MTV And The Madonna Phenomenon Essay, Research Paper

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“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

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“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 the 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 it’s 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 Ciconne 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 than television will portray women in the

workforce. On the other hand if women are not needed in the work force than 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?

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