex symbols and rather inanimate objects of desire, Madonna has proved herself to be a strong independent woman. One may dispute this by pointing out that

Madonna uses her body to promote herself. Indeed her persona is based mainly on her sexuality, but Madonna is not your average sex symbol. She is a brilliant woman who has used a patriarchal society which takes advantage of women and manipulated it so that it works to her advantage. More than a singer Madonna is a business woman. Madonna has not let society and politics influence how she portrays herself or how she lives at all. Madonna does what she wants, and perhaps if other women did the same than Marxist feminists would not have so much to complain about when they analyzed women on television. When it comes to money making- the key to Marxism Madonna is a genius.

Combining the "Madonna Phenomenon" with Marxist feminism has been one of the main ideas which has influenced my opinion of Madonna as a person. When watching her videos I no longer see a woman dancing around in her underwear for money. I see someone who knows well that women are easily controlled by the patriarchal society and economy. She has obviously studied how women are shown on television and made a mockery out of it. People are offended by her because they know well that she is one of the few women who has been strong enough and has had enough courage to stand up for what she thinks is right, and has been extremely successful in doing so. Madonna could have marketed herself as many other female stars do: as helpless victims of man, torn apart by love gone wrong. Instead she has shown, to the advantage of her many young female fans, that women do not have to be victims.

In her music video "Express Yourself" Madonna actually plays with the idea that in the career world men are the bosses and women their workers. Based on early German expressionistic films the video shows Madonna as the performer, but also as the director and narrator. She is the female heroine of the video but also presides over the text before it begins, heralding it as dedicated to women in retaliation to the male address in the German films. The video empowers women and influences them to take control of their lives.

The Post-Modernist feminist view is almost always discussed in relation to Madonna. E. Ann Kaplan writes about Madonna in relation to post-modernist feminism in bringing up another one of her more famous videos, "Justify my Love". This video perhaps took Madonna's post-modernist daring to it's furthest. It was banned by MTV as obscene yet it sticks out as one of Madonna's most brilliant works and career steps to date. American viewers (who are probably not used to anything more artistic than "Tool Time") misunderstood Madonna's fantastical depiction of 1920's Germany. It is a ornate, stylized vision. This video forces the viewer to look past the images that they may see as obscene in order to question the confines of "gender constructs and the cultural constraints on sexual themes and sexual fantasies" (Kaplan 275). Madonna has explored female fantasy and in this respect, she is to be regarded as someone who tries the limits of social codes, in a time when the dominant culture is revolting against the challenges of the 1960s. She reacts

against American sexual mores and explores women's sexual alternatives from lesbianism to sadomasochism. Madonna as a feminist has proved herself to be a useful, rebellious role model for young women who have the need to look up to someone who is powerful and self-promoting. She enables girls to see that female sexuality can be used to their advantage, and that their subjectivities do not have to be totally determined by the dominant patriarchy.

British Cultural studies also provide an opening for a discussion on the "Madonna Phenomenon". Her success has been due in great part to television and music videos, and many critics will dispute her musical talent but will concede to the fact that Madonna has one of the most powerful "looks" in history. These critics might say the Madonna has made her fortune by using her sexuality to manipulate young girls. As Fiske writes, however, this theory could only be true if one thought of all Madonna fans as so-called "cultural dupes" (Fiske 304). There is a great deal of evidence to support this theory. Madonna may be seen as just another female star who aims to show herself as the embodiment of male sexual desires, this would propose that she is attempting to teach young female fans that they are simply "feminine subjects within patriarchy and as such is an agent of patriarchal hegemony" (Fiske 305). I choose to believe as Fiske does that this is not the case.

The young girls choose to imitate and in fact idolize Madonna rather than anyone else because she goes against ideological control and allows her fans to construct meanings that relate with their personal social experiences. The girls do not see her as someone who has conformed to the dominant ideology of women but rather as someone who has offered opportunities to resist it. "Her image becomes, then, not an ideological role model for patriarchy, but a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance...".

Madonna attempts to instill in girls the ability to keep their care-free feelings towards exhibitionism and self-expression that society tries to take away from them when they reach womanhood. She recognizes the significance of sexual identity in determining our social relations and experiences. In working various meanings into her texts she points out their role in male hegemony. She shows that women may be either "worshipped and adored by man or used and despised by him."

Madonna is a woman who has greatly influenced the thoughts of many contemporary women. Some may hate her and some may love her but all must admit that the packaging and industry that is "Madonna" is monumental. In answering the question "how have these theories affected the way you view television?" I can sum up everything which I have just written about. Were it not for my studying of the "Madonna Phenomenon" I would look at the women on television (and in particular those in music videos) quite differently. I would see them,, as I had in the past as victims of the dominant ideology and the patriarchal society which we live in.

Madonna proves that women can fight against the regulations which are forced onto women: that if they are sexual beings than they are nothing more than sex symbols, and that society determines how women are portrayed on television.

If I could go as far as to describe Madonna in one word it would be "strong". I not only enjoy her work but admire her ability to do what she feels like doing, even if she completely disregards society's definitions of decency. She is one of the few women in history who has never asked others to accept or like what she does. To conclude I would like to quote Madonna herself in order to demonstrate her atypical way of thinking which has brought her such undeniable success:

"Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another"

-Madonna "Justify my Love"