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LIZ ROSENBERG

FACE-OFF: MADONNA'S "LIKE A PRAYER": THIS VIDEO AFFIRMS RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES

USA Today, 1996

In these two related "guest columns" in USA Today, *Liz Rosenberg, vice president of Warner Bros. Records, "faces off" with Donald Wildmon, executive director of the ultraconservative American Family Association, as they discuss the merits—or lack thereof—of Madonna's "Like a Prayer" video.*—Eds.

New York—As with any work of art as striking and evocative as Madonna's music video "Like a Prayer," it's understandable some would take exception or offense to images and themes juxtaposed to a contem-

porary pop song. What's striking in light of the ongoing Salman Rushdie uproar is that ad hominem, Khomeini-esque calls for censorship continue unabated.

"Like a Prayer" portrays a dramatic situation in which hate-mongering bigots murder an innocent woman, a crime which Madonna's character witnesses. Is this an implicit endorsement of bigotry or murder? Of course not, no more so than any theatrical presentation condones a character's actions or point of view.

Madonna's character, in peril, seeks refuge in a church, which represents sanctuary. This is a story about positive religious beliefs, human equality, religious symbolism. It's about being good, not about evil.

And what of the saint who comes to life in the dream sequence? Isn't Madonna making a statement about the innocence and guilt we all share? As a mortal, this man is charged with a crime he didn't commit. In the confines of the church, inspired by a saint and full gospel choir, Madonna experiences an epiphany leading her to set aside concerns for her own safety to clear an innocent man.

That's the story line and one, albeit educated, interpretation. Doesn't Madonna, or any artist, have the right to tell a story using imagery and ideas most resonant to the creative process? Madonna's brave video affirms the eternal biblical covenant: "Love thy neighbor." Though some object to the way she has chosen to make her statement, who can deny her constitutional right to do so?

At Warner Bros. Records, we stand by our artists' right to free expression, a hallmark of an open and tolerant society. While that expression can be one of despair or vitriol, it is ironic that in this instance an uplifting story of redemption and hope is damned by self-appointed arbiters of decency. Kudos to Madonna and the millions who will not be frightened away from her positive message by those who make no effort to transcend their own ingrained prejudices.

DONALD WILDMON

THIS VIDEO IS OFFENSIVE TO BELIEVERS

USA Today, 1996

Tupelo, Miss.—Madonna's new video, "Like a Prayer," is an extension of a disturbing trend by some in the media, that of disrespect and disdain for the religious beliefs of millions of Americans.

The video is steeped in Christian symbolism in general and Roman Catholic symbolism specifically. The freeing of the priest from the bondage of being locked in the church is good. Christianity should not be locked up in the building. The symbolism dealing with racial injustice is good. A person's race should not be a source of hatred or injustice. But the video's symbolism of sexuality, suggesting that priests (and indeed all Christians) are sexually repressed, is blatantly offensive.

In the video, Madonna, who represents Christ, is shown in a scene suggesting that she has sex with the priest, obviously to free him from sexual repression. That is absolutely repugnant to Christians. It brings back shades of *The Last Temptation of Christ*—and that is no doubt the intent.

Christian symbolism is nothing new for Madonna, once quoted in *Penthouse* as saying, "Crucifixes are sexy because there's a naked man on them." Famous for her "Like a Virgin" song and open sexuality, Madonna once starred in a low-budget porno film. Pepsi rewards her by giving her millions of dollars to promote her as a role model for our youth.

Coca-Cola, not to be outdone by Pepsi in the race to denigrate Christianity, gives George Michael millions of dollars to be its role model. In "I Want Your Sex," he sings that he "don't need no Bible" when he gets ready to have sex.

I am solidly behind the First Amendment. There is, however, another issue. Columnist Charles Krauthammer stated it: "American [religious] pluralism works because of a certain deference that sects accord each other. . . . In a pluralistic society, it is a civic responsibility to take great care when talking publicly about things sacred to millions of fellow citizens."

For the next year, I will not drink Pepsi. If enough others join me, perhaps respect for religious beliefs of others will be helped tremendously. At least it is a start.

CARLA FRECCERO

OUR LADY OF MTV: MADONNA'S "LIKE A PRAYER"

1992

Here are further academic ruminations about Madonna, the video, Pepsi-Cola, MTV, etc.—Eds.

White academic feminists and feminist intellectuals are currently enacting the wanna-be syndrome of Madonna fans, analyzed, along with fashion, by Angela McRobbie, and more recently by Lisa Lewis, as the complex and specific mode of interpretation, appropriation, and revision belonging to "girl culture" in Britain and the United States.[1] What better way to construct an empowered performative female identity than to claim for ourselves a heroine who has successfully encoded sexiness, beauty, *and* power into a performing embodiment? You can have it all, Madonna suggests, and be credited with a mind, as well. For her girl fans, Madonna has suggested ways of appropriating rebellious masculine youth culture, both preserving and subverting femininity, mitigating the adolescent disempowerment of the female position. It is Madonna's ambition, hard work, and success, as she moves into her thirties, that her women fans appreciate. Thus, Lisa Lewis and Susan McClary, abandoning the intellectual feminist's suspicion of popular cultural representations of female empowerment, argue for a feminist reclamation of Madonna on solid intellectual and feminist, if overly celebratory, grounds.[2]

While impressed with their insights and sympathetic to their "defense" of Madonna against her detractors (all of whom, to my knowledge, deploy traditional elite or masculinist *topoi* in their attacks), I am skeptical of their and my own desire to appropriate Madonna for intellectuals, if only because "she" responds so easily to this desire and fits so well into the progressive white feminist fantasy I am about to explore in her text. Since I am interested in practicing cultural politics, in strategically locating and developing what Andrew Ross calls the "protopolitical" in popular culture, particularly in those media that have been derogatorily designated as "mass culture" or the "culture industry" by left- and right-wing intellectuals alike, it will be important to consider my investment in this reading, as a patrilineally Italian American academic, antiracist (multiculturalist) feminist, whose micropolitical positioning is peculiarly adapted to the cultural representations called *Madonna*.[3]

Much has been made of MTV's postmodern style: the fragmenting of images, the blurring of generic boundaries between commercial, program, concert, and station identification, the circulation of commodities wrenched from their marketplace context, the sense of play and carnival; the attention to fashion; and the de-centered appropriation of images without regard for context or history. Now, there is even a show called *Postmodern Videos*. Its advertised de-centeredness, its "semiotic democracy" (John Fiske's term), its refusal of national boundaries, are, however, like postmodernism itself, far from innocent, and most comparisons that foreground MTV's postmodernism neglect its project, a sort of global cultural imperialism that is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in its own self-advertisement: "ONE WORLD, ONE IMAGE, ONE CHANNEL: MTV." I call this *imperialism* because MTV is not a democratic medium, equally available to all cultures and nations for use, but a specific creation of the United States for the incorporation of "world music" into itself and for the creation of global desires to consume the products of U.S. popular culture.

The global preparation for Madonna's Pepsi commercial testifies both to MTV's success in having colonized cable and to some of the more concrete goals of this capitalist medium (for MTV models itself on television advertisements and airs commercials for songs and albums). A commercial appeared around the world, featuring an aborigine running across the plains of Australia (in reality, California) into a bar, arriving just in time to see, you guessed it, Madonna's Pepsi commercial version of "Like a Prayer." The commercial itself aired in forty countries on 2 March 1989. Madonna is, like George Michael and other relatively recent stars, one of the "corp-rock" generation, as the *Village Voice* puts it, untroubled by Neil Young's accusations of sell-out as they take directorial control over multinational commodity advertising to the tune of $3 to $5 million.[4]

I point out these things to emphasize that it is not a question of holding these stars to some kind of moral or political "standards"; the portrait of the folk/rock artist as an oppositional figure does not apply to the same extent in the domain of pop. Rather, if resistance, or opposition, is to be found, it is in the subordination of the multinationals' interests to the promotion of an individual; both George Michael and Madonna made long, seminarrative minimusic videos out of Coke and Pepsi bucks that de-centered the corporation's product (Diet Coke and Pepsi) relative to their own. Madonna's piece is that of an *auteur* inscribing a thoroughly private autobiography as a masterpiece of global interest in its own right.[5]

It is often said of the postmodern that its messages are both reactionary and leftist; certainly popular texts must occupy at least both those

positions to be "truly" popular, for the clearer the *partis pris*, the narrower and more specific the addressee.[6] Madonna aims for a wider audience, the widest possible, as her changing image indicates. One song that quintessentially illustrates this political both/and position is Madonna's "Papa Don't Preach," a song about a girl who decides against having an abortion but articulates this decision in assertively pro-choice terms.[7]

I start from the position that these products of late capitalism are, with almost no embarrassment, reproducers of dominant ideologies; I then ask whether there is anything else to be found in them. Fiske, in his studies of television, of Madonna, and of television audiences, argues for a *reading* of television that emphasizes not only the dominant ideology's efforts to reproduce and maintain itself, not only the representation of hegemonic forces, but also the active and empowering pleasures that are negotiated in television by subcultures, by the marginalized and subordinate. "Television and its programs do not have an 'effect' on people. Viewers and television interact," he asserts, which is another way of saying that viewing television is, for its viewers, an act of reading and that the cultural text is that which is produced by these acts of reading.[8] Television, Fiske argues, is an open text, one that enables "negotiated," resistive, and oppositional meanings to be read even as it promotes the values and serves the interests of the ruling classes. I propose to read the ways in which several of Madonna's music videos enable some oppositional readings, and I want to go a step further in describing a theologico-political discourse that moves into and out of focus in these videos. I want to make an argument for deliberately locating elements of resistance in cultural texts produced, as in this case, squarely within a patriarchal and capitalist hegemony. Of course, it is difficult to gauge whether such elements are indeed resistive, or whether, through their staging of rebellion, they, in fact, contribute to hegemony.

The Village Voice, given to a great deal of highbrow sneering when it comes to Madonna, remarks nastily of her autobiographical album, *Like a Prayer*, "You don't need Joseph Campbell to untangle her personal mythos."[9] I am suggesting, however, that there is a specificity to Madonna's mythos and that the specific cultural semiotics of Madonna's lyric and visual production are located within the history and popular spiritually of an Italian American cultural imagination. Robert Orsi, in *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, describes the mythos of the immigrant community, its relationship to the homeland and to spirituality, as well as the relationship of the second generation (the immigrants' children) to this mythos, fundamentally centered on the *domus*, household or family, as its significant unit.[10] Orsi argues that one must understand Italian immigrant culture to understand the sometimes "strange" forms its popular piety takes. The visual images of "Like a Prayer," and those of an earlier video, "Open Your Heart," bring this Italian American culture into focus so as to articulate Madonna's feminocentric street theology. Critics of "Like a Prayer" accuse it of sacrilege and even heresy. Orsi notes that there is a similar response to the forms of popular spirituality in the communities he studied, and he adds, "There is a spirit of defiance in popular spirituality . . . it allows the people to claim their religious experience as their own and to affirm the validity of their values" (Orsi, 221). Furthermore, Orsi provides a key to the central role played by the Madonna, or heavenly mother *(mamma celeste)*, in Madonna's theology and provides, as well, a key to her staging of a daughterly discourse within a patriarchal family context.

Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone was born in 1958 and grew up in Pontiac, Michigan. Her father is a first-generation Italian American, whose parents came from the Abruzzi in the twenties or thirties to work in the steel mills of Pittsburgh. Like many Italian Americans of his generation, he was upwardly mobile. Silvio Ciccone went to college to become an engineer, and he moved to the Detroit area to work in the automotive industry. Like many "patriotic" Italian Americans, Silvio Ciccone served in the U.S. military. In interviews, Madonna talks about his ambition, his work ethic, and his will to succeed materially, all of which bequeathed a legacy that is embodied in the nickname critics give to Madonna and that is also the title of one of her most famous songs, "Material Girl."

Madonna takes her name from her mother, a French Canadian woman, who lived in Bay City and who died when the singer was six. Madonna is the third of six children, the oldest daughter. After high school, she won a dance scholarship to the University of Michigan, where she remained for a year or so. She then left for New York and "worked in a donut shop" until she joined the Alvin Ailey Dance Co., after which she went to Paris, where she began to sing. Hers is a typical and typically romanticized immigrant story, an American dream come true. She affirms this myth at the beginning of the Virgin tour, where her voice-over prefaces the concert tape with the following story: "I went to New York. I had a dream. I wanted to be a big star. I didn't know anybody. I wanted to dance. I wanted to sing. I wanted to do all those things. I wanted to make people happy. I wanted to be famous. I wanted everybody to love me. I wanted to be a star. I worked really hard and my dream came true."[11]

The autobiographical album, *Like a Prayer*, makes explicit the traces of a Roman Catholic Italian American family ethos in Madonna's work.

Family is the major theme of the album: from "Till Death," an account of the violent dissolution of her marriage; to "Promise to Try," a child's hymn of mourning to the lost mother and an appeal for guidance to the Virgin herself; to "Oh Father," an indictment and a forgiving of the severe patriarch; to "Keep It Together," a song that asserts the necessity of family ties. The album also includes a distorted rendering of the Roman Catholic Act of Contrition that turns into a sort of child's parody of this frequently recited confessional prayer. The album itself is dedicated to her mother, who, she writes, "taught me how to pray." The cover playfully exploits Roman Catholic religious themes and reinscribes Madonna signifiers, most notably her navel, from her earlier work.[12] The album cover of *Like a Prayer,* which reveals Madonna's naked midriff and the crotch of her partially unbuttoned blue jeans, imitates the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album cover. Above the crotch is printed her name, Madonna, with the o (positioned where her navel should be) surrounded by a cruciform drawing of light and topped with a crown (the Virgin's, presumably).[13]

Understanding Madonna in this context depends on three aspects of these video texts. First, Madonna plays with the codes of femininity to undo dominant gender codes and to assert her own power and agency (and, by extension, that of women, in general), not by rejecting the feminine but by adopting it as masquerade; that is, by posing as feminine.[14] She takes on the patriarchal codes of femininity and adds an ironic twist that asserts her power to manipulate them. The second salient aspect of Madonna's text depends on understanding a subculture that goes unread, for the most part, by the dominant culture: a connectedness to Italy—in name, of course; in tradition; and in relation to theology, to femininity, and to exile, departure, and immigration. Madonna represents herself as doubly, if not triply, exiled: She has lost her homeland (as a second-generation immigrant), she is a woman, and she is motherless. She also figures herself in a relation of generational conflict (as the oppressed daughter) within the severely patriarchal structure of the household, represented by her Italian American father.[15] The inscription of the daughterly position is a market strategy, as well, for it sets up an identification with adolescent girls, who initially constituted the majority of Madonna's fans.

These motifs appear strikingly in two videos: "Papa Don't Preach" and "Open Your Heart." "Open Your Heart" presents an early version of Madonna's musings about her Italian heritage, explicitly brought out by the 1987 Ciao Italia tour, where she attempts rudimentary conversation in the language and makes a pilgrimage to the home of her Italian relatives.

In this video, Madonna also works, dreamlike, through her relationship to an actress she idolizes, Marlene Dietrich in the *Blue Angel,* and to Dietrich's dark sister Liza Minnelli (another Italian American) in its remake, *Cabaret.* The relationship to Italy, to the father, and to her own commodification as a female sex object and a performing star are all deeply ambivalent.

The video opens with a small boy trying to gain admittance to a sort of cabaret/peep show that displays out front photographs of naked women (with black bars covering breasts and pubes) and a blue-tinted poster of Madonna, who wears a black wig. The ticket-taker will not admit the boy. We move inside, then, to Madonna's "strip show" number, where she manipulates a chair and sings, while onlookers sit in coin-operated booths that enable them to watch the show (this video also includes, for the first time in Madonna's videos, the gay spectator—a woman rather than a man). The video plays with the notion, made famous by Laura Mulvey, of the male gaze in cinema, the construction of the camera's "look" as male and its object as female. Madonna is clearly the object of these voyeuristic gazes, yet, at the same time, she fractures the monolithic nature of the camera's look with the opening and closing barriers of the booths, her direct countergaze into the camera's lens, and the cuts in the video to the little boy standing outside, placing his hands over the various body parts of the pinup women as if to cover them. Thus, the video makes the audience uncomfortably aware of the voyeuristic aspect of our enjoyment of the performance, while nevertheless staging that performance for us to watch. The camera cuts to the young boy, who, looking in a mirror, dances in a manner imitating Madonna's dance inside the cabaret, thus establishing an identification between them. When Madonna comes outside, she is dressed like the boy, with her hair similarly disheveled. McClary argues that "the young boy's game of impersonating the femme fatale and Madonna's transvestism at the end both refuse essentialist gender categories and turn sexual identity into a kind of play," a visual effect echoing the musical resistance to closure in the song itself.[16] Madonna gives the boy a chaste kiss, and they run off together. The ticket-taker runs after them and mouths some words that appear as subtitles in the video. The two "children" go skipping off into the distance.

The subtitles without translation, "Ritorna . . . ritorna . . . Madonna. Abbiamo ancora bisogno di te" [Come back . . . come back . . . Madonna. We still need you] literalize Louis Althusser's description of how ideology functions by "hailing" the subject; here, Madonna is hailed by what is represented as Italian patriarchy. In the Virgin concert tour, her real-life dad

comes on stage during the song and says, "Madonna, get off that stage right now!" Madonna looks around and out into space, as if puzzled, and says: "Daddy, is that you?"

The father is figured as in the role of service to a clientele (he is a ticket-taker) and thus not in the dominant position, clueing us in on the immigrant or subcultural status of "Italian" in this context. "We" is, of course, a symbolic utterance: "We," uttered in Italian, suggests that the "we" has to do with being Italian, with "serving," and with profiting from the woman's prostitution. It is not, in other words, the "we" of the clientele. It is also a private message. Subtitles, which are meant to make what is foreign intelligible, here refuse to translate for the Anglophone viewer, staging, instead, the private in a public place; like the cabaret act and the children's flight from both it and the camera, subtitles permit voyeurism but reject voyeuristic mastery by the viewer. Meanwhile, what is also staged is the flight from an interior space (coded as "feminine" in music video) to the exterior (coded as "masculine" and "free"), with its explicitly drawn vanishing point.[17] The family triad of Madonna, child, and interpellating father, who is resisted and refused, uneasily alludes to the absent mother, who is both sacrifice (Madonna as commodity) and savior (fantasy of escape), the homeland, or motherland.

Madonna says that her father was socially ambitious, focusing on his own, and his children's, upward social mobility. This video stages Madonna's ironic resentment of the hostility and rejection she receives as a "bad woman" (whore, slut, skeezer, etc.) within the very culture that uses her for profit; and she marks that culture as Italian. The ambitions are figured as her father's. She stages, as well, the typical second-generation resentment of the make-it-in-America materialist mentality (*and* her willingness to serve those ends). Madonna is thus "martyred" to the male gaze, but she escapes into preadolescent innocence. Yet, this martyrdom is simultaneously a recognition of her power to rake in profit, to fix and fragment the male gaze, and to control men.

A third important aspect of Madonna's text is the way in which the relation to exile becomes displaced in "Like a Prayer," so that the position of exile without a home, pariah, or outsider comes to be occupied not by Italian immigrants but by African Americans. This displacement has become even more pronounced in her recent work, which consistently features Black gay dancers. This, too, has its microcultural history: Italian Harlem shared borders with Black Harlem in New York, as in many urban communities across the United States, and Italians and African Americans share a long American history of similarities and differences, conflicts and

cooperations. For Madonna, there is, additionally, a personal narrative of guilt assuaged, in that Steven Bray, an African American R&B musician, composer, songwriter, and producer, gave her her first break into the business and established her on the R&B charts before she ever crossed over into pop. She subsequently abandoned him for a producer with more prestige but has since then provided him with opportunities for fame and has reunited with him to collaborate in songwriting.[18] Finally, of course, what traverses many white popular musicians' work is a sense of indebtedness and collective guilt about R&B, or Black, music, whose deliberate exclusion from avenues of mainstream stardom and, until recently, MTV itself, is well documented.[19]

"Like a Prayer" is the now-notorious video that occasioned Pepsi's withdrawal of the Madonna commercial featuring the same song but different visuals. Fundamentalist religious groups, in the United States and abroad, protested that the video was offensive, and they threatened to boycott Pepsi.[20] In part, their reaction stems from a long-standing dominant culture hostility to Italian Catholic popular spirituality: statues coming to life, bleeding (an old tradition called *ecce homo*, whereby Christ's, or a saint's, face becomes bathed in blood), stigmata, sexuality coupled with religious worship, as well as the demystification involved in developing an intimate and personal reciprocal relationship to the divine (Orsi, 225). There is also the fact that Madonna is inserted as an active agent in a story and in a role reserved for men, and in so doing, she challenges the patriarchal stranglehold on the Catholic church. The video of "Like a Prayer" can also be read as an indictment of a white male patriarchal Christianity in the name of what has happened to "white" women and to Black men.

Here, then, is Madonna's (and the video's director, filmmaker Mary Lambert's) account of the plot for "Like a Prayer":

> A girl on the street witnesses an assault on a young woman. Afraid to get involved because she might get hurt, she is frozen in fear. A black man walking down the street also sees the incident and decides to help the woman. But just then, the police arrive and arrest him. As they take him away, she looks up and sees one of the gang members who assaulted the girl. He gives her a look that says she'll be dead if she tells. The girl runs, not knowing where to go, until she sees a church. She goes in and sees a saint in a cage who looks very much like the black man on the street, and says a prayer to help her make the right decision. He seems to be crying, but she is not sure. She lies down on a pew and falls into a dream in which

she begins to tumble in space with no one to break her fall. Suddenly she is caught by a woman who represents earth and emotional strength and who tosses her back up and tells her to do the right thing. Still dreaming, she returns to the saint, and her religious and erotic feelings begin to stir. The saint becomes a man. She picks up a knife and cuts her hands. That's the guilt in Catholicism that if you do something that feels good you will be punished. As the choir sings, she reaches an orgasmic crescendo of sexual fulfillment intertwined with her love of God. She knows that nothing's going to happen to her if she does what she believes is right. She wakes up, goes to the jail, tells the police the man is innocent, and he is freed. Then everybody takes a bow as if to say we all play a part in this little scenario.[21]

The puns, reversals, and circularities of this video, in combination with the lyrics, are dizzying. The name *Madonna* and "the voice" are constantly referred to yet never named: "When you call my name it's like a little prayer." The name is Madonna, heavenly mother, here also embodied in the singer herself. Calling the name Madonna is "like a little prayer," a prayer to the Virgin, "little," presumably, because the big one would be the "Our Father." Yet, it is "like a" prayer as well, suggesting the deep irreverence familiar to us from a former context, Madonna's "Like a Virgin." It is and it is not a prayer, the name-calling referring devoutly and daughter-like to the absent mother (whose name was Madonna) and narcissistically to the star herself. When she enters the church, she is singing: "I hear you call my name . . . and it feels like . . . Home," whereupon she closes the door to the church. Orsi mentions how the women of East Harlem called their church *la casa di mamma* (Momma's house), grafting together their real mothers in the lost homeland, Italy, and their heavenly mother (the Madonna) (Orsi, 206–7). Madonna does this, and goes a step further, returning the name Madonna to herself. The strange distortion of pronouns in the song can be attributed to this circularity: Madonna is both mother and child, both divine intervener and earthly supplicant.

After witnessing a double crime that is equated with a burning cross, Madonna falls into a dream. That this is a dream is of utmost importance, for it signals that the character Madonna is not really putting herself in the place of the redeemer but imagining herself as one (note the insistence on dreaming in the script). At this point, Madonna sings the words, "Oh God, I think I'm falling" and "Heaven help me," clichés that in the context of a dream flight and a divine encounter become literal. A Black woman catches her; the woman is a figure of divinity (a heavenly mother) and assists Madonna. She plays this role throughout; meanwhile,

similarities of hair, halo, and voice establish an identification between the two women.

Back at the church, Madonna encounters the black icon (apparently a representation of Saint Martin de Porres), who comes alive through the praying Madonna's faith and who, after conferring upon the character Madonna a chaste kiss (like the chaste kiss in "Open Your Heart"), leaves the church.[22] The scene of the encounter between mortal and saint epitomizes Orsi's description of "popular religion" and the hostile reaction it provokes from the established church:

> When used to describe popular Catholic religiosity, the term conjures up images of shrouds, bloody hearts, bilocating monks, talking Madonnas [!], weeping statues, boiling vials of blood—all the symbols which the masses of Catholic Europe have found to be so powerful over the centuries and which churchmen have denigrated, often while sharing in the same or similar devotions. (Orsi, xiv)

After the icon comes to life and departs from the church, Madonna picks up his dropped dagger and receives the stigmata that mark her as having a role to play in the narrative of redemption. Stigmata, with their obvious phallic connotation, are a sensual sign of contact with the divine, a kind of holy coupling, which the film *Agnes of God* has made clear in the popular filmic imagination. This reciprocity between the worshipper and the divine is a common feature of popular piety (Orsi, 230–31).

During the (second) scene of the crime, an identification is established (through the camera's line of sight, through hair color and style) between Madonna and the victim. The woman's death is compared to a crucifixion (arms out, Christlike knife wound in her left side) and, perhaps, to a rape.[23] Madonna first sings the lines, "In the midnight hour I can feel your power," in the scene with the icon; now these words are given a sinister reinterpretation, suggesting the collusion between patriarchal and racist power rather than the more traditionally lyric "seductive power" of woman. The woman cries out while the lyric line is "When you call my name." The look between the ringleader and Madonna sets up a complicity (one commits a crime, one remains silent about it) that is also a challenge. The scene sets up a parallel: White men rape/kill women, white men blame it on Black men; or, women are raped/killed for being on the streets at night, Black men are thrown in jail.

With the line, "Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone," the scene cuts to Madonna singing in front of a field of burning crosses, a visual cita-

tion of the film *Mississippi Burning*, as is the young boy in the white choir gown (referring, perhaps, to the only Black person represented in the movie as speaking out against Klan violence), who beckons to Madonna. She prays. This scene, which marks the dramatic center of the video, uses the privileged "sign" of Madonna (the cross, or crucifix, which she always wears) to set up the religious and political discourses of the text.[24]

Back at the church, Madonna is brought into the community of worshippers by the female deity. With the laying on of hands, Madonna is "commissioned," or slain in the spirit; the community is an African American community. The scene of erotic union with the saint sets up the syntax for a sentence: We see the kiss; a burning cross; Madonna; a field of burning crosses; Madonna's face looking shocked; the bleeding eye of the icon, all of which seem to suggest: Black men have been martyred for kissing white women.

At this point, the dream ends, and the choir files out. The icon returns to its position, and the bars close in front of him. Madonna wakes up, and the camera cuts to the jail cell, which is the church, now without the altar and with the American flag in its stead. We see Madonna mouthing the words "He didn't do it" to the police, who then free the Black man. A red curtain closes on the scene, which fades to Madonna in the field of burning crosses. Next, the curtain rises on the church, with all the actors—the criminals and victim and police—gathered, seated or standing in the foreground. They take a bow; the camera moves in to focus on the Black woman. Madonna and her costar, Leon Robinson, come center stage, holding hands, and they take a bow. The camera pulls back and the credit comes up: "Madonna/'Like a Prayer'/*Like a Prayer*/Sire Records." We see the actors dancing, and the curtain comes down again. Finally, "The End" is written in script on the curtain.

How can we read the political and spiritual in this melodramatic medieval morality play? On the one hand, there is the displacement of a predicament: A woman's disempowerment in relation to a religious tradition is displaced by a story about how a white woman, with the help of a female Black divinity, saves a Black man. Madonna stages the predicament of the Italian American immigrant daughter within the patriarchal institutions of family, church, and state and enacts a feminine fantasy of resolution and mediation, the quintessential Roman Catholic fantasy of sacrifice, redemption, and salvation. This feminine fantasy of resolution resembles that of the popular religious *feste* that constitute the spiritual experiences

of the East Harlem women described by Orsi, as well as those of most southern Italian immigrant communities in cities all over the United States, with their specific focus on the divine intercession of the Virgin. It is the temporary empowerment of sacrifice that connects the woman to the Madonna and that allows her to play a central role within the Italian spiritual community. This role is also a trap, however, for it perpetuates an ethos of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. The video suggests Madonna's rebellion against this entrapment by presenting the image of a successful heroine. In this fantasy of female empowerment, the mother, as divine intercessor, empowers the daughter to play the son's salvific role. The narrative attempts to break the cycle, whereby the mother's centrality to the *domus* also disempowers, by finding a place of empowerment as the mother, as the *mamma celeste,* the omnipotent woman—Madonna herself. In other contexts, Madonna will figure herself as playfully and parodically phallic, but here she remains emphatically feminine, even while enacting the son's castration in the stigmata.[25] Yet, the trace of a self-wounding sacrifice remains, for at the end of the play there is a corpse, the young woman, who is also a double for Madonna, thus reminding us that phallic power also kills.

There is clearly guilt here, a guilt Madonna shares with many white rock and pop musicians who have been making "Black America" the subject of their videos, for theirs is a musical tradition grounded on a violation and a theft, the appropriation of musical forms originating with African American musicians who were unable, in racist America, to profit. That appropriation made millions of dollars for these white musicians. But if we take seriously the cultural specificities of this particular white woman (Madonna), cultural specificities that may be applicable to communities larger than the private fantasies of one individual, then the mixture of religious traditions in the video and the intertwining of two political histories may constitute a different sort of text.

Orsi points out that southern Italian immigrants were often associated with Africans by their northern compatriots, by the Protestant majority, and by the established Catholic church.[26] Chromatically black Madonnas and saints abound in southern Italian and Catholic worship. The video, too, sets up a chromatic proximity through the racial indeterminacy of the woman who is killed and, most markedly, through hair: Madonna's hair is her natural brown (she says it makes her feel more Italian) and curled into ringlets, the female deity's hair is similarly brown and curly, while the female victim's hair is black and curly. The only blond characters are the white men who attack. Madonna says she grew up in a

Black neighborhood and that her playmates and friends were Black. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, she notes apologetically that when she was little she wanted to be Black.[27] Likewise, there is a tradition of African Americans in northern urban settings who identify themselves as "Italian" in order to pass or to protect themselves from the full force of U.S. racism in the majority community.

This fantasy thus attempts to reach out beyond the private ethnic imagination to create a bridge to another culture's popular piety, itself grounded in an experience of exile and oppression. McClary notes how the song merges the traditional solemnity of Catholic organ music with the joyous rhythm of gospel, thus musically reinforcing the fusion of the two communities.[28] More ethnographic research might reveal the ways in which these communities met or meet (East and West Harlem) in the neighborhoods of New York City or Detroit and might also reveal what is produced from the similarities in their family structures, spiritualities, and their historical experiences. The media, the press, and even resistive subcultural narratives, such as Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, suggest that the dominant representation of intercultural relations is a narrative of conflict. The alternative vision of community presented in this video challenges the complicity with hegemonic violence of Spike Lee's cultural politics. I wonder to what extent the rareness of this fantasy is related to the fact that it is a feminine fantasy of mediation, a woman's representation of the possibilities of connectedness rather than conflict. In other words, one difference between the cooperative interaction narrated here and the representations of violent conflict is that this representation is feminocentric and grounded in a spiritual vision. Points of contact between communities are imagined not only in terms of conflicting and competing ethnicities but also in terms of communicative openings, the affirming interactions and the potential for communication between contiguous cultural groups who also share some experiences of oppression within a majority community hostile to their presence.[29]

The visual bridges that connect the two communities are identity and icon. Identity connects Madonna and the Black priestess, the Madonna, a phallic woman, the "muse," who answers Madonna's prayers and assists her, who participates as her mirror in the narrative. The identification, furthermore, extends beyond two individuals; Madonna does not redeem alone, she seeks assistance from her Black double and from the community of worship whom the woman represents and leads. The icon is the Madonna icon par excellence: The cross, or crucifix, the calvary for African Americans, and the burning cross of the Ku Klux Klan all remind us that Catholics and African Americans (as well as Jews) were targets of this nationalist project conducted in the name of the cross. It is no wonder, then, that the first to speak out about this video, condemning its irreligiosity and sacrilege, were fundamentalist religious leaders and televangelists—Jimmy Swaggart, Donald Wildmon, Bishop Gracida of Texas, and the American Family Association.[30]

This story of how a white girl learns to "do the right thing" and succeeds, with the help of a Black woman and the Black community, depends on the scapegoat and the saved being Black and in a position of even more radical disempowerment relative to the police and to "America." As the recognition of a predicament, the narrative is politically progressive; in its resolution, however, it participates in the myth of the great white savior, marked here as a traditionally feminine wish fulfillment in its simultaneous desire for power and approval. The absent-mother-returned-as-divine-intercessor-become-Black mitigates that usurpation, covering also for the guilt of the white woman's erotic appropriation of the man she saves (the Black woman says "I'll take you there" just before the camera cuts to the kiss). The narrative itself signals this irony through the explicit reference to fantasy and dream as the contexts for wish fulfillment and through the framing device of the play, which distances the events from anything that might occur in "real life." Madonna's hyperfemininity in the video and her association with the children in the choir attempt to convince us that she is, indeed, a daughter, a mediator, and not the powerful superstar Madonna, so that we can "believe in" the power and agency of the other woman. But the governing irony of the text as a whole, an irony that remains unstated, is that the mother, the Madonna, *is* Madonna; the Black woman is "merely" a screen.

It is in its relation to the "Other woman" then, to use Gayatri Spivak's term, that the political blind spot in the narrative, and in its reception, appears.[31] We would not expect a Madonna commercial to assume any subject-position other than that of its protagonist, Madonna. Though in the media we can see interviews with Leon Robinson and hear him speak about his role, with regard to the other woman there is silence, so much silence that I do not know her name. This necessarily questions the gender/race empowerment of the representation in its interaction with a hegemonic racism that traditionally suppresses nonstereotypic representations of women of color. The erasure of the embodied African American woman, the Madonna of the narrative—Madonna's double—is even more marked, because she is the only character other than Madonna to have a solo part in the song. The Pepsi commercial merely reinforces the inter-

changeability of that image, for the gospel solo is sung not by the woman we see here but by a more stereotypical—maternal and desexualized—member of the choir who is, therefore, more "fitting" for the traditional worship setting of the service.

A bold fantasy of intercultural relatedness that will not obey the rules of the dominant culture's narrative of necessary interracial conflict; a fantasy of self-aggrandizement that recognizes itself as such; a world where women are both heroic and omnipotent, where female agency can be effective. A world, too, where the authorities are benign, where police will admit that they have made an honest mistake. A world where Black women approve of white women's desires for the leading role in the narrative of African American salvation. As Andrew Ross has insisted, "We cannot attribute any purity of political expression to popular culture, although we can locate its power to identify areas and desires that are relatively opposed, alongside those that are clearly complicit, to the official culture."[12] In celebrating the proto-political of Madonna's texts, academic feminists must recognize, as well, the self-aggrandizement these fantasies serve. Madonna is not, after all, a revolutionary feminist (*pace* Camille Paglia); she is a female multimillionaire.[13] MTV reveals its political inadequacies in the very postmodernism of its premise: It is the individual, or the private subject, who makes cultural meaning, rather than communities or collectivities, and individuals may become empowered through those meanings.[14]

So why read MTV, and why read it in this way? For one thing, it's pleasurable—pleasurable because these texts are there to be read and talked and gossiped about publicly in the culture. They often bridge class gaps and, at least in my experience, have made for some interesting interracial, intergenerational, and interfaith conversations that have served as occasions for political debate. Almost anyone can participate in such debates and conversations, since Madonna, MTV, and television, in general, are available to the many rather than the few. If the news constructs, produces, and mediates hegemonic national fantasies under the guise of a reality principle, why not frankly confront and contest it with alternative fantasies explicitly produced in the name of pleasure?

At the same time, the Left cannot retreat into anachronistic puritanism with regard to what it calls the new opiate of (young) people—"mass" culture—or else it cedes a strategic terrain of cultural politics all too clearly recognized as such by the New Right. These texts may suggest strategies for the empowerment of the subordinated, marginal, and decentered in advanced capitalist culture, strategies that are not anachronistic but born of the medium of advanced capital and the gaps that are produced within it. I am interested in the ways such strategies, and such technology, may be used to produce significant counterhegemonic forces within a culture whose ruling classes seem to have perfected the art of containment. If Gil Scott-Heron is correct in claiming that "the revolution will not be televised" (and I am no longer convinced that he is), it may, nevertheless, be the case that through strategic articulations of these popular cultural texts, something "like a" revolution can be imagined.

NOTES

The use of initial caps in writing "Black" is a deliberate political gesture on my part, referring not to a color but to a political designation.

1. Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991); Lisa Lewis, Gender *Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). See also Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," *Screen Education* 29 (1978–1979): 3–19. I owe a debt of gratitude to numerous people who have assisted in this study of Madonna: Nancy Vickers, in particular, for her studies of the lyric tradition, MTV, and popular music; Tom Kalin (see "Media Kids: Tom Kalin on Pussy Power," *Artforum International* [September 1991]: 19–21); Charles Hamm; the audiences, mainly students, who have heard and criticized this paper; and Cirri Nottage and Melinda Weinstein, whose research assistance has been invaluable.

2. See, in particular, Susan McClary, "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," *Genders* 7 (March 1990): 1–21; and Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV.*

3. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989); see also his "Hacking Away at the Counterculture," in *Technoculture,* ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 107–34: "The significance of these cultures lies in their embryonic or *protopolitical* languages and technologies of opposition to dominant or parent systems of rules. If hackers lack a 'cause,' then they are certainly not the first youth culture to be characterized in this dismissive way. In particular, the left has suffered from the lack of a cultural politics capable of recognizing the power of cultural expressions that do not wear a mature political commitment on their sleeves" (122). For a critique of the too-rapid dismissal of neo-Frankfurt School leftist intellectuals' suspicion of mass culture, see Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism,* ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14–43: "There is an active process going on in both of discrediting—by direct dismissal (Baudrillard) or covert inscription as Other (cultural studies)—the voices of grumpy feminists and cranky leftists ('Frankfurt School' can do duty for both). To discredit such voices is, as I understand it, one of the immediate political functions of the current boom in cultural studies (as distinct from the intentionality of projects invested by it). To discredit a voice is something very different from displacing an analysis which has become outdated, or revis-

It's hard to believe that Madonna was once considered to be a bubble-gum, teeny-bopper pop singer, somewhat less talented than Cyndi Lauper, to whom she was first compared. Madonna's work has spawned an entire industry of academic commentary, and several collections of academic articles have already appeared, discussing her impact on music, feminism, sexuality, and dozens of more issues. This part of the book collects some of the classic academic pieces, beginning with Daniel Harris's overview of Madonna's impact on the academy.—Eds.

DANIEL HARRIS

MAKE MY RAINY DAY

1992

An overview of the academic reaction to Madonna written by a critic who is none too sympathetic to the academy.—Eds.

Within an entertainment industry expressly designed to absorb and commodify even the most unconventional talents, up-and-coming performers must face the fact that growing recognition of their work will ultimately compromise their integrity by forcing them to tone it down and smooth out the rough edges of their idiosyncrasies as they attempt to appeal to wide audiences. In the case of Madonna, however, the exact opposite has occurred. If co-optation involves the appropriation of a marginal artist by the mainstream, reverse co-optation involves the appropriation of a mainstream artist by a marginal group—in this case, the increasing numbers of academics who are currently flooding the country's journals and small presses with a glut of scholarship on the stylistic flamboyance—the glitz, guts and pure raunch—of a celebrity who has borne much of the brunt of the university's restless and uncertain engagement with popular culture. Madonna has been drafted into the staggeringly implausible role of spokeswoman of the values and professional interests of university instructors! Her academic admirers spend a great deal of time studying how she embodies the fantasies of other people; they devote remarkably little time, however, to discussing how she embodies their own.

A quick survey of the variety of responses to what mass-media pundit E. Ann Kaplan identifies in all seriousness as the "MP," the "Madonna Phenomenon," offers a fascinating look not only at contemporary academics' attempts to counteract their own marginality by making desperate

forays into popular culture but also at the inadequacies of postmodernism itself and the conceptual limits of its application to specific uncanonized forms of lowbrow entertainment. There is a Madonna for virtually every theoretical stripe—the Lacanian Madonna of Marjorie Garber, who says that the singer's recent tendency to squeeze her crotch like a man while singing "emblematize[s] the Lacanian triad of having, being, and seeming"; the Foucauldian Madonna of Charles Wells, who claims that in her videos she "is instructing us with a Foucauldian flair in the 'end of woman'"; the Baudrillardian Madonna of Cathy Schwichtenberg, who reads "Madonna's figuration against the backdrop of Baudrillardian theory"; or the Marxist Madonna of Melanie Morton, who says that Madonna singlehandedly undermines "capitalist constructions" and "rejects core bourgeois epistemes." There is even the Freudian Madonna of Cindy Patton; in reference to the fact that the voluptuous members of Madonna's male dance troupe often appear on stage in the steamier numbers grinding and groaning as they massage outrageous strap-on falsies with masturbatory intensity, she claims that "the gendering of the breast is problematized through the evocation of breast envy . . . and implicitly [through the evocation of] men's desire to be lesbians." In Barbara Bradby's close reading of the lyrics of the song "Material Girl," titled "Like a Virgin-Mother?: Materialism and Maternalism in the Songs of Madonna," she, like Patton, plumbs the depths of our collective musical ids when she psychoanalyzes the lines "Only boys that save their pennies / Make my rainy day" in an effort to buttress her theory that Madonna is not passive and victimized but in fact nurturing and mothering:

> We may note that teaching children to save pennies (in piggy-banks, etc.) is an important function of mothers, if their children are to be successful. However, in this nursery context of early training, "saving pennies" evokes its opposite, "spending a penny," which little boys may think of as like "making rain." In this sense, potty training is about learning to "save pennies," or the ability to control the activity of "spending a penny." The lines "Only boys that save their pennies / Make my rainy day" can therefore be taken as expressing the mother's approval of the boy who has learnt to pee in the appropriate situation.

Just as members of the left often sentimentalize the proletariat, so academics have begun to sentimentalize popular culture by ascribing to it all sorts of admirable characteristics that it does not have—in particular, the potential to radicalize the huddled masses by providing typically quiescent MTV viewers with what it is now fashionable to term "a site of contention" (or, in Charles Wells's marvelous malapropism, "a cite of contention"), a subversive forum within the mainstream where socially conscious performers can actively challenge reactionary patriarchal ideologies. In the inflationary rhetoric of the MP, however, the tail inevitably begins to wag the dog and Madonna emerges not simply as a pop star but as "the most significant artist of the late twentieth century," who, in the acknowledged masterpieces of her oeuvre, songs like "Cherish," "Papa Don't Preach" and "Like a Prayer," demolishes assumptions "foundational to liberal humanism," "rewrit[es] some very fundamental levels of Western thought" and even defies "the ongoing dominance of 'Western' culture by Protestantism." In "Madonna's Postmodern Feminism," Cathy Schwichtenberg strikes the apocalyptic note characteristic of the whole extravagant tenor of Madonna scholarship when she speculates wistfully about the sexual utopia that would result in American society if the performer's agenda of unbridled hedonism, her uncanny ability to "pluralize sexual practices" and transgress "the lines and boundaries that fragment gender polarities," were actually implemented. In Schwichtenberg's view, the world according to Madonna would be so emancipated, so polymorphously perverse, that we could all "'come out' and participate in a range of identities such as a lesbian heterosexual, a heterosexual lesbian, a male lesbian, a female gay man, or even a feminist sex radical."

The meteoric growth of the MP reflects changes that are occurring in the perception of popular art not only among academics but among mainstream pop critics as well. In the past few decades, there has been an ironic switch of roles between the two major sectors of cultural commentators in our society. Mainstream reviewers are gradually assuming the mantle abandoned by academics, that of the custodian of High Art, criticizing Madonna as a talentless opportunist, a monster created by the publicity machine, a nasty scourge in an unmitigatedly vulgar pop music scene; while academics are wrapping themselves in a populist flag and interpreting Madonna as nothing less than a grass-roots revolutionary.

The psychological mechanism behind this recent orgy of slumming in the university has, in my view, little to do with its participants' genuine interest in popular culture and even less with the real pleasure it is possible to take from it. Rather, it is motivated by professional factors within the academy—specifically, by many academics' desire to prove their social relevance. The MP is really not about Madonna at all but about dissatisfaction with insulting stereotypes of the Ivory Tower, stereotypes some

academics reject by flouting the decorum of traditional fields of study in what often seems, at least in the kitschier examples of postmodern scholarly extremism, to be a magnificently executed practical joke on the conventional disciplines of the liberal arts. Madonna scholars see themselves as iconoclasts rebelling against the suffocating strictures of High Art, as devilish pranksters shocking prudish humanists who hurl themselves melodramatically in front of the canon in order to shield it maternally from assault. It is one of the great ironies of the whole phenomenon of slumming that the perception of radicalism on the part of those who go rooting around amid the rubbish of popular culture, defying the ordinances of the classical definition of the humanities, derives from their increasing contacts with conformist mainstream culture, a forum that is anything but radical—or more precisely, that is radical only within the context of divisive skirmishes occurring within the university itself.

Despite this new tendency to sentimentalize popular culture and exaggerate its subversive content, Madonna studies in fact represent the ultimate act of cultural imperialism in the sense that Madonna simply provides a lift into the saddle for the inevitable ride on academics' all-too-predictable hobbyhorses. Such theorists are often quite frank about the naked opportunism of their pillaging of lowbrow art. In her preface to the forthcoming (Westview, October 1992) anthology *The Madonna Connection*, Schwichtenberg states explicitly that "this volume demonstrates Madonna's usefulness as a paradigm case to advance further developments in cultural theory." Kaplan, the acknowledged torchbearer of Madonna studies, refers to the performer's contributions to MTV as "an especially appropriate proving ground for postmodern theories." This tendency to turn Madonna into a classroom aid becomes most obvious when one examines the basic methods by which her admirers interpret her songs and videos—in particular, the intensive close readings they perform with the grisly clinical efficiency of autopsies. These astonishing note-by-note and frame-by-frame vivisections of Madonna's work, which surely constitute some of the strangest intellectual curiosities to have emerged from the university, reveal the devastating insufficiency of postmodernism as a vehicle for cultural analysis. Academics interpret even the melodies of these conventional pop hits as "strategies" for effecting revolutionary changes in listeners, as if Madonna were capable of rousing the slumbering masses from their oppression with unoriginal Top-40 songs postmodernists take quite literally as clarion calls for action.

In "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," Susan McClary examines the "brave new musical procedures" of each bar of

"Like a Prayer" in order to show that Madonna, who is "as much an expert in the arena of musical signification as [Teresa] de Lauretis is in theoretical discourse," "offers musical structures that promise narrative closure at the same time that she resists or subverts them," thus "destabilizing the male gaze" and rendering the coup de grâce to patriarchy. Similarly, in "Don't Go for Second Sex, Baby," a deconstructionist analysis of the song "Express Yourself," Morton transforms a pop hit into a rabble-rousing postmodernist anthem, the "Internationale" of the dance floor, which "takes as its object the general logic and various practices of domination most prevalent in Western culture." Subverting melodic authority by challenging oppressive tonal hierarchies, Madonna decimates "patriarchal, racist, and capitalist constructions" simply in the way she bellows out "self" in the line "Express yourself."

> [The word becomes a meditation] on the constitution of a de-centered subjectivity. "Self" is first sung on G, then on F sharp, moving to F natural, then on G, moving back to F sharp, and lastly (not counting repeated bars) self is sung on F sharp to E. The word as well as the concept gets divided and put in motion, articulating agency through positions which remain partial and temporary. . . . [Madonna's melodies thus] prevent what we would call in narrative terms an ideological closure. There is no recapitulation which fixes power and establishes (or re-establishes) any element as dominant.

As seen here in the way academics overinterpret Madonna's songs, close reading represents the inappropriate transfer to low culture of habits of study derived from high culture, habits that assume that the work of art under scrutiny is so complex that it deserves to be examined in all of its nuances. Because such techniques presuppose conventional notions of authorship, as well as misconceptions about the density of artistic intentions in commercial entertainment, they are suffused with the humanistic reverence for canonical art that postmodernists flatter themselves they have long since outgrown. In the very act of turning away from high culture and spurning the pieties lavished on the canon, academics demonstrate how incomplete the postmodernist break with traditional forms of artistic analysis has been, how abysmally they have failed to take popular culture on its own terms and how unimaginatively they insist on studying one set of cultural artifacts exactly as they study an entirely different and more literary set. Their treatment of popular culture is inherently elitist. At their most postmodern, academics remain dyed-in-the-wool humanists.

That critical theorists simply borrow the methodology of traditional scholars can also be seen in the way they attempt to create a unified artis-

tic form out of the fragmented rock video, whose deconstructed "text" inevitably provokes frantic efforts to fuse all of its component parts into an integrated composition. Intolerant of the cinematic confusion of MTV—the non sequiturs, the jump cuts, the decontextualized images, the random breaks in visual syntax—scholars like Kaplan and John Fiske engage in spectacular feats of overinterpretation to restore seamless narrative continuity to something that is by nature disjunctive. Concluding that Madonna's videos lack "closure" and therefore liberate the female viewer by allowing her to interpret the images as she chooses, thus leaving her in "a position of power vis-à-vis the text" Kaplan and Fiske paradoxically recycle the high-art concept of organic unity. They distill from a wide range of very disparate pieces a single encompassing idea, the master theme, the skeleton key that unlocks every door—the absence of ideological and narrative resolution, an interpretation they apply indiscriminately, oblivious to the irony that works of art purported to have such little closure should become in their hands so hermetically closed.

This never-ending attempt to silence the clamor of incoherence with pat, reductive readings about empowering "syntagmatic gaps" that produce a malleability of form academics describe as somehow intellectually nutritious for the viewer shows how determined postmodernists can be in quarrying out of the garbled obscurities of MTV themes as monolithic, invariable and all-inclusive as those developed by New Critics in the cribs and trots with which they once led their readers through the enigmas of modernist art. Moreover, "lack of closure" is in itself a high-art concept, for what is this mystifying property that academics bestow so sanctimoniously on popular culture but the New Critical concept of "ambiguity" in disguise, a quality that critics have long reserved as the highest form of praise for canonical works of art?

But perhaps the clearest example of the way postmodernists cling tenaciously to the values and procedures of conservative scholars is the tendentiousness with which they examine every pose Madonna strikes for the taint of ideological corruption. In "Images of Race and Religion in 'Like a Prayer,'" Ronald Scott scours the song's video for "the positive social messages imbedded" within it, agonizing over such questions as whether the black character in the piece is actually lying on top of Madonna as she sprawls defenselessly over a pew, an image that may be contaminated with negative stereotypes. In "'Material Girl': The Effacements of Postmodern Culture," Susan Bordo takes this didactic political nitpicking one step further when she describes Madonna as a

kind of antifeminist scab, an unprincipled collaborator with the opposite sex, who recently rejected the voluptuous proportions of the full-figured female when she submitted to a punishing exercise and diet regimen in an effort to satisfy the patriarchal ideal of svelte feminine beauty. This moralizing of every bump and grind that Madonna makes, of every inch of cleavage she bares and every glimpse of navel she flashes, demonstrates the full extent of the intellectual chauvinism implicit in the academics' engagement with popular culture.

While Madonna scholars share the philosophical posturing and muddled politics characteristic of contemporary critical discourse as a whole, her admirers' wild exaggerations of her subtlety as an "author" are even more untenable than the evasive generalities found in theoretical work on conventional literary subjects. It is even tempting to enter into the Swiftian spirit of overstatement that suffuses the books and articles about her and conclude apocalyptically that postmodernism is Madonna, that the banality of Madonna is in some sense its fate, the logical conclusion of its aims and assertions. As she is remade into Theory incarnate and invested with a radicalism that her public image as a mainstream performer cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, sustain, she becomes the ultimate realization of many postmodernists' most cherished tenet—that words have only an arbitrary relationship with the things they signify, and that there is no stable and empirically verifiable "reality" behind the vagaries and impermanence of language. As E. Deirdre Pribram put it in her analysis of last year's documentary *Truth or Dare*, "Madonna, this chameleon-of-appearances . . . refuses all fixed meanings . . . there is no definitive 'real,' no authentic Madonna beyond the person(a) we already know through her various incarnations." When a signifier becomes as "free-floating," as unmoored from the thing it signifies as Pribram suggests that Madonna has become, the consequence is what some would call "slippage" but might be more aptly characterized as outright detachment, a state of intellectual anarchy that sanctions willfully perverse misreadings. Some theorists have even gone so far as to justify the poetic license with which they treat their subjects by suggesting that, as Charles Wells writes in his master's essay on Madonna, titled "Like a Thesis," "rationality is a patriarchal trick. . . . All readings, in some way, are misreadings. All interpretation is misinterpretation. Though the page you are now reading appears to be flat, that is an illusion." Such skeptical caveats go a long way toward explaining the literature of the MP: Although it appears to be about Madonna, that is an illusion.