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Phallic Film and the Boob Tube:

The Power of Gender Identification in Cinema, Television, and Music Video

I use clichés as bricks and blocks. They are mostly exposed to critical examination and doubts, so they reveal their real nature, especially if you watch them several times.—Dusan Makavejev (1)

I want to build my essay on two clichés about technology and then examine them with respect to gender, where they become quite revealing about the social formations of our culture. The site of application will be film and television, with special attention to music video—the mass media that repeatedly force us to watch these clichés in action.

The first cliché is that technology brings human progress by extending man's control over nature, granting us more freedom over our destiny and making our lives more pleasurable. This assumption, or at least the language in which it is frequently presented, is already sexually coded. Since human is usually redefined as *Man* and nature personified as *Mother*, it is *Man's* control that is being extended and the object being controlled is *Woman*. Since the result of this act of domination is pleasure and freedom for the conqueror, this struggle between technology and nature is metaphorically imbued, not only with the archetypal battle of the sexes and the child's endless rebellion against the parent but also with the perverse pleasures of sadomasochism.

This metaphor is part of the larger cultural mythology of sexual difference that puts men in control of civilizing machines and women in symbolic substitution for whatever is being mastered—nature, sex, spirit, chaos. By making women an object to be conquered, possessed, and exchanged by men, this symbolic system not only deprives women of their humanity, but also fools men without capital into thinking they are naturally empowered by their gender. Henry Adams provided one of the most powerful renditions of this metaphoric opposition of the sexes in "The Dynamo and the Virgin." In 1900 Adams visited the Great Exposition where he beheld the Dynamo—a formidable machine that could convert mechanical energy into electrical power and that thereby accelerated industrialization and its consolidation of patriarchal capitalism. For Adams, the dynamo became a symbol of infinity which, in this historic sequence of forces, rivalled the power of the Virgin:

The Woman had once been supreme....She was goddess because of her force; she was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies. (2)

By defining the force of the Virgin as female sexuality, Adams also attributed, by implication, a masculine gender to her historical antagonist, the dynamo, and thereby dramatized, not only the material base of patriarchal dominance, but also the power of metaphor in constructing human history.

Another formidable machine that appeared roughly around the same time was cinema—a machine that would also be identified with the

masculine gender and would soon become the most potent vehicle for transmitting patriarchal mythology. In some of the pioneering films of Georges Méliès, like *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Magic Lantern* (1903)—two of the earliest science fiction and reflexive films respectively—men were already in control of the magical machines, both in front of and behind the camera, and women, like nature, were presented as erotic spectacle designed for the male gaze. Even in a revolutionary context such as the Soviet Union in the 1920s where there were key women (Esther Shub and Dziga Vertov's wife and lifelong collaborator Elizaveta Svilova) behind the scenes, it was still *The Man with the Movie Camera* who controlled the gaze of the *kino-eye* and who actively worked toward integrating radical theory and practice and the image of woman was used to signify the regressive subjectivity of the bourgeoisie.

The metaphoric identification between man and machine leads to the second clichéd assumption—that technology extends the human body. When our apelike ancestors first picked up a stick or a bone, they were extending their reach with surrogate arms, just as today our most advanced computers extend the power of our brains. These analogies were dramatized in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which also reflexively explored the science-fiction genre as the primary carrier of the myth of scientific progress, just as it reflexively identified film technology as an extension both of our eyes and brain.

Thus far I have mentioned only parts of the body that are shared by both sexes—arms, eyes, brains. Yet, even these human parts have been sexually coded by patriarchal culture. In traditional science fiction, for example, brains and computers have been identified primarily with males, as is clearly the case in *2001*, where the rebellion of the sympathetic yet wayward computer HAL provides the emotional highpoint in this male-dominated narrative and where women are restricted to the periphery. Although this gender coding is challenged in the revisionist science-fiction film *Alien*, where the surviving astronaut, her pet pussycat, and the controlling computer called Mother are all decidedly female, the old sexist coding is restored in the end. Despite her physical triumphs, the female astronaut is still used as erotic spectacle when she does her final strip, a scene that is bound to remind film buffs of the unliberated image of Jane Fonda in the opening of *Barbarella* and of a patriarchal convention that goes all the way back to the first science-fiction film by Méliès. Moreover, *Alien* reaffirms traditional essentialist assumptions in allying females with Mother Nature and setting them in opposition to Pure Science, which is embodied in a male robot. In those rarer instances in cinematic science-fiction where Woman is the robot—like the false Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or the female replicants in *Blade Runner*, she is clearly constructed by men (both on and off screen) as a mechanical toy designed as an erotic lure or distraction for other men. Thus, unlike the male robots that have always been ubiquitous in science fiction, such female robots function merely as an object of exchange in the competitive male quest for economic and political power and as an objective correlative

for female representation in the cinema.

In his highly influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin connected cinema's metaphoric extension of the human eye and ear with psychoanalysis—a discourse which arose in history almost at precisely the same moment as cinema:

The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical perception, the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception. (3)

In performing these particular revelatory functions, both cinema and psychoanalysis distracted urban spectators from perceiving the material and ideological entrapment imposed on them by industrialization and instead encouraged them to become absorbed in the dazzling spectacle of movies and dreams, which illuminated the hitherto hidden spectacle of subjectivity and the unconscious.

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling....The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (pp. 689-690)

Although Benjamin never connected cinema with the Freudian concepts of scopophilia and voyeurism, he nevertheless was correct in assuming that the unconscious optics and impulses revealed by cinema and psychoanalysis would have far-reaching political consequences.

Phallic Film

In conceptualizing and naturalizing the patriarchal unconscious as the universal deep structure of the human psyche, Freudian theory succeeded in strengthening its hold over all human subjectivity—including that of the female, who became, in Laura Mulvey's terms, "the lynch pin" to sexual difference and to the phallogocentric symbolic order built on that primary distinction:

The function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is two-fold, she first symbolises the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end, it does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory which oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack. Both are posited on nature (or on anatomy in Freud's famous phrase). (4)

Demonstrating how the patriarchal unconscious also dominates the

enunciation of narrative cinema, which became the most powerful 20th-century apparatus for molding subjectivity, Mulvey was the first to argue that in order to resist the entrapment of female representation within patriarchy, feminist theorists, spectators, and filmmakers had to understand psychoanalytic theory and use it as a "political weapon."

The argument turns again to the psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat. None of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, but it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look. It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, strip-tease, theatre, shows, etc. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. (p.815)

Though Mulvey's pioneering work helped generate new forms of resistance to patriarchal mechanisms both in feminist theory and radical film practice, it also helped to strengthen the metaphoric gender identification of mainstream cinema by arguing that all three of its interlocking looks were exclusively male: the look of the camera recording the pro-filmic event (that is, the event being photographed), the look of the characters controlling the gaze within the screen illusion, and the look of the spectators watching the film in the movie theater. In this way, Mulvey's analysis intensified women's sense of their virtual exclusion from the cinematic institution. Seeking a way to break this male hegemony, many of the feminists who followed Mulvey tried to theorize a position for the female spectator, so that it would be possible for women to perform resistant readings that might recoup parts of texts—even those constructed within mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Another line of resistance critiqued the concept of fetishization—both within the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and the way they had been applied to cinema—particularly by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier*. Unlike Mulvey, Metz makes no attempt to use psychoanalysis as a political weapon; rather, the main effect of his work has been to consolidate the phallogocentric hold of psychoanalytic theory over film discourse.

According to Metz, film viewing gives us pleasure because it allows us to regress to an infantile situation. It recalls the "mirror phase," the developmental phase between 6 and 18 months theorized by Lacan, when the infant first recognizes itself in the mirror, usually by distinguishing its image from that of the mother who holds the child. Rupturing the intersubjectivity shared with mother, this act of looking enables the infant to develop an Imaginary Signifier for itself, which is a crucial step in its ego development. When looking into the mirror, the child is both the subject—the one doing the looking—and the object

of its own gaze. This unity of subject and object gives the infant extraordinary pleasure because it substitutes for the original plenitude that was experienced when baby and mother were one. Yet, paradoxically this unity of self is a false construct based on a misrecognition which leads to a sense of alienation. Nevertheless, when we go to the cinema, says Metz, we reexperience this infantile pleasure, this false unity of identification with the Imaginary images on the screen. And that's why the pleasure is so intense, no matter what film we are seeing, and that's why we keep going back to the cinema, which enables the industry to survive.

But one might ask, how does this connection with the mirror phase make cinema phallogentric, particularly since the mirror phase occurs in the pre-Oedipal stage of sexual development at least two years before the recognition of sexual difference and the child's entry into the symbolic? Doesn't this connection imply that the cinematic image represents the mother's body, perhaps the womb in which the infant was once safely enclosed, or the breast on which its pleasure and survival depended? No, Metz says, echoing Lacan and Freud. The image on the screen is a fetish—a material substitute for what is absent. And even though the mother's womb and breast were the first human parts to be missed by the infant and even though the bottle and the pacifier would seem to be obvious fetishistic substitutes for the mother's breast and the dark, warm movie theater a fetishistic substitute for the womb, they are denied that status, for in Freud's phallogentric construct *the fetish always represents the penis*. Once the phallus becomes the signifier of sexual difference (it is either present or absent), within the symbolic order of the patriarchy it becomes the measure of all desire. Hence, even erotic memories of maternal plenitude or of the mother's body from the pre-genital stage merely become fetishistic substitutes for the all-signifying penis. Moreover, since the fetish is a substitute, its presence implies that the penis is absent. Hence, fetishism is inevitably linked to the idea of castration and the fear it inspires. For Metz, Lacan and Freud, the scenario of castration is a symbolic drama which uses the fetish as a "decisive metaphor" to take over all of life's losses, both real and imaginary.

Within the patriarchal unconscious, the cooptive power of the fetish is boundless: "At the same time as it localizes the penis, the fetish represents by synecdoche [the rhetorical figure in which the part stands for the whole], the whole body of the object as desirable." (5) Metz calls it synecdoche; I call it chutzpah. Even though the woman's body is capable of reproducing both another female and a male, complete with penis, the patriarchal unconscious denies the biological, emotional, and erotic powers of the mother through synecdoche—by using the "distinguishing part" of the penis (privileged over the equally distinguishing womb only by its immediate visibility) to redefine the whole as incomplete. Through fetishism, the patriarchal unconscious conquers and castrates the mother's body. As Metz acknowledges:

Castration, for Freud, and even more closely for Lacan, is first of all the mother's castration....The child who sees its mother's body is constrained by way of perception...to accept that there are human beings deprived of a penis....It believes that all human beings originally have a penis and it therefore understands what it has seen as the effect of a mutilation which redoubles its fear that it will be subjected to a similar fate (or else, in the case of the little girl...the fear that she has already been subjected to it). Inversely, it is this very terror that is projected on to the spectacle of the mother's body, and invites the reading of an absence where anatomy sees a different conformation. (p. 69)

The cooptive power of the fetish is equally dazzling within the patriarchal cinema, where, according to Metz, we find it not only in the images on the screen, but primarily in the equipment itself:

As for the fetish itself, in its cinematic manifestations, who could fail to see that it consists fundamentally of the equipment of the cinema (its technique), or of the cinema as a whole as equipment and technique, for fiction films and others?...Of all the arts the cinema is the one that involves the most extensive and complex equipment; the technical dimension is more obtrusive here than elsewhere. Along with television, it is the only art that is also an industry, or at least is so from the outset. (p. 74)

I have gone on at such length in summarizing Metz's ideas so that we can see exactly in what terms this phallogentrism of cinema is argued—as a powerful metaphor that elaborates the cliché I began with (that all technology is an extension of the human body) and that supposedly explains how cinema gives pleasure. In fact, as part of the patriarchal social formation, it claims the cinematic institution exclusively for *mankind* and helps deny women access to the medium, its technology and its signifying practices.

Drawing on pre-genital theories within psychoanalysis that assume the fetish originally represents the breast, or on Bertram Lewin's concept of the dream screen which posits the breast as the visual background on which dreams are projected, or on Gilles Deleuze's model of masochism which deviates from Freud's construct of sadomasochism, revisionist film theorists like Gaylyn Studlar and Robert Eberwein have recently tried to perform a sex change on cinema—primarily by arguing that the screen represents the mother's breast in the pre-genital stage and thereby opening a position for an androgynous spectator. Studlar develops the argument in its most sophisticated form:

Cinematic pleasure is much closer to masochistic scopic pleasure than to a sadistic, controlling pleasure privileged by Mulvey and also by Christian Metz....Masochistic fantasy is dominated by oral pleasure, the desire to return to the nondifferentiated body state of the mother / child, and the fear of abandonment (the state of non-breast, non-plenitude). In a sense, these same wishes are duplicated by the film spectator who becomes a child again in response to the dream screen of cinema. This dream screen affords spectatorial pleasure in recreating the first fetish—the mother as nurturing environment....The spectator's narcissistic omnipotence is like the narcissistic, infantile omnipotence of the masochist who ultimately cannot control the active partner. Immobile, surrounded in darkness, the spectator becomes the passive receiving object who is also subject. The spectator must comprehend the images, but the images cannot be controlled.(6)

Although I find Studlar's argument convincing, what concerns me in the context of this essay is not whether the breast argument is *right* and the phallus argument *wrong*, but rather that both are "decisive metaphors" of gender identification that reinforce the primary distinction of sexual

difference on which the patriarchal symbolic order is based and that reinscribe the technology with ideological assumptions that are naturalized as truth. One way of resisting such naturalization is to exaggerate and call attention to the symbolic process of assigning any gender to this technology—an effect that is partially achieved by the mere attempt to make the sex change. This phenomenon of switching genders is even more apparent in the historical context of television than in cinema.

The Boob Tube

What is fascinating to me is that the metaphor of the mother's breast has been widely accepted, not for cinema, but for television—the medium that began to challenge cinema in the post-war era of the 1950s, when American women fresh from the factories were forced back into the home where they would become the daytime audience for soap opera and game shows. This metaphoric identification is undoubtedly related to the historical role of television, as having come later than cinema. Like Eve being made out of Adam's rib, television is seen as derivative of and subordinate to the cinema, thus deserving a subordinate metaphor—a less potent part. Yet television has considerable powers, even if they have been misused. Many TV historians assume it may be less capable than cinema of reaching artistic or intellectual heights; yet, it offers more seductive and debilitating pleasures. In Melanie Klein's terms, it has been primarily perceived as "the bad object," "the bad breast"—an idea carried in the popular phrase "the boob tube." This pun implies that TV is a technology that is both female and stupid: It's female because it's stupid, and it's stupid because it's female.

Beverle Houston has thus far offered the most powerful theorizing of the metapsychology of television and the most persuasive development of TV's metaphorical identification with the female breast. Grounding her argument within a psychoanalytic framework and, like Studlar, within the pre-genital stage, she distinguishes between the kinds of Imaginary that operate in cinema and television:

Whereas the specularity of cinema's promise evokes the misrecognition of the mirror, and can do so only in the presence of its images, television's promise evokes a much earlier moment and can do so all the time, even when the set is off. In its endless flow of text, it suggests the first flow of nourishment in and from the mother's body, evoking a moment when the emerging sexual drive is still closely linked to—propped on—the life- and-death urgency of the feeding instinct.... Thus the constant interruption or reopening of desire at the analogical level occurs under the pressure of this life-and-death urgency that is re-evoked by the flow. It is no accident that the main textbook in American television studies is called *The Tube of Plenty*. (7)

Television's endless flow is not limited metaphorically to the mother's breast, but it can also be extended more generally to female sexuality with its multi-climaxes, particularly when contrasted with the big-bang structure of male sexuality. While the masculine structure is analogous to the single dramatic climax of the well-made play and film, the endless female flow is the ideal narrative model for women's shows like soap opera as well as for most television programming. (8)

Television's metaphoric identification with female sexuality can also center on vaginal receptivity. Once you own a TV set, you identify with the equipment, for you, too, become the basic receiver, the passive consumer who is so hotly pursued by the competing suitors—advertisers, stations, and stars—who boldly express their desire in direct address and who keep reminding you of what you lack. You, in turn, are trained to desire everything television has to offer—not only the goods being advertised, but all the latest TV hardware to compensate for your sense of inadequacy and loss. As in the automotive industry, obsolescence and rapid technological improvement are made to seem inevitable. The steady stream of innovations that define technological progress distracts our attention from the steady state of ideology they carry, which limits rather than extends our choices and pushes us deeper into the role of passive consumer.

Satellite technology has now extended this receptivity to cosmic proportions. We now have the Super Dish capable of absorbing the world and of reinforcing TV's metaphorical identification with females. In the remote villages of India, millions of Third World spectators are receiving government messages and American soaps via INSAT, an Indian satellite that was launched to achieve national unity (probably at the expense of cultural diversity) and that has been described as the prime political legacy of the matriarchal Indira Gandhi.

The increased receptivity of the TV spectator need not be seen totally in negative terms, though this has been the prevailing tendency in the discourse on television, partly because in Western culture receptivity is associated pejoratively with passivity and weakness—so-called feminine traits. In a quite different context, Wilhelm Reich tried to reclaim vaginal receptivity as a highly positive value, associated with flexibility and strength, and providing an alternative resource for human progress and the social formation of human subjectivity. As Juliet Mitchell explains in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*:

For Reich vaginal receptivity came possibly to represent a meeting of the self and the world in universal love; he postulated that it was a new and higher stage on the evolutionary road from beasthood to godhead. In women's sexuality perhaps mankind would at last rejoin the natural. (9)

As in Adams's "The Dynamo and the Virgin" and in *Alien*, underlying this optimism we still find the essentialist metaphorical identification of woman with nature and man with machines—only their position and values have been reversed on the evolutionary scale.

Since the 1960s, television has become the dominant mass medium, usurping the position formerly held by phallogocentric cinema. The question is will TV retain its gender identification with the female, the so-called subordinate sex, or will it have to undergo a sex change? The 1970s saw the rise of women's liberation; so, the timing was right for the rise of television. But, the 1980s brought a backlash and the false media construct of "postfeminism" and we can already see signs of an effort to reclaim this victorious technology for mankind.

Beverle Houston has theorized television as the site of the family struggle. She argues that, not only does its constant flow of images promise feeding off the mother, but it also carries the symbolic in the Name-of-the-Father:

In an infant's life, the television, as powerfully as verbal language from other sources, provides a body of signifiers emanating from some unified but mysterious source, an interference from elsewhere drawing the child away from the maternal plenitude. In a scenario of their early months and years together, the mother's eyes are drawn to the shimmering set, and very soon the eyes of the infant as well. The television text intervenes with enough force to prohibit the child's desire to be the exclusive desire of the mother. In their very bedroom, the infant is forced through her to confront this third term, the television and its representational practices. Thus the television substitutes itself partly for other institutions and discourses which constitute the Name-of-the-Father. (p. 185)

This identification of television with the intervention of the father is also present in *Blue Velvet*, David Lynch's grotesquely comic transplant of the Oedipus story deep into the Edenic heartland of the small-town American family. In the climactic scene, set in the womblike apartment of the mysteriously masochistic mother/whore, when all of the opposing daddies are wiped out before the scopophiliac gaze of our young perverted/detective hero, a smashed television set is prominently featured among the array of decimated patriarchs.

It's easy to envision the patriarchy performing a sex change on the "tube of plenty"—switching its referent from breast to phallus. This process is already well under way in movies about television. In *Death Watch*, Harvey Keitel plays a TV cameraman who has a lens implanted in his eyes, literally transforming him into a walking video camera who can document Romy Schneider's death on live TV and thereby fuse soap opera with video vérité. In another science-fiction thriller, *Videodrome*, access to certain X-rated video tapes displaying the rape and torture of women causes brain tumors in male spectators. In turn, these tumors cause video hallucinations that transform the protagonist (the owner of a cable station featuring pornography) into a killer phallus. At first, his hand turns into a gun; then, through the power of synecdoche that Metz described, his whole body is fetishized. What is the effect of these programs on the female spectator? The heroine, played by rock singer Deborah Harry (from Blondie), is a media star who gives advice to the lovelorn. The deviant videodrome programming intensifies her inherent masochism, causing her to offer herself as a willing victim.

Naturally, this science-fiction vision presents an exaggerated version of what the filmmakers think TV is already doing to our brains and sexuality. In the historic battle of the media, cinema portrays television as the "bad object"—a pattern we can see in many other films outside the science-fiction genre, such as *Network*, *Poltergeist*, and *King of Comedy*. (10) But what is most important to my argument here is that in both *Death Watch* and *Videodrome*, it is the man's body that fuses with video technology, while woman provides the spectacle through her suffering and death.

The battle between the media is metaphorically reinscribed as a battle between the sexes, a reinscription that may remind us of Henry Adams's use of "The Dynamo and the Virgin" to describe another "sequence of forces" at the turn of the century.

The Battle of the Sexes on MTV

The decisive battles over TV's gender identification will undoubtedly be played out not in movies, but on television. There is no more suitable arena than MTV—the 24-hour national cable station whose rock video programming has proved so lucrative and popular, especially with adolescents for whom gender identification is so crucial and for whom it is identified with a rebellion against parents. Though it supposedly offers alternative programming, MTV actually provides a model that highlights through exaggeration the unique aspects of television, particularly those that distinguish the medium from cinema. (11) Thus it conflates the three battles—of the sexes, the generations, and the media—and wages all three in the advertising arena. Like the Friday night video fights on MTV, no matter who loses the battle, the sponsor is always the winner.

Like all television, MTV's primary function is to sell products. While this goal is fairly visible on MTV, it is disguised in most conventional programming on commercial television. Nick Browne has argued that, although the television program is presented as the primary text and the commercials that temporarily interrupt it as secondary, the opposite is true, because the main function of the program is to provide a suitable environment for the commercial message. The actual television text is "a super text that consists of the particular program and all the introductory and interstitial material—chiefly announcements and ads." (12) MTV exposes the "supertext" by erasing the illusory boundaries within its continuous flow of uniform programming and reveals the central mediating position of advertising by adopting its formal conventions as the dominant stylistic. In fact, *everything* on MTV is a commercial—advertising spots, news, station IDs, interviews, and the music video clips.

This erosion of boundaries can be seen as a special form of intertextuality—a modernist convention with radical potential that undermines bourgeois individualism by decentering individual works, revealing that all texts are made out of other texts. Yet as Fredric Jameson has argued, in the context of postmodernism, this parodic convention is stripped of its subversive potential and transformed into pastiche. (13)

The cooptive powers of music video may rival those of the fetish. It has succeeded in absorbing not only intertextuality, but other modernist conventions with radical potential like reflexivity, parody, surrealism, and even androgyny—turning them into potent cooptive mechanisms which, like the oozing characters of addiction in William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* or the cancerous monsters in *Alien*, *The Thing* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, first invade the rival by feigning

likeness and then transform the Other from within until all functional difference or resistance is eradicated.

Music video has even made its way into children's TV programs such as *Sesame Street* (where charismatic monsters and cows perform in music videos that parody parodies) and onto The Disney Channel, which has developed a G-rated version of the MTV format. Using current pop hits as a soundtrack, DTV (as it's called) re-edits and recycles classic Disney images to make them more appealing to "rad" kiddies of the 1980s. In a one-hour special called "Romancin' " (which was broadcast on a major commercial network), DTV made Madonna, Eurythmics, and Lionel Richie reaffirm wholesome heterosexual mating, clearly demarcated gender lines, and the traditional nuclear family by pairing their songs with scenes of chipmunks singing, angels matchmaking, and Bambi (and friends) coupling. It's hard to be very enthusiastic about this development, unless one is connected with MTV. For those who are primarily concerned with the values promoted on children's programming, this quixotic attempt to coopt MTV may backfire, for in cultivating in tiny tots (whose parents probably prevent them from seeing the real thing) a taste for the MTV format, it grooms them as future viewers. On the other hand, if one takes the competition for higher ratings in the youth market as the real battle, then one sees the so-called non-commercial PBS and Disney channels striving to adopt whatever format sells and another line of resistance and functional difference evaporates. In either event, DTV was based on the shrewd perception that music video tends to trivialize words and music by riveting the spectator's attention to the fast-changing flow of visual images. It is this dimension—along with its extraordinary profitability—that has helped music video rival not only other modes of television, but also radio and cinema. Significantly, MTV uses intertextuality as one of its main devices for enunciating the battle between cinema and video. The range of intertextuality and its relation to the three battles of media, sexes, and generations can be illustrated by examining four specific music videos: Duran Duran's *A View to a Kill*, the Power Station's *Some Like it Hot*, Tom Petty's *Don't Come Around Here No More*, and Cyndi Lauper's *The Goonies* (*Good Enough*).

A View to a Kill

Duran Duran's *A View to a Kill* centers on the competitive struggle between film and television for male dominance over spectatorship. From the perspective of the film industry, this video clip of the title song from the James Bond movie was merely one component in an elaborate promotion for the film that also included straightforward TV ads (featuring some of the same images used in the video clip), a short documentary film broadcast on cable which showed how the Bond film was made, and an exclusive MTV interview with Roger Moore telling how Duran Duran came to do the title song. For the filmmakers, Duran Duran is one of many groups of recording artists who have done title songs and promotions for the successful Bond series, and television is merely one advertising medium being used to sell tickets to their movie.

From the perspective of MTV, the film and its title song were sources of free programming, provided by the film and music industries in exchange for free air time. Whereas most other TV stations usually have to pay for the programs which the commercials interrupt, MTV originally had no such overhead. But once the phenomenal success of MTV generated competition, the record companies started charging the stations for the use of their videos—especially for exclusive rights to preview the clip for the initial period when it would generate the most excitement and therefore have the greatest selling power. This situation highlights the main business of every TV station—not to generate programs, but to deliver viewers at the lowest cost-per-thousand to advertisers who normally have to pay both for the commercials and the time it takes to air them. Since everything on MTV is a commercial, the Bond movie could "triple" as ad, news, and exclusive new video clip. In this sweet business arrangement, both advertisers and station make a killing, as long as the viewer watches and buys. Each sees the other as a tool being manipulated to serve its own lucrative venture—as *A View to a Kill*.

The competitive edge comes out in the interview when the handsome young video jockey wistfully quips about the middle-aged Roger Moore, "He'll always be the Saint to me!" In this innocent remark, the VJ not only reclaims Moore as a TV star (the Saint), but implies he watched him as a kid and that the TV images of machismo imprinted him more strongly than those projected on the silver screen.

This line of media rivalry is elaborated in Duran Duran's performance. From the perspective of the band, this clip is one more work in their reflexive canon of music videos that explore how media images, both from film and television, construct our subjectivity. In *A View to a Kill* the singers thrust themselves and their hardware into one of Bond's most spectacular sequences and capture the film space for video. Duran Duran tries to outdo the Bond film, not only in reflexiveness, but also in spectacle and male dominance. At the opening of the clip a womblike eye containing Bond is abruptly displaced by the phallic image of the Eiffel Tower, the setting for the scene that Duran Duran has chosen to invade. As if this setting were not sufficiently phallic, the band members blatantly fetishize their own video camera, detonators, and guns—which fits right into the Bond mythos where the male always controls the gaze and where all technological toys represent the powers of the phallus.

They also thrust themselves into the middle of a violent confrontation between Bond and one of his formidable antagonists, played by statuesque rock singer Grace Jones. As a powerful non-male, non-white symbolic Other, Jones may appear biologically suited to arouse castration fear; yet, her punk stylization seems designed to transform her into a reassuring fetish. In their video takeover, not only do Duran Duran displace the fetishized Grace Jones as Bond's key rival, but they also choose a scene in which her role is played by a stunt man. As if

that double displacement weren't enough, when we consider that the filmmakers chose Duran Duran to do the title song rather than Jones, we see that at the very moment Jones was taking a big step forward in her career from rock to film star, the black woman proved to be doubly restricted in both media. This subordination of women is also echoed in the dramatic business introduced in the scene by the band. One singer poses as a fashion photographer taking shots of a female model, but this heterosexual encounter is exposed as merely a deceptive cover for the *real* battle between the male media stars.

After watching this video, we are left wondering how we are to read the band's relationship to Bond. Clearly, Duran Duran is parodying his machismo; yet, this reading is problematic because the spy thriller is already reflexively parodic in its own right. In all Bond movies, the spectator's passive act of surreptitious looking is glamorized by being associated with the adventurous occupation of spying. From the opening shot of the eye at the beginning of the titles (which also opens the clip), *A View to a Kill* eases us into voyeuristic pleasure through an all pervasive reflexiveness, which makes the video clip appear to be merely an extension (rather than a parody) of its tactics and vision.

Thus, instead of functioning like the radical reflexiveness of a Bertolt Brecht or Jean-Luc Godard, which breaks emotional identification by demystifying the nature of representation and the way it carries the dominant ideology, Duran Duran's brand of reflexiveness is that winking complicity so pervasive in postmodernist pastiche and so popular in music videos and TV commercials—the kind of reflexiveness that leads us to accept deception or sadomasochism as harmless, so long as we can see through it with humor, but that simultaneously encourages us to identify with its perpetrators.

The specific image from the clip that comes to mind is the young singer on the tower who is disguised as a blind man. Is he pretending to be blind to Bond's corruption while really performing a critique or is he actually blind to his own complicity in the action? Then there's the young man with the earphones who pushes the buttons and plays with Bond's identity. At the end of the clip, when he identifies himself as Simon LeBon, he links himself to a different culture, technology and generation, but, despite his *goodness*, he positions himself as the true inheritor of Bond's macho media legacy.

Some Like It Hot

The title of Power Station's clip, *Some Like It Hot*, immediately introduces an intertextuality both with the children's nursery rhyme and with the Billy Wilder comedy from the repressive 1950s. Wilder's film subverted the boundaries both of genre—by fusing romantic comedy with a parody of the male-dominated gangster film—and of gender—by having Marilyn Monroe do a self-parody and by putting Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in drag so that they could join an all-girl band to escape from the patriarchal gangsters who wanted to punish them for surreptitiously watching, not the primal scene, but the St.

Valentine's Day Massacre. At the end of the film, when the eccentric millionaire (who has been hotly pursuing Lemmon) learns that his fiancée is really a man, instead of rejecting him in anger he tolerantly reaffirms his desire, quipping "Nobody's perfect!" This punch line not only subverts the patriarchal law of sexual difference on which both Oedipal conflict and romance are built, but also gives the last word to the kind of vaginal receptivity and deviant taste that are affirmed in the nursery rhyme, "Some like it hot, some like it cold, some like it in the pot, nine days old."

By reprocessing this title, the Power Station foregrounds the current usage of *hot* within the lingo of the teen subculture and the survivability of Monroe as a popular icon of female masochism; yet, the video works to restore the same repressive sexual stereotypes that Wilder's film was interrogating. The clip depicts women as painted constructions—either as a stylized animated drawing that may evoke Monroe and that assumes X-rated postures suggesting dance, sex, and torture, or as live fragmented figures costumed in spiked heels, pointy phallicized breasts, and fluorescent bondage attire. In this video, all the power sources are male, whether it's the all-boy band who generates the words and music while situated next to a phallic three-pronged cactus, or the feminine paraphernalia—lipstick, blow-dryer, razor, nail polish brush, sun lamp—all blatantly fetishized to signal that they are energized by the absent phallus. This clip condemns female spectators to a masochistic aesthetic by glamorizing the ball and chain, and coopts female icons by claiming they emanate from a male power station. Both the name of the group and their visual images reassure this Pepsi generation that the remote source of control for all TV broadcasting still lies safe in the laps of the patriarchy.

Don't Come Around Here No More

In *Don't Come Around Here No More* by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers the intertextuality is even more compromising. It presents a comic video version of the mad tea party from Lewis Carroll's Victorian verbal dream text that has been so widely adapted in film, both in animation and live action, and that inspired in the 1960s the classic psychedelic album by the Jefferson Airplane called *Surrealistic Pillow*, and that has recently been read by Teresa DeLauretis in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (one of the most sophisticated theoretical texts to emerge from recent feminist film studies) as "a parable suggesting...the situation, the predicament, and the adventure of critical feminism." (14)

In earlier versions of *Alice in Wonderland*, despite the linguistic traps set by the patriarchy, females still boldly grabbed their share of the discourse—whether it was the persistently questioning Alice, the castrating Queen of Hearts, or even the assertive lead singer of the Jefferson Airplane Grace Slick. But in this music video version Petty captures all the power himself and forces the silent Alice to "give it up." Playing the Mad Hatter, he dominates the discourse and gives all

the orders—as the title confirms. His phallic mushrooms literally bowl Alice over and make her spread her legs, transforming her into a passive victim within his surrealist vision. When Alice is drowning in a cup of tea, even the vaginal donut proves impotent as a lifesaver. In the process of video adaptation, there is a transfer of power, not only from female to male, but also from word to image. Just as the original Alice had challenged male supremacy over the Symbolic, Petty seeks dominance over the female realm of the Imaginary.

It is here in the visuals that the clip demonstrates the superiority of video software technology in achieving, at relatively little cost and effort, surrealist imagery—a stylistic that has become fairly commonplace on MTV. In one scene Petty transforms Alice into a baby Miss Piggy, not only infantilizing her, but also extending the intertextuality beyond Carroll's tale to the Muppets. The clip uses surreal trickery to manipulate Alice's size and finally to turn her into a cake that Petty can devour. This image of cannibalism implies not only that music video feeds on intertextuality, but that adaptation is another form of consumption.

Like Duran Duran's brand of reflexivity, the surrealism we see on MTV must be distinguished from its historic roots in modernism. Best represented in film by Luis Buñuel, the surrealist movement of the 1920s used dream rhetoric as a radical strategy to undermine the power of bourgeois ideology, particularly as it was manifest in the fine arts. In contrast, this postmodernist pop surrealism uses dream images to cultivate a narcissism that promotes our submission to bourgeois consumerism.

These three clips all show the process of masculinizing video technology as television usurps the dominant position formerly held by cinema. We also see this gender identification in the iconography of one of MTV's oldest and most popular station IDs: the phallic rocket, the man on the moon, and the male technician at the video control panel. These images illustrate the cliché with which we began—that technology extends man's control over nature, granting him more freedom over his destiny.

Is there no female voice on MTV to challenge this mastery? We might hear Madonna harnessing the male dynamo to reclaim the lost powers of the Virgin. Or Bananarama parodying the cooptive fruits of the male fetish. Or Tina Turner mythologizing the survival power of female sexuality. But the female opposition on MTV is probably best represented by Lauper.

The Goonies (Good Enough)

By flaunting bad taste, Lauper reconnects the new wave aesthetic to the naive "shlumpiness" of "lovely peasants" who genuinely love wrestling, melodrama and other forms of pop trash. She deliberately positions her work in opposition to the snobbish "high art" pretensions of cinema. The object of her satire is never bad taste, for she finds

strength in the lowbrow and the cliché, which are "good enough" for her. Thus, the intertextuality of most of her videos mediates between movies and commercial television. For example, in *Time After Time*, the vision of her banal romance is shaped by a Bette Davis tearjerker watched on TV.

The intertextuality is much more elaborate in *The Goonies* (*Good Enough*), which is from the sound track of a youth-market film "presented" by Steven Spielberg. The clip breaks the boundaries of many conventions by mixing genres (thriller, melodrama, comedy) and media (TV and film) and by presenting itself as Part I in a series of cliffhangers.

While working successfully within the structures of patriarchy, Lauper subverts them from within by exposing male power as a sham. The male authority figures in the clip are all bumbling comic figures. The political heavies ("cheating creditors" and "filthy rich customers") are played by TV wrestlers, whom Lauper has regularly challenged on commercial television. Her repeated victories remind us that the posturing machismo of these veterans of early TV history was no more authentic than their wins or losses and that their gender identification was always in question (remember Gorgeous George?). Since the villains of *The Goonies* (*Good Enough*) come from commercial TV, it's only fitting that the good guy hail from Hollywood. He's a *deus ex machina* played by the master of money-making movies, Steven Spielberg—the executive producer of *The Goonies* and the director of the blockbuster *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which Lauper's clip parodies. When Cyndi is poised at an impasse threatened by goony villains wielding comically cumbersome swords, she plays helpless female and cries, "Steven Spielberg, how do I get out of this one?" Though he is positioned at the control panel of a moviola on which her image and narrative are being manipulated, he sheepishly admits, "I don't know." In this subversive clip, no god or hero comes to the rescue.

The clip also reaffirms the resourcefulness of what is normally defined as subordinate on both registers of class and sex. Her family's Mom and Pop gas station provides the setting and fuel for her rebellion and closes the generation gap; Lauper refuses to be distracted from the class struggle by the battle of generations. The power of the breast and the womb as sexual icons and as the original referents for the fetish is comically developed when she bottle feeds a mobile cow, generating two kinds of super fresh milk and when she displaces the image of her patriarchal grandpop in order to discover a hidden vaginal cave which provides access to a rupture in both the clip's style and narrative.

The real strength in Lauper's challenge of male dominance comes in the recognition that the sexual struggle must be waged, not only reflexively and metaphorically in terms of the rivalry between the media and their technology (a battle that can be as distracting as the generation gap), but economically where patriarchal power has always been materially based.

Such readings of music videos do not encourage one to strive for sex changes in the gender identification of the mass media or for simple power reversals within the patriarchal coding of sexual difference. Rather, they demonstrate the futility of such projects and the necessity for resisting the reification of sexual metaphors which so easily entrap both women and men in essentialist definitions and which so readily restrict the human potential of technological change—whether it be in the dynamo, in cinema, or in video.

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Notes

1. John O'Hara, "Dusan Makavejev: Interview," *Cinema Papers* (November/December, 1975), p. 240.
2. Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1900), in *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p. 384.
3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 689.
4. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), reprinted in Mast and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, p. 804.
5. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 75.
6. Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9:4 (Fall 1984), 274-276. These arguments are elaborated in *Visual Pleasure and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (forthcoming from U. of Illinois Press). Also see Robert Eberwein's *Film & the Dream Screen* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1984); Bertram Lewin, "Inference from the Dream Screen," *The Yearbook of Psychoanalysis* 6 (1950), 104-117; Bertram Lewin, "Reconsideration of the Dream Screen," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 22 (1953), 174-199; and Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: George Braziller, 1971).
7. Beverle Houston, "Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9:3 (Summer 1984), 184.
8. For an elaboration of this argument see my review of *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Film Quarterly* 28:2 (Winter 1974-75), 48-53; and Tania Modleski's "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Film Quarterly* 33:1 (Fall 1979), 12-21.
9. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 201.
10. Beverle Houston has been doing germinal work on movies about television. Though most of this material is contained in papers read at various conferences and not yet published, one pivotal essay in print is "King of Comedy: A Crisis of Substitution," *Framework* 24 (Spring 1984), 74-92.
11. I have argued this position at greater length elsewhere. See "Music Video and the Spectator: Television, Ideology and Dream," *Film Quarterly* 38: 1 (Fall 1984), 2-15.
12. Nick Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9: 3 (Summer 1984), 176.
13. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 114-115.
14. Teresa DeLauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1984), p. 2.

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A World of Confusion: Music Video as Modern Myth

Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing; it distorts; it is neither a lie nor a confession; it is an inflexion—Barthes (1)

To approach music video as a form of modern mythology is to accept it as a vehicle for both coherence and confusion. As the quintessential postmodern art, music video delights in difference, juxtaposes multiple realities, and employs devices designed to call attention to itself as a created artifact. Music video fuses together icons and images from diverse contexts—from surrealist films, television commercials, rock music performances, and subcultural styles and practices. Its ultimate synthesis remains an unstable and contradictory "unity" of antagonistic elements. The fragmented and multi-layered messages of music video reflect no failure of communication on the part of their creators; rather they speak coherently to a world increasingly characterized by the necessity of living with painful contradictions.

Yet as Roland Barthes demonstrates in his work on modern mythology, myth-making can have important social consequences. Mass media messages do not just reflect social life, they also shape it. Music video can serve a conservative function in modern society, fragmenting experience into innumerable private moments and representing sexism, racism, and classism as necessary and inevitable. On the other hand, music video might also reveal contemporary hierarchies and oppressions as undesirable fabrications through its ability to transcend traditional categories. In its worst moments, music video renders social alienations as natural. At its best, music video calls attention to itself as a created artifact, and encourages a consciousness that sees the oppressive categories of everyday life as artificial and undesirable. In that contradictory capacity, music video inherits the relationship to myth making characteristic of previous forms of electronic mass media.

In *Media and the American Mind*, Daniel Czitrom describes a common thread in the history of all emergent forms of electronic mass communications. At first, the new medium promises to usher in a world of enlightenment and democracy though its capacity to transcend old barriers of time and place. But rapidly, commercial imperatives and political power realities undercut that utopian promise, turning the new medium into a refined instrument of domination. Although Czitrom emphasizes that enduring dialectical tensions between the interests of those who control the media and the desires of those who receive their messages remain, his analysis demonstrates that no medium of communication has been able to fulfill its emancipatory potential because none has been able to escape the institutional, economic, and political matrix in which it originated.

The history of music video seems to conform to the scenario outlined in Czitrom's discussions of the telegraph, motion picture, and radio