

Stars, stripes, cameras and decadence music videos of the Iraq War era

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STARS, STRIPES, CAMERAS AND DECADENCE:
MUSIC VIDEOS OF THE IRAQ WAR ERA

by

HENRY MILLER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Barry Mauer

ABSTRACT

Recently, academic researchers have brought critical attention to representations of the Iraq War in popular culture. Most of this work, however, focuses on film and music, leaving the influential medium of music video largely unexplored. A number of artists produced music videos that capture the zeitgeists of competing movements leading up to and following the United States' involvement in the Iraq invasion. This project, "Stars, Stripes, Cameras and Decadence: Music Videos of the Iraq War," seeks to survey music videos in order to understand how music video helps shape Americans' relationship to heavily polarized public discourses in the United States regarding this controversial military act.

The thesis will take a multi-dimensional approach to analyzing each music video. The study will incorporate data on public opinion, audience reaction and political shifts in relationship to each video. On the most elementary level, the thesis will address the "anti" and "pro" war stances portrayed by music videos to understand both how they were shaped by their relationship to power and how they consequently shape their audience's relationship to power.

The study will also undertake to understand these music videos aesthetically. Both "anti" and "pro" music videos draw upon schools of political messaging that largely dictate the art of the music video. Each school portrays soldiers, violence, war, enemies, families and loved ones in different ways. The thesis will delve into the histories of how various political traditions use images of war to shape their messages and how music videos continue (or break from) these traditions.

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INTRODUCTION

Music videos are integral elements in the entertainment world. The fusion of the cinematic paradigm with music has resulted in several music video relics being added to the collection of American popular culture. From the early days of The Buggles to the music videos of Culture Club, external politics have acted as a source of discontent and inspiration for musicians and video. This trend continues with the music videos released during the era leading up to and including the Iraq War. Artists from different political ideologies during the Iraq War did not shy away from expressing their opinion about America's occupation in Iraq. The Dixie Chicks faced a vitriolic backlash from a conservative market for an anti-Bush statement made in England, Green Day released a commercially successful album that was highly critical of the Bush Administration in both its title and content and country star Toby Keith became a red-state hero with his unwavering jingoism. Yet more noteworthy than the simple statements were the music videos that emerged during this time. In his book, *Money For Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes*, Saul Austerlitz notes political influence in the realm of music videos:

Politics had long played an occasional, supporting role in videomaking. The music-video networks had always embraced a vague social liberalism, concentrated in efforts like MTV's "Choose or Lose" voter-registration push. Having to keep their advertisers satisfied, though, meant that politically outspoken videos were few and far between. Never as a big presence as sex or violence in the music video, politically astute artists had occasionally used videos as a soapbox of sorts. Videos had long been opportunities to

introduce pet causes to a wider audience, or jump on a trendy bandwagon to look sensitive. (201)

A navel-gazing, quasi-political stance became vogue throughout the 90's, but an abrupt shift in tone occurred as the United States commenced its military activity in Iraq. As Austerlitz narrates, "After September 11, and the American invasion of Iraq, politics returned to the forefront, with multiplatinum artists like Green Day and Pharrell Williams taking advantage of music video's relative cultural obscurity to make impassioned, artful statements on the state of the world" (204). The music videos of the Iraq War, whether the works of liberal artists like Green Day or conservative performers like Toby Keith, reflect cultural anxieties, concerns and political ideologies that are reflective of the culture that produced them. However, several of the music videos reflect the personal politics of the artist that produce them. For instance, Toby Keith's personal support for the Iraq War is displayed in his music video. A concern of this project is how artists' personal stances relate to government institutions.

The role of hegemony is crucial. Can music videos perpetuate hegemony? In her book *Gender Politics and MTV*, Lisa A. Lewis describes the role hegemony plays in social relations: In hegemonic social relations, ruling members of the social order remain in the upper echelon of an unequal distribution of power and wealth only so long as they successfully promote an ideology that makes their superior position appear somehow natural. But at any strategic moment, subordinates may mobilize effectively to dismantle the ideological apparatus, thus threatening the continuation of the dominant group's rule. (219)

In terms of dominant political institutions and music videos, the work of conservative videos such as Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" would fall under the former description. Keith attempts to paint the United States' military intervention as the only viable option for "freedom." Keith's message echoed the ideology of the Bush administration. In his 2003 speech from the Cross Hall in the White House, Bush vowed, "The only way to reduce the harm and duration of war is to apply the full force and might of our military, and we are prepared to do so" ("Full text: Bush's speech"). Keith would later endorse Bush's re-election campaign and fight a media war with the Dixie Chicks over their anti-Bush statements. During his concerts, Keith performed in front of a doctored photo of Dixie Chicks' leader singer Natalie Maines with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The message was unambiguous: anyone against George W. Bush was an ally of the enemy. The feud between Keith and Maines represented the larger debate brewing among the American electorate: could one be against the invasion of Iraq without being labeled a traitor? What constitutes patriotism? Keith played an integral role in helping the Bush administration paint any opposition to the Iraq invasion as un-American, and it has been argued that Keith helped Republicans secure electoral victory in the 2004 election, "In the wake of 9/11, Republicans seized the opportunity to control the culture through fear and patriotic fervor. They were facilitated in this endeavor by the country music industry with songs that would question the motives, defense of 'country,' and patriotism, of anyone who would question the Bush administration" (Maxwell, and Stooksbury). Keith's tirade against Maines also reiterated the notion that 9/11 and Iraq were somehow connected. The Bush administration preferred this notion frequently (Gordon, and Rutenberg).

The campaign to convince the American population that Iraq and 9/11 were connected worked. A *USA Today* poll taken in September 2003 found that seven in ten Americans believed Saddam Hussein was “personally involved” in the September 11th attacks. A *Washington Post* poll published shortly after revealed that sixty-nine percent of Americans believed the same. These results stretched across partisan lines (“Poll: 70% believe Saddam, 9-11 link”). Keith’s revenge-themed song, jingoistic music video and doctored photograph of Maines with Hussein lent itself to the narrative that 9/11 and Saddam Hussein shared a connection.

Madonna’s video adheres to the latter part of Lewis’ assessment. Through her video for “American Life,” the artist portrays war as dangerous and barbaric, a course that only results in death and decay. This message clashes with the political message of the Bush Administration. Keith and Madonna’s songs both address issues of the natural order. Keith’s song proclaims that “We’ll put a boot in your ass/It’s the American way” while Madonna mockingly taunts during the chorus, “American life/I live the American dream” after listing off examples of how American culture has become a corporate, materialistic wasteland. The former seeks to habituate the notion that military intervention is innate to the American spirit, while the latter seeks to deconstruct America’s obsession with materialism. Both artists are trying to make grand statements about the nature of America. This type of lyrical obviousness is not always apparent in music form, and in some cases the music video acts as a supplement to a song that otherwise omits any trace of commentary on social relations.

Against Me! and Madonna complemented their highly charged political music with equally politically charged music videos; however, this is not the case with every music video.

Songs like “White People For Peace” and “American Life” explicitly state their anti-war stance in their lyrics, which are then translated into vitriolic images, but other videos are the visual counterpart to songs that are ambiguously open-ended or completely removed from the realm of politics and current events. For example, Green Day’s song “Wake Me Up When September Ends” narrates a tale of lost innocence, though the music video supplements this loss with a storyline that is premised on the Iraq War. Lady Gaga’s song “Alejandro” is a conventional pop song about the dangers of love, but the music video acts as a critical commentary on the masculine hegemony and institutionalized homophobia apparent in the United States military. This type of trend is not a unique element of contemporary music videos, as Andrew Goodwin points out in his examination of the relationship between visual and aural discourses in music videos:

It might still be possible that visual discourses dominate, however. I want to turn to a comment by Graeme Turner, who suggests that the video for Culture Club’s “Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?” may shift the song’s meaning. This clip is often cited as one that politicizes its audio track. The song appears to be a simple tale of romantic loss, but the video introduces a new element, as gender-bending Boy George sings the refrain to a courtroom judge. Thus, it can be read as an attempt to address homophobic attitudes and the persecution of gays, or more correctly perhaps, of anyone who defies dominant gender roles – in a manner that is absent from the song itself. (10)

The same analysis is pertinent for the stated Green Day and Lady Gaga songs. Even when the lyrical content is apolitical, the context of the music video can add a political facet. This project

does not seek to place more precedence on the lyrical matter than necessary, though song lyrics addressed briefly. I want this project to focus more on the imagery and aesthetics of music videos and the way live footage and theatrics are used to create a narrative. I am more concerned with questions relating to visual style than lyrical or musical content. How and why videos incorporate live footage, images of soldiers and war are more important to this project than lyrics. This is a tactical decision based on my goal of analyzing the visual aspect of music videos instead of the aural. I do not to suggest that the relationship between lyrical and music video content is not worth addressing. Andrew Goodwin discussed the sound-vision relations succinctly:

The debate about whether or not the video image triumphs over the song itself needs to take account of where the emphasis lies in the visualization (lyrics, music, or performance iconography) and surely then must engage with the question of whether or not it illustrate, amplifies, or contradicts the meaning of the song. This idea needs to be related to music, as well as the song's lyrical message, but it should already be clear that visual images do indeed tend to follow a musical logic. Here the argument concerns how the lyrical content is visualized, where it is possible to identify three kinds of relations between songs and videos: illustration, amplification, and disjuncture. (86)

Goodwin defines "illustration" as "clips in which the visual narrative tells the story of the song lyric," "amplification" occurs when "the clip introduces new meanings that do not conflict with the lyrics, but that add layers of meaning" and "disjuncture" as the state of the imagery having

“no apparent bearing on the lyrics” or when the visual narrative “flatly contradicts the lyrics” or “unintentionally undermines” them (86-88).

Of the three types of relationships described, only two are present in the selection of surveyed music videos. As previously stated, the music videos of Green Day and Lady Gaga rely on amplification, while the music video for Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten” bases itself in illustration. Though the lyrical content of Madonna’s “American Life” (a song about mass consumerism) and Against Me!’s “White People For Peace” (an explicit anti-war song) offer an anti-corporate, anti-war stance, their music videos do not obviously narrate their songs. Both videos display war as a commoditized spectacle that is ferociously consumed by the American public, and these themes do manifest in the songs via lyrics (“White People for Peace” features a verse that sings, “The Broadcast like their prayers went unanswered and ignored”); however, the added visual element further extends that criticism. For instance, the children soldiers in Madonna’s video are not referenced in the song’s lyrics.

This project seeks to act as a survey of the music videos that emerged throughout the era of the Iraq War. This project will attend to issues such as consumerism, public opinion, political turmoil, gender and sexuality, propaganda and government influence. Specific points of interest include the struggle and differences between starkly pro and anti-war music videos, the evolution of the melodramatic film into the music video of the same genre and power struggles in terms of gender and sexuality in the military. In addition, the attitudes and actions made obvious by the artists behind each music video will be included in developing a broad analysis of each music video. In their article, “The Spectacle of Visual Culture,” Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne M.

Gaudelius describe the ideology of visual culture as “a spectacle pedagogy” in that “images teach us what and how to see and think and, in doing so, they mediate the ways in which we interact with each other as social beings” (298). This project seeks to detail the method in which music videos from the Iraq War reflect contemporary cultural norms and anxieties in addition to the manner in which music videos are influenced by and dictate political attitudes.

This project will begin by comparing the music videos of the Iraq War to the study of propaganda. A working definition of the term “propaganda” will first be established in order to provide a framework for the analysis. I have discussed the way Toby Keith helped continue the notion that opposing the Iraq invasion constitutes as an “un-American” action. I have also addressed the argument that Keith’s work helped secure George W. Bush a second term. However, a bigger question must be answered: Do music videos work as a form of propaganda? Can music videos influence the way audiences think? Considering the method and techniques used by various forces during wartime efforts, it is relevant to analyze music videos as potential sources of propaganda.

MUSIC VIDEOS AND PROPAGANDA

Can the music video act as a form of propaganda? If music videos can function as propaganda, then how do they do so? Do music videos need support from a government agency or political institute to be labeled “propaganda”? Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” will be further discussed as having ties with some form of military connection, but the rest of the music videos lack a correlation to any governmental institutions. Toby Keith has claimed his music has approval of a military official, unlike the rest of the music videos. The work of Madonna, Against Me!, Green Day, Carrie Underwood, Daryl Worley and Lady Gaga have no direct ties to the government or any political figure. However, by employing specific images, whether they are scenes of actual footage from the Iraq War, or simply allusions to previous wartime films, the selected music videos seek to elicit a specific response to the Iraq War. Before addressing any more forms of propaganda, it is first important to construct a working definition of the term. This paper will draw its definition from Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell’s *Propaganda and Persuasion*; the two define propaganda, “in the most natural sense, means to disseminate or promote particular ideas” (2). They also offer a more specific definition of the term in relation to intent and purpose of propaganda:

When the use of *propaganda* emphasizes purpose, the term is associated with control and is regarded as a deliberate attempt to alter or maintain a balance of power that is advantageous to the propagandist. Deliberate attempt is linked with a clear institutional ideology and objective. In fact, the purpose of propaganda is to send out an ideology to

an audience with a related objective. Whether it is government agency attempting to instill a massive wave of patriotism in a national audience to support a war effort, a terrorist network enlisting followers in a jihad, a military leader trying to frighten the enemy by exaggerating the strength of its army, a corporation pursuing a credible image to maintain its legitimacy among its clientele, or a company seeking to malign a rival to deter competition for its product, a careful and predetermined plan of prefabricated symbol manipulation is used to communicate an objective to an audience. The objective that is sought endeavors to reinforce or modify the attitudes, or the behavior, or both of an audience. (3-4)

Though there is no specific governmental agency associated with the music videos, the personal politics of many of the artists will be explored in order to construct a correlation between their art and their political intent.

Each example listed in Jowett and O'Donnell's work is pertinent to the collection of music videos that will be examined. Keith's song and video positions the war effort as heroic and patriotic while painting the American troops next to images of helicopters, guns and training grounds. Madonna and Against Me!'s videos offer the war effort as a spectacle meant to be consumed by the electorate and Carrie Underwood's "Just A Dream" employs a *mise-en-scene* that draws heavily from the Vietnam era. This project will not attempt to position any music video as explicit propaganda by a government agency. However, by examining the personal statements made by the artists and analyzing their public image, it will attempt to construct a political purpose behind each music video.

Jowett and O'Donnell also establish three different forms of propaganda: white, black and gray. The first "comes from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate," though the information is presented "in a manner that attempts to convince the audience that the sender is the 'good guy' with the best ideas and political ideology" (16). White propaganda is often used to promote patriotism and nationalism (196). The second occurs when "the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions." Black propaganda is "the 'big lie,' including all types of creative deceit" (17). Gray propaganda falls somewhere between black and white and occurs when "the source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is uncertain" (20). The music videos that are premised on fictional narratives seem to fit most comfortably in the definition of gray propaganda. Keith and Worley's videos act as white propaganda. The videos position America as the ultimate source of purity and justice and use live footage (supposed "accurate information") to strengthen their argument for supporting the war effort. Again, the personal politics of the artists help solidify the categorization.

Music videos are a new installment to new media. Jowett and O'Donnell provide a brief history of new media:

The new major forms of mass communication that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries had its own peculiar set of strengths and weaknesses. What they all had in common was their ability to establish direct contact with the public in such a manner as to bypass the traditional socializing institutions, such as the church, the school, the family, and the political system. (103)

The art of the music video is in many ways a more immediate, readily consumed version of the motion picture, which “never became the powerful vehicle of ‘direct’ propaganda that its critics feared it would,” even though it was “extremely successful in influencing its audiences in such areas as courting behavior, clothing styles, furniture and architectural design, speech mannerisms, and eating and drinking habits” (107). Yet, an extended time was originally believed to be an asset for the motion picture, which “has the greatest potential for emotional appeal to its audience, offering a deeper level of identification with the characters and action on the screen than found elsewhere in popular culture” (107). Music videos are meant to be consumed in a smaller time frame. Music videos are also readily available to anyone who has access to basic cable or the internet. The advent of YouTube allowed the instant consumption of music videos from one’s personal computer, laptop or smart phone.

The shortened timeframe forces the music video to rely heavily on preexisting images and metaphors. Music videos typically lack the time to build development of characters; however, specific images can expedite an emotional appeal, such as the funeral scene in Carrie Underwood’s “Just A Dream,” the images of the crumbling towers in Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten?” or the sight of wounded soldiers in Madonna’s “American Life.” The salience of metaphors and images have always had precedence and vital roles in propaganda, according to Jowett and O’Donnell:

The use of specific words and images has a direct bearing on how certain events are structured in the minds of the public. Key images and concepts are evoked by a careful consideration of previous experiences with new events. For such metaphorical

propaganda to be effective, images must be readily recognizable to the audience being propagandized. (311-12)

Such images as children who are victims of war and the folded American flag are part of the American collective memory defined as “the ways group, institutional, and cultural recollections of the past shape people’s actions in the present” and is formed by “folklore, holidays, stories, songs, rituals, ceremonies, museum displays, monuments, paintings, cartoons, films, and television programs” (196). The selected music videos both mine the archive of images found in the American collective memory (the American flag, memories from Vietnam, popular sports, etc.) and have the potential to act as new entries into the American collective memory. For example, the activism Lady Gaga participated in with the repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, combined with her music video’s images of same-sex attraction among soldiers, will arguably make its way into the narrative of gay civil rights.

Another aspect of music videos that will be developed later is the juxtaposition of the music videos’ message with popular opinion at the time. Jowett and O’Donnell underscore this point, “communication effects are greatest when the message is in line with relevance, existing opinions, beliefs, and dispositions of the receivers” (199). For instance, the vehemently anti-war message of Madonna’s original video of her “American Life” song was intended to be released during the early days of the Iraq War when support for Bush’s military action was more popular. Madonna refrained from releasing the video and instead issued a more innocuous version that omitted the image of gore, blood and military imagery. The video of Lady Gaga’s “Alejandro” was released during a time when the majority of the country believed the military’s “Don’t Ask,

Don't Tell" policy should be overturned. Rock music often romanticizes rebellion, and while artists like Madonna, Against Me! and Green Day positions themselves as anti-establishment (particularly anti-Bush administration), the videos of the latter two were not far removed from the discontent felt by the American electorate in regards to the Iraq War.

To conclude, it is difficult to label the music videos of the Iraq War as explicit propaganda, although the politics of the videos do reflect the personal politics of some of the artists (as revealed through interviews, lyrics, etc.). Furthermore, a certain degree of audience opinion is pertinent to the consumption of music videos and the politics espoused in them and, in the case of Madonna, mandates the choice of the artist and their art. Now that the relationship between propaganda and music videos has been examined, the role of "pro" and "anti" war sentiment will be addressed.

THE PRO/ANTI-WAR DICHOTOMY

Two distinct and polarized forms of music videos manifested from the attempts to represent the spheres of civilian and military life and how those spheres interact. The emerged dichotomy can be best described in simplistic terms of “anti-war” and “pro-war.” The former represents war as a spectacle meant for consumption. War is represented as a fashion show or a football game. These videos assimilate specific components of war into modern, average civilian activities. For example, in Madonna’s music video, the clothing of war becomes a fashion staple in the same manner large retail clothing stores sell camouflage attire. The “anti-war” videos utilize various forms of live footage, live performance and stereotypically patriotic images in order to perpetuate the notion that members of the United States Armed Services are involved in martial activities in order to safeguard domestic liberties. The videos that will be surveyed in this essay are Madonna’s “American Life” and Against Me!’s “White People For Peace” for the anti-war set countered with Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” and Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten?” for the pro-war selection.

One question must be addressed before continuing. How does visual culture influence the way members of a society think? Garoian and Gaudelius provide an answer with the spectacle pedagogy of visual cultural:

First, as a ubiquitous form of representation, which constitutes the pedagogical objectives of mass-mediated culture and corporate capitalism to manufacture our desires and determine our choices; and second, as a democratic form of practice that enables a critical

examination of visual culture codes and ideologies to resist social injustice. As the former, spectacle pedagogy functions as an insidious, ever-present form of propaganda in the service of cultural imperialism; the latter represents critical citizenship, which aspires toward cultural democracy. (299)

One of the pro-war songs certainly conforms to the first definition provided. Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" functions as a propagandist tune intended to perpetuate a sense of national anger and zeal for enacting vengeance upon an undefined enemy, all in the name of "freedom" and "patriotism." Although "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" does not have specific financial ties to the Bush administration, Keith has touted the song's approval of General James L. Jones. In fact, according to Keith, his original intention was not to record or release the song as a single, but under General Jones' diligent insistency that Keith owed the song to the soldiers, the singer eventually submitted. Jones informed Keith it was "duty as an American" to record the song ("How do you like him now?"). That the then Commandant of the Marine Corps would reiterate the importance of Keith's song's message of "serving your country" certainly elicits speculation about the political power of Keith's song. Furthermore, Keith has later addressed General Jones as, "One of my best friends," and suggested, "he should run for President some day" ("Toby Keith talks to POLITICO"). Keith publically endorsed George W. Bush's reelection campaign in 2004 and preformed at a rally the night before the election.

The second pro-war song, Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?" lacks the military liaison that accompanies Keith's song; the absence of political interference helps position

Worley's song within the second definition provided by Garoian and Gaudelis. In fact, Worley insisted that the song was not meant to yield lucrative results or provide a framework for manufacturing consent, instead affirming that his intentions were to provide a paean to the members of the Armed Services:

I really didn't care if I made a bunch of money from it. I did want the people that it was written for – the men and women that died in the tragedy of 9/11 and their families, the men and women that wore the uniforms here in our country and then last but not least, our military troops that were in Afghanistan taking care of business – I just wanted to do something to honor them. (“Patriotic Country Music and a Divided U.S.”)

Despite the pro-war tone of “Have You Forgotten?” the song's dearth of political or military backing allows it to appear more in line with the likes of Against Me!'s “White People For Peace” and Madonna's “American Life.” The artists released all three music videos because it was their vision and desire, as oppose to being marred by military intervention.

For this project, I placed more precedence on the videos than the actual chord changes, production values and most importantly, the lyrics. According to the article “Music Video and the Spectator: Television, Ideology and Dream,” Martha Kinder argues the images on the television screen are far more influencing than anything the ears can interpret, “In all television the visual component is privileged over the audio” (4). Kinder's argument is the source of debate among scholars. Theorists have continued the debate over the potency of audio versus visual; however, Kinder's assessment was relevant and appropriate for the music videos surveyed in this project. The role images play in music videos is a focus of this project. I want to address the way

images are used to promote an ideology. Therefore, the jingoistic lyrics of Keith or Worley take only the silver medal when competing with their images of blazing American flags and fervent troops rallying around a stage.

The attributes of “pro-war” and “anti-war” music videos will be addressed to denote the differences among the two groups. The sets of binaries that embody the components of the dichotomy are:

Pro-War

Sincere use of American flag
Incorporates live footage heavily
Minimal violence
Actual violence

Anti-War

Ironic use of American flag
Incorporates live footage minimally
Abundance of violence
Simulated violence

Madonna’s unreleased video for “American Life” begins the analysis. The original video was never officially released but later substituted for a more sterile and less indicting piece that lacks the worthy commentary of the first. Madonna claims the dismissal of her original draft came from a personal concern of not wanting “to risk offending anyone who might misinterpret,” though as *Slant Magazine* critic Jonathan Keefe commented on the decision, “It seemed like spin control back in 2003, but that statement reads today like a damning indictment of the reactionary groupthink that gripped the nation in the early days of the Iraq War” (“Best of the Aughts: Music Videos”). It is the Iraq War, but more broadly war in general and the way in which the American population translates war into a commodity meant for consumption, that becomes the thesis of Madonna’s original music video for “American Life.”

In his book, *The New American Militarism*, author Andrew J. Bacevich echoes the indictment of Madonna's video:

In the right circumstances, for the right cause, it now turned out, war could now offer an attractive option – cost-effective, humane, even thrilling. Indeed, as the Anglo-American race to Baghdad conclusively demonstrated in the spring of 2003, in the eyes of many, war has once again become a grand pageant, performance art, or a perhaps temporary diversion from the ennui and boring routine of everyday life. (22)

In Madonna's specific case, war is represented as a fashion show. Not only does the spectacle of the fashion show emulate the way Americans view war as a popular form of commodity, it also serves as a commentary on the affluent American population. It is the American elites who are able to attend high-end fashion shows and indulge in the fiscal gluttony that is foreign to the middle and lower class. It is also the privileged, wealthy portion of the population that loses fewer family members in war, as the military is largely made up of those who are not as affluent (Bacevich 219). The sense of frivolous opulence is further extended in the attendees of the fashion show, with their expensive cameras, ornate attire and mindless applause at every figure on the catwalk; the audience of the fashion show are Madonna's vision of an upper-class who see style, not substance, and can willfully consume something as dangerous as war.

The sculpted, firm and chiseled models of the fashion show are the video's soldiers, and in the beginning of the video, the models are behind the stage being adorned with dog tags, gearing up in camouflage, smearing war paint unto their faces and receiving the orthodox haircut that has become emblematic of the United States military experience, alluding to the opening

scene of the iconic war film *Full Metal Jacket*. The model/soldiers then make their way to the catwalk, vamping and strutting up and down in a military garb: bullet necklaces, gas masks, helmets and combat boots.

As the models continue to bask in the sea of flashing cameras from the paparazzi in the audience, another set of models are found exiled in a bathroom. This set of models is the physical antithesis of the catwalk models. Curvy and tattooed, this set of models is confined to the depths of obscurity and removed from the consuming eye of the media in the audience. As the perspective of the two groups of models is altered from scene to scene, one of the ostracized models carves into the bathroom wall, "Protect me." The effect is explicit: the media only purchases what is perceived as beautiful, the "right cause" as Bacevich called it, while the unappealing factors of war are simply omitted to the murky sidelines, never to be approached or acknowledged.

As the fashion show continues, young children from the Middle East begin to descend upon the catwalk while their faces are blinded by the intruding cameras and provoking smiles from the audience. The children wear confused looks on their faces before the screens behind the catwalk explode with images of an American helicopter, prompting the children to run away. The walkway is abruptly interrupted when Madonna intrudes on the catwalk in an armored car complete with the American flag. The audience is appalled and before the paparazzi can commence their assault of photography, Madonna unleashes a geyser of water from the armored car's pistol, thus metaphorically and literally "watering down" the media. The source of the media's dilution is not the actual journalists in this instance, but the military force. It is the

military, not the journalists, that misleads the public. As the military-clad Madonna continues to water down the media, gore begins to consume the catwalk. Wounded soldiers and children crawl across the catwalk, their blood tracing their failed attempt at mobility, yet the commander that is Madonna does not allow the cameras to capture this footage, as she laughs and continues to shower them with a high-powered jet.

Madonna's portrait of a military determined to regulate information recalls the military's publication role in the film *Full Metal Jacket*. A banner proclaiming, "FIRST TO GO LAST TO KNOW – we will defend to the death your right to be misinformed" is placed in the publication room in the film. Madonna's video echoes the sentiment of the banner. This aspect of the music video is a commentary on the restrictions the military places on information. Only the material that is defined as the "right stuff" is permitted while all other accounts are to be either ignored or prohibited from exposure: children are only allowed to be pictured when they are not harmed and the members of the service are to be displayed in a highly sexualized light; all other portrayals are to be excluded.

Towards the finale of the video, the screen becomes infiltrated with a gloved hand extending its middle finger to the audience between scenes of the atomic bomb before a singular hand grenade rolls unto the catwalk, provoking gestures of horror from the audience. The ticking of the weapon ends the video, leaving the viewer with an obvious conclusion. Madonna's message is simple: viewing war as entertainment and allowing the "imperialist" agenda to set precedence for information erodes the spirit of "critical citizenship" that Garoian and Gaudelius examined.

If Madonna's fashion show-as-war scene allegory aimed its criticism at the affluent and military, the video for Against Me!'s "White People For Peace" is an indictment of the entire nation's hunger for consuming war as entertainment. Against Me!'s video exchanges the catwalk for a football field, and by painting war as a football game, the video criticizes the manner to which America allows the military to be crucial to its identity. The video for "White People For Peace" is an expansion of Bacevish's assessment:

The global military supremacy that the United States presently enjoys – and is bent on perpetuating – has become central to our national identity. More than America's matchless material abundance or even the effusions of its pop culture, the nation's arsenal of high-tech weaponry and the soldiers who employ that arsenal have come to signify who we are and what we stand for. (1)

The green, expansive football field of Against Me!'s video is the substitute for the couture of Madonna's catwalk, signifying a spectacle that is not reserved for any particular caste but instead readily available for universal consumption. The selection of a football field also harkens back to the Vietnam era documentary *Hearts and Minds*, which featured the juxtaposition of war and a high school football team. The effect is deliberate and overt.

The opposing teams are each monochromatically coated and armored with gasmasks. The masks perpetuate the anonymity of the soldiers. As the players employ the traditional arming of the guns on the football field, jubilant cheerleaders on the sideline begin their routine. In the midst of the brawl, a decrepit, weathered and aged man slowly begins to emerge on the sidelines. His bones are clearly frail as his movement is almost impossible. A large mechanical device

keeps his mouth agape, preventing any speech. The man falls to the ground and is later shown confined to a grotesque and morbid bathroom, in the same vein as Madonna's unwanted models. The image of the silenced man who is unable to enter the arena of spectacle and assigned to an isolated bathroom reinforce the media's refusal to acknowledge the ugly side of war. The man embodies the opposite of the "right stuff." This image allows Against Me!'s video to reiterate the indictment of Madonna's "American Life." The ugly side of war is invisible to the American public.

In the following sequences, the man is shown both inside and outside of the bathroom playing a guitar. With his mouth unable to function due to the device, his only source of speech is music but even as he plays, it is clear that there is no audience. Even as the ugly side of war attempts to be vocal, there are no listeners for it. The audience is preoccupied consuming the war-as-football exhibition on the field. And as the battle on the field wages on, the camouflage-embellished cheerleaders continue to engage in chants and cheers.

An obese man in an ornate pink suit appears on the field. The gut that is hanging over his beltline symbolizes gluttony and his adamant hand gestures for more force, representing what Bacevich defines as, "a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness" (2). His rants incite more violence on the field and a scoreboard lights up with the number of deaths; the nonchalant nature of the scoreboard reflecting the aloof method that newscasters rattle off numbers of casualties of war, as if they are simply empty numbers and not human lives. When one soldier dies, the man in pink raises his middle finger at the deceased addressee. The same sentimental universal hand gesture represents a sense of anger in

Madonna's video; however, in this video the gluttonous man is infuriated that the deaths have not yielded the desired intention of the war-as-football game. Madonna's middle finger was a belligerent reaction to the audience for enjoying the fashion show. The man in *Against Me!*'s video lifts his middle finger out of frustration that his team has not won.

The violent actions escalate into the finale of the video, where one player finds his wounded comrade on the ground and embraces him delicately. This human gesture is completely ignored by the pink-clad man and cheerleaders, who continue their aural support for the fighting. The context of the finale reveal an audience that is so consumed with viewing the spectacle of war that they omit the fact that human lives are at stake and when a player/soldier agonizes over a fallen companion, the event is neglected. The ugly side of war cannot be acknowledged, but even the human side of war is to be excluded, simply making the entire spectacle of war an event, as if it is a luxury and can simply be turned off without consequences. The American public's ignorance on the reality of the Iraq War underscores this assessment. A 2008 Pew Research Center poll found that only twenty-four percent of Americans could accurately name the number of American deaths in the Iraq War. A similar poll from 2004 revealed only half of the population could accurately answer a similar question. The 2008 poll's assessment concluded that "The drop in awareness comes as press attention to the war has waned," and "As news coverage of the war has diminished, so too has public interest in news about Iraq" ("Awareness of Iraq War Fatalities Plummet"). Americans dismiss the reality of the war when it is not presented as a ubiquitous news story. Television becomes the vehicle to view war, and television can be turned off.

The allegory of civilian events as wars is notably absent in the pro-war videos. The music videos for Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" and Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?" instead attempt to facilitate and solidify the concept that military life and civilian life are two separate spheres with no interaction. This effort is a successor of the American military professional revival, which Bacevich describes as attempting to indoctrinate people with the notion that war is "a unique domain falling exclusively within the purview of the warrior" (42). The binaries introduced earlier allow the videos to promote the idea that the foreign action of the military is essential in order to secure American freedom. This gives a reason for fighting and supporting military action.

In contrast to the anti-war videos, which feature no live performance of the musicians but instead had the musicians adopting a theatrical part, the pro-war videos rely heavily on Keith and Worley's performance shots. The most apparent effect from this style is that unlike the anti-war videos, the use of performance segments makes a clear separation between war and civilian life. Keith's performance shots feature him on a stage, equipped with a stars-and-stripes decorated guitar, performing his song in front of a group of soldiers. In this instance, the stage is the barrier between the civilian life of Keith and the military life of the soldiers. Worley's video features the artist performing in a closed studio, making the obstruction between the two spheres even more explicit. Worley and Keith are separated from the violence of war, and are tucked away from the action. Madonna and Against Me! made civilians active participants in the battle. The incorporation of military life into civilian life that founded the anti-war videos is denied in the

pro-war videos, where the performers position themselves as being free of the military life, thanks in part to the military's service.

A second effect of employing performance pieces into music videos is the documentary-like authenticity. Kinder observed that, "In many rock video clips the visuals do not focus *primarily* on the performer in the act of performing; those that do risk appearing regressive to conventions used in rock film documentaries" (3). Yet, the purpose of the pro-war music videos is to appear documentary-like in order to appear genuine.

Keith's video opens with the jingoistic salvo of a transparent American flag waving before opening up into a performance scene where the flag has imprinted itself on Keith's guitar. As the singer makes his final chord strum, black and white photographs of American soldiers in Vietnam materialize. The video then continues by shifting between various live performances of Keith and actual footage of soldiers in Iraq, though the live recordings from Iraq are sterile, often depicting young men arriving on base or greeting Keith. In one of the video's live shots, a soldier reaches over a barbed wire fence in order to shake the hands of a group of children. This footage is used to reiterate the separation of military and civilian life. The video's closing moments include fireworks erupting over the skyline with the Statue of Liberty in the background before the screen is once again consumed with the American flag, leaving the audience with images of victory, liberty and freedom. But the images that precede the signifiers of "American freedom" are of soldiers and past wars, reminding the audience that the war is a necessity.

Worley's video begins with the singer in the studio before shifting to footage of civilians protesting America's involvement in Iraq. As Worley, donning a shirt emblazoned with an

American flag and the slogan “fighting side” above it, begins to raise his fist, images from 9/11 flood the screen. The conclusion of the comparison of the two images is simple: how could one not want to fight when American was attacked? The logic is completely visceral and lacking substance and context. More documentary clips begins to circle around Worley’s performance; clips from Ground Zero memorials, troops moving around bases and crying families who must depart from their loved ones. The image reiterates the notion of the “ultimate sacrifice” those enlisted must endure for America’s freedom. Worley’s video is not brought to a close with the American flag; instead a picture of the Twin Towers pre-9/11 is presented. The building stands in glory, asserting the belief that the attacks of 9/11 and Iraq are connected. In doing this, the video is reminding the audience once again why America’s involvement in Iraq is essential as well as provoking a sense of rage that will yield support for the war.

In employing live images, neither pro-war video incorporates any actual blood or intimate violence. Pro-war videos leave the violence for the troops, not allowing civilians to have their lives infiltrated with gore. The violence that the fashion show attendees witnessed in Madonna’s video is absent, because the pro-war videos seek to portray war as an affair that does not factor into civilian life. Pro-war music videos heavily integrate live footage into their videos, but omit actual violence. Ironically, the pro-war videos strive for authenticity by assimilating live recordings and images but fail to achieve the actual elements of war that the anti-war videos display through theatrics.

To conclude, the music videos that address the United States’ activity in Iraq are polarized texts that reflect the divided stance of “anti-war” and “pro-war.” The former set of

videos portray the American population's consumption of war as entertainment while avoiding actual violence and dangers of war as well as comment on the plethora of ways that military ideology has merged into civilian life. The latter depict a clear distinction between military and civilian life and attempt to argue that the action of the American military is essential in order to shelter domestic liberty. The melodramatic music video moves even deeper into the domestic sphere and how war affects civilian life.

THE MELODRAMATIC MUSIC VIDEO

Beyond the apparent dichotomy of pro and anti-war music videos, a genre of music video exists that acts as a successor to a cinematic genre. These music videos are addressed by the same name as their cinematic antecedent, melodramatic. It is first vital to establish a working notion of the term “melodrama.” In her article, “Melodrama Revised,” Linda Williams defined the phrase as follows:

If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions, then the operative mode is melodrama. (42)

It is tangible to operate in the melodramatic mode when attempting to display a theme as culturally, politically and emotionally turbulent as war. Williams notes that melodrama “is grounded in the conflicts and trouble of everyday, contemporary reality” and “All the afflictions and injustices of the modern, post-Enlightenment world are dramatized in the melodrama” (53).

What the melodramatic music videos do with this paradigm and how that relates to the larger political mentality of the culture that produced the videos is the main concern of this section.

Though the pro and anti-war dichotomy is not as explicit in this portion, it is worth noting that of the two music videos being analyzed, Green Day’s “Wake Me Up When September Ends” is far more explicit in its message and tone than Carrie Underwood’s “Just A Dream.”

From a structural standpoint, there is no denying the obvious dramatic and theatrical elements of the video for “Wake Me Up When September Ends”: while the song does not extend beyond the five-minute mark, the music video extends past seven minutes. The video opens up with a title credit that echoes the premier scene of a movie and the young starlet Evan Rachel Wood serves as the protagonist of the video’s narrative. Unlike other music videos, “Wake Me Up When September Ends” is supplemented by dialogue that is independent of the video’s song. These intertwining facets allow the video to elevate itself from the commercial nature of other music videos and make the theatrical intention of the band all the more undeniable. Austerlitz makes several comparisons between films and the aesthetic of Green Day’s video: the “you-are-there battle footage” recalling *Black Hawk Down* (2001), the “overwhelming beauty of the natural landscape” provoking memories of *Days of Heaven* (1978) and the “lover’s babble” reflecting the dialogue of *All the Real Girls* (2003) (206). The criticism positions the video as a type of teenage, wartime melodrama.

The video commences in a field of bright yellow flowers, typical of the melodramatic; “Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence. Often the ideal space of innocence is posited in American stage melodrama as the rural ‘Old Kentucky’ home” (Williams 61). The male lead kisses his girlfriend as they embrace tightly. Tears glide over the girl’s puffy red eyes as she places her arms around the boy’s neck. He pulls away and the two exchange the following:

Male: You know they say life is short. They say you wake up one day and on that day, all your dreams and everything you wish for and wanted, gone. Just like that, you know? People, people get old and you know things change and situations change and what I want, I just want this

moment right now, this day, my feelings for you, the way you look right now, the way I look at you, I just want this to last forever.

Female: It will. I mean, we know we've always had this and had each other and nothing can change that. But I just want you to know that, no matter what, you always have someone here for you. Always. I'm never going to leave you. I love you.

Male: I know, I know.

Female: Don't leave me.

Male: I won't, I won't.

The obsession with "life is short" and constant fear of lost opportunities and the ephemeral nature of life enshrined in the exchange between the two characters is yet another motif the video inherits from the melodramatic, "At its deepest level melodrama is an expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast" (Williams 74). The video begins to shift from clips of the band performing in an isolated room to scenes of the couple lethargically moving throughout the fields of flower, a neighborhood and what is presumably one of the character's houses. The muted, vintage décor of the furniture is juxtaposed against an Xbox game. After a birthday party scene, the girl storms out of the house and meets her boyfriend on the porch. The song ceases to play and another exchange of dialogue begins:

Female: Tell me you didn't do it! Tell you me you didn't!

Male: Do what?

The female slaps the male.

Female: *[Crying]* Tell me you didn't do it! Please!

The male lowers his head and begins to cry.

Female: *[Hysterically]* Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! Please don't do it! Please don't do it!

The male stands up and hugs the female.

Female: How could you do that? I love you so much!

Male: I love you. Stop, please stop. Stop, stop, just listen.

Female: How could you do this to me?

Male: I thought of all people you'd understand! Why don't you understand? *[Shouting]* I did this for us! I did this for us! This is suppose to make it easier! I thought you'd be proud of me. I thought of all people, you would understand why I did this!

Male exits while female continues crying.

The video returns to the members of the band, who are now positioned on a stage. The narrative continues with the male lead now entering boot camp. The scene is a clear allusion to a similar segment in the film *Full Metal Jacket*. The male watches in fear as the barber severs the tresses of several young men. The raven hued hair of one boy is highlighted by a lightning bolt of pink dye, denoting a type of fashion that is meant to signify a form of societal delinquency that Green Day premised their career on during their freshmen days. The male is stunned as he witnesses the eccentric locks fall to the ground. The daunting homogeneity of the military becomes as undeniable as the new haircut the male now adorns.

In an abrupt shift, the male is now on the battlefield in Iraq. A blazing fire is the only color that contrast with the monochromatic sand. Suddenly, action takes a central role in the narrative. A tank rolls into the remains of a destroyed city and troops quickly deploy across the grounds. The role of action sequences has largely been incorporated into the melodramatic mode, as Williams argues, "Nothing is more sensational in American cinema than the infinite varieties

of rescues, accidents, chases, and fights. These ‘masculine’ action-centered multiple climaxes may be scrupulously motivated or wildly implausible depending on the film” (57). The former is more appropriate for Green Day’s video. The juxtaposition of simulated battle footage with the female lead crying at home is meant to elicit pathos from the audience. Drawing pathos from the audience is the prime objective of action in the melodramatic, “action-centered melodrama is never without pathos, and pathos-centered melodrama is never without at least some action” (Williams 58). The action in the video is atypically violent for a video released by a major label record and the video does not shy away from the consequence of firing bullets. In one scene, the male lead watches as a soldier is shot in the leg and blood emerges from the wound.

The video ends with the female lead returning to a tarnished bleacher, thus making a journey back to the days of youth and innocence, before the war. The conclusion of “Wake Me Up When September Ends” does not fully return to “a space of innocence” (65), while the female lead physically revisits a bastion of comfort, her emotional state is clear from the teary eyes. Though the soldier’s fate is ambiguous, the final shot of the weeping girl assures that his fate is bleak. In discussing the conclusion of melodramatic films, Williams writes, “melodrama does not reside specifically in either the happy-ending success of the victim-hero or the sad-ending failure of the same. Though an initial victimization is constant, the key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode” (66). The victim in “Wake Me Up When September Ends” is clearly the couple. The couple’s innocence is lost and their bond is depleted by distance, obligation and war.

Green Day's video, unlike previously surveyed videos, is exclusively about young characters. The only figure who appears to be past his early twenties is the Marine head, who is briefly seen berating the young men as they descend from the recruitment bus. Though the viewer is never given the answer as to why the male joined the armed forces, there are two indicative moments. During the dialogue, the male informs the female that joining the service would "make it easier." In an earlier scene, the male reaches to pay for a hotdog but finds himself without money; thus the female is forced to pay for the date. We can deduce that the armed forces represents a way to be liberated of fiscal burdens, which now begs the question, is the male a victim of a type of blood money? Is the video suggesting the government preys on the socio-economically disenfranchised in hopes of increasing the number of bodies they have to fight wars? If the video were to include a scene that featured the male signing up for the service, the conclusion would be more tangibly drawn; however, the sentiment that war destroys happiness, youth, innocence, family and love is rather obvious.

Carrie Underwood's "Just A Dream" video relies on a type of anachronism. Despite the 1965 Chevy Malibu Convertible and Eddy Arnold song playing on the radio of the opening scene of "Just A Dream," a letter addressed to Underwood in the video is dated 2008. Country Music Television writer Whitney Self claimed the intention of director Roman White was to have the video allude to the Vietnam War era (Self). The parallels between the Iraq War and Vietnam are not unique to Underwood's video, and many pundits and politicians alike have vocalized the correlation, including President George Bush (Fletcher). This raises the question:

do the aesthetics define the politics? The level of pastiche in Underwood's video draws the same type of scrutiny Andrew Goodwin applied to the Madonna's "Material Girl" video:

Just how relevant are the references to a film made in 1953 for an audience comprising many Madonna fans who are unaware of its existence, and would therefore be blind to the elements of pastiche? Of course, it would be foolish to deny that pastiche is involved here, to the extent that Hawks movie and the Monroe image remain current in popular culture. My point is simply that this is not the only referent, and that it will, for *some* viewers, be an irrelevant one. (22-23)

Unlike the contemporary shots of war in Green Day's video, Underwood's video relies heavily on past cinematic pieces to create a universe of mourning. But how obvious is this to the viewers? Can Underwood's audience freely draw parallels between her video and a Vietnam film like *Coming Home*? Furthermore, are there political implications from this aesthetic choice? While the Iraq War's critics and proponents alike have drawn parallels between the two wars, does the music video contain a political message?

Underwood herself has been unwavering in her apolitical stance, condemning celebrities who advocate for politicians, "I lose all respect for celebrities when they back a candidate" (Goodwin). The video for her song does not make a clear alliance to the pro or anti-war schism and incorporates elements of both types of videos in order to progress her poignant storyline. Patriotic images of the flag share screen time with the grim reality of a soldier's funeral. A different dichotomy present in "Just A Dream" is found in the set of dresses Underwood adorns

throughout the video: black for mourning and white for celebration, or specifically, black for a funeral and white for wedding.

The motif of funeral/wedding provides the foundation for the video's narrative. Scenes of terse dialogue are intertwined between Underwood walking down an aisle in a wedding gown. As the video progresses and it becomes apparent Underwood's soldier fiancé has died, the white gown fades into attire suited for mourning. One scene toward the end of the clip features a car driving up to Underwood's home. An officer exits and delivers the notice of Underwood's lover's death. When not adorned in a white gown or black dress, Underwood is dressed in an outfit that seems to be lifted directly from Jane Fonda's character in *Coming Home*.

The director, Roman White, has stated his intention to make a stylistic reference to Vietnam but with no explanation of his intentions. In the video's closing clip, Underwood is seen holding the traditional folded flag. It's apparent that a conflict of some type has robbed her of her love, but there are no signs of Underwood's rage or pride towards the death. The young couple in Green Day's video was painted as a victim of war, fooled into the Armed Service's narrative of financial stability only to find their lives together destroyed. But there is no such indication in Underwood's video. In fact, there are no explicit images of violence or war. In relation to Green Day's video, or the previous videos surveyed, Underwood's video comes the closest to a level of objectivity.

It is arguable that the music video for "Just A Dream" is an exercise in nostalgia, an attempt to mine America's collective imagery from the past in order to sell a familiar image. Unlike Madonna's "Material Girl" video, Underwood has remained mute on politics and has

offered no external or supplementary texts to indicate a more cohesive message behind her highly stylized music video. Underwood's video appears to be an anti-war statement when placed next to the video for "Have You Forgotten?" but could just as easily be read as a type of hagiography to fallen soldiers when juxtaposed next to Madonna's "American Life." Underwood's dearth of political statements in conjunction with the video's ambiguous message renders the melodramatic video a blank slate.

In conclusion, the melodramatic genre of music videos has a salient place in the era of the Iraq War. The genre paradigm allows the music videos to express emotionalism and human pain in relationship to political issues. The melodramatic music video makes the political personal. In the case of Green Day's "Wake Me Up When September Ends," the band's video espouses the view that war not only results in the deaths of actual humans, but also the deaths of families and relationships. The video takes on an anti-war stance through an emotional appeal that is specific and focused. Like Green Day's video, Carrie Underwood's "Just A Dream" employs a death and loss through war; however, the lack of dialogue combined with Underwood's apolitical stance make the video an exercise in emotionalism that is not focused or explicitly political.

Up until this point, the music videos have dealt with war and the effects of war on families; however, no video or artist has directly taken a position on a specific policy thus far. The next segment addresses Lady Gaga's music video and its relationship to the repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

MASCULINITY, SOLDIERS AND DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

Throughout the course of music videos, soldiers have been displayed in a myriad of manners: heroic, depressed, sad, melodramatic, family-centered, focused, angered, and so forth, but across the spectrum of emotions, the soldier typically maintains a sense of machismo and orthodox masculinity that rarely deviates from the template introduced by the titular character of the *Rambo* film series. The camouflage ensemble that adorns the soldier is typically reserved for the traditional media representation of the heroic, hyper-masculine male. In fact, the tie that bonds the representation of the soldier to the “tough guy” notion of masculinity is so deep, some critics have condemned the criteria for awarding the military’s prestigious Medal of Honor. Bryan Fischer, of the conservative Christian nonprofit organization the American Family Association, recently condemned the way Americans have dismissed the traditional role of the masculine military hero:

I have noticed a disturbing trend in awarding these medals, which few others have seemed to recognize. We have feminized the Medal of Honor. According to Bill McGurn of the Wall Street Journal, every Medal of Honor awarded during these two conflicts has been awarded for saving life. Not one has been awarded for inflicting casualties on the enemy. Not one. Gen. George Patton once famously said, “The object of war is not to die for your country but to make the other guy die for his.” When we think of heroism in battle, we used to think of our boys storming the beaches of Normandy under withering fire, climbing the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc while enemy soldiers fired straight down on them, and tossing grenades into pill boxes to take out gun emplacements. That kind of

heroism has apparently become passe when it comes to awarding the Medal of Honor.

We now award it only for preventing casualties, not for inflicting them. So the question is this: when are we going to start awarding the Medal of Honor once again for soldiers who kill people and break things so our families can sleep safely at night? I would suggest our culture has become so feminized that we have become squeamish at the thought of the valor that is expressed in killing enemy soldiers through acts of bravery. We know instinctively that we should honor courage, but shy away from honoring courage if it results in the taking of life rather than in just the saving of life. So we find it safe to honor those who throw themselves on a grenade to save their buddies. (Fischer)

Several conclusions can be drawn from this statement. The first is the obvious androcentric view of the military. Fischer refers to the soldiers being “our boys” and equates the action of killing as a necessary act to ensure safety. The latter is an apparent tactic of right-leaning, pro-war music videos. What is worth noting is that Fischer sees an inclusive, moderate society that attempts conflict resolution before conflict escalation as “feminized.” Implicit in this assessment is the idea that the female is the weaker sex. Notice it is the action of “killing” and “breaking things” that supposedly keep American families safe at night.

Up until this point, even the more left-leaning music videos avoided soldiers who were the least bit “feminized.” I place quotations around the phrase in order to denote that I am using the phrase in an essentialist manner. The soldiers in Madonna’s music video retained the traditional martial body language of previous depictions of soldiers and the soldier in Green Day’s video adhered to the traditional image of the heterosexual soldier. These videos beg the

question: where does a “feminized” soldier fit into the mold? Or even more so, where does a gay soldier belong in the cachet of wartime music videos? Because the proponents of the military’s ban on gay men and lesbian women work within an essentialist paradigm, homosexuality is viewed as a reversal of gender norms. Gay men are “feminine” and lesbian women are “masculine.” In their study of the religious right’s ex-gay movement, Christine M. Robison and Sue E. Spivey concluded that the anti-gay movement sought to make the argument that “justifies male dominance and socializes men and women into polarized, hierarchical gender identities. In interaction, scripting gendered homosocial and heterosexual relations reinforces hegemonic masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, and gender polarity” (669). Opponents of openly gay men and women soldiers base their argument in a strict gendered dichotomy that views sexuality as integral to gender identity. However, Madonna’s “American Life” video and Green Day’s “Wake Me Up When September Ends” video adhere to essentialist gender norms. The image of the soldier remains similar in videos by Madonna, Toby Keith, Against Me! And Darryl Worley.

The reality of current political trends was not accurately portrayed in the music videos. Women have been serving along with men for years and the dialogue about openly gay soldiers serving in the military had been underway since the early nineties. Yet it wasn’t until 2010 that these depictions etched themselves onto the collective popular cultural landscape of America. Lady Gaga’s “Alejandro” video broke ground for its imagery of soldiers wearing stilettos, dancing sexually with other men and being commanded by a militant matriarch. Both in her artistic and personal life, the artist known as Lady Gaga galvanized a grassroots movement to see the end of the military’s policy that banned gay and lesbian soldiers from serving openly. Lady

Gaga's "Alejandro" video addresses the scarcely discussed gay soldier. The video discusses a specific policy issue. The "pro" and "anti" war music videos portrayed different political positions on the Iraq War, but neither addressed specific legislative policies. The music video for "Alejandro" is an integral part of Lady Gaga's effort to see "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" repealed. Before analyzing the actual text, it is first important to provide a brief history on the hegemonic masculinity that is enshrined in the image of the soldier, as well as the attitude Americans have toward openly gay men and lesbian women serving in the military.

In his article on gender relations in the US Navy, F.J. Barrett notes that "specific patterns of hegemonic masculinity" are integral elements of the construction of the military (132). The military acts as a bastion for a very particular understanding of what it means to "be a man" that excludes effeminate men, women and homosexuals. The masculine mythology became threatened by social issues that tempted to endanger the authority of the established patriarchy. In her article "Make Room for Daddy: Masculinity and Emergent Homophobia in Neopatriarchal Politics," Arlene Stein argues that the "arena of masculinity" has been infiltrated by a plethora of social changes that "call patriarchal authority into question" and "question the naturalness of male dominance" (605). The cracks in the aegis of hegemonic masculinity have led to opposition against any deviation from the orthodox masculine, including gayness. That a gay man could be a member of an institution that preserved the ideal masculine hegemony is the cause of fear: that a gay couple could be affiliated with the armed services is a cause of terror and anxiety.

Decades before the military's policy that barred openly gay men and women from serving, the federal government attempted to marginalize sexual minorities in order to perpetuate

the conventional and understood notion of ethical conduct. In his article, “Lifting the Ban on Gays in the Civil Service: Federal Policy toward Gay and Lesbian Employees since the Cold War,” Gregory Lewis writes of the 1940s and succeeding decades, “The federal government has traditionally required that its employees be of good moral character, a standard that historically excluded homosexuals” (387). Yet a change in tone regarding gay and lesbian employees of the federal government occurred when Bill Clinton ascended to the White House in 1993. This promising momentum was eventually diluted into the highly maligned “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, as Rodger Streitmatter chronicles in his book, *From “Perverts” to “Fab Five”: The Media’s Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians*:

The new president, a scant nine days after taking office, directed his secretary of defense to prepare a written policy that would, once and for all, end the discrimination based on sexual orientation that kept gays from serving in the armed forces. Then the flags stopped waving. Clinton’s proposal was opposed by a formidable coalition composed of all members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a sizeable number of U.S. senators and representatives – nearly as many Democrats as Republicans. (65)

The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy would be the product of Clinton’s botched attempts at ending America’s tarnished history on gay and lesbian rights:

By the end of the year, Clinton had abandoned his initial proposal and replaced it with a very different one, which Congress quickly approved. Under the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, military officials wouldn’t *ask* new recruits about their sexual orientation, which

meant that gay soldiers would be allowed to serve as long as they didn't *tell* anyone in the armed forces about their sexuality. (65)

Even the highly compromised bill, which was denounced by gay activists as an “outright betrayal” (Streitmatter 66), did not manage to evade criticism and controversy by those seeking to legislate morality and eternalize the heteronormative patriarchy. These conservative critics understood the potency of regulating and maintaining influence and power by dictating the role of men and their relationship to institutions of power. Sociologists R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt note that “The concept of hegemonic masculinity is not intended as a catchall nor as a prime cause; it is a means of grasping a certain dynamic within the social process” (841). In the case of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” the dynamic in question was the primacy of the heterosexual masculine male as the protector and leader of the nation. Connell and Messerschmidt claim that hegemonic gender dynamics are used to express “widespread ideals, fantasies and desires” (838). Those who opposed allowing gay men and lesbian women to serve openly positioned their argument implicitly as a threat to traditional masculinity. They did not overtly argue that gay men would demolish the hegemony of the patriarchy; instead they asserted that openly gay men in the military were “disruptive in so many ways that it would be impossible for the armed forces, if their ranks were officially opened to homosexuals, to function effectively” (Streitmatter 66). The policy became the law of the land and the fear of gayness seemed temporarily alleviated.

Lady Gaga's musical video response to the military's ban on gay and lesbian members arrived at a fundamentally different place in American history than the policy's public genesis.

“Alejandro” debuted at a time when the idea of gay men and lesbian women serving their country openly was no longer marred with controversy and hysteria and instead was accepted by both political leaders and the voting public at large. The year 2008 was animated by the electric primary battle over the Democratic nomination for President between Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards. All three candidates painted themselves as staunch advocates for overturning the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy (Long). The American public overwhelmingly supported allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military, with one Washington Post poll indicating three quarters of the nation believed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” should be eliminated (Dropp and Cohen). The cultural shift on the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was indicative that the image of the hyper-masculine straight male soldier was losing its hegemony.

Senator Barack Obama became President Obama in 2008 and continued his campaign promise of eliminating the policy known as “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.” His 2010 State of the Union address was a vehicle used to fully state his robust support for repealing the policy. The President spoke eloquently and fiercely, “I will work with Congress and our military to finally repeal the law that denies gay Americans the right to serve the country they love because of who they are” (CNN Politics). The President viewed gay and lesbian soldiers as equally honorable to their heterosexual counterparts, proving that the obsession with duty as an act of honor transcended sexual orientation. Throughout the legislative year of 2010, the battle for repeal was animated by heated and loaded rhetoric from advocates and opponents of repeal alike. Despite the overwhelming public support, Republicans continued to delay the process of repeal. Popular

culture collided with politics directly when Lady Gaga began her crusade to ensure the repeal of the policy.

The “Alejandro” music video was released June 7, 2010, but Lady Gaga’s political advocacy extended beyond the frame of the television. On the eve of the first attempted vote to repeal the policy, the artists traveled to Maine to spearhead a rally outside of Portland. Maine’s two senators were cited as moderate Republicans who could provide the numbers to successfully repeal the policy (Madison). Lady Gaga also made a public call on the *Ellen Degeneres Show* to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to request a vote to repeal the policy be held in the Senate (Kreps). In the most obvious public event, Lady Gaga attended the MTV Music Video with soldiers who were dismissed under the policy (Harmon). Though the various media appearances and speeches highlight the dedication of the artist’s fight to repeal the policy, it was her music video that brought the image of the gay soldier to the mainstream.

“Alejandro” was directed by photographer Steven Klein and dedicated to Lady Gaga’s gay fans (Brady). In his article, “I’m Not Your Babe: ‘Alejandro’ and the Gaga Narrative,” music critic Oscar Moralde described the video as a combination of “bizarre and beautiful cocktail fetish and fascist imagery” (2010). While Moralde explored the public persona of the artist in his article, the content of the video begs for an analysis of gender, sexuality and dominance in military culture. The artist’s contributions to ending the military’s ban on gay and lesbian soldiers, combined with the material in the music video for “Alejandro,” make for a text that yearns for liberation from the restrictive hierarchy of the military and religion.

The video's opening salvo sets the tone for the video's combination of militant prowess and hermaphroditic sexuality. Behind a black screen, the title of the video emerges in blocked, bold white letters. In between the transitions from the artist to the director's name, shots of lethargic soldiers lounging around an open room fill the screen. Amid the sea of soldiers, who are adorned in what appears to be uniforms inspired by the Soviet Army, a single soldier sits cross-legged at a desk. Unlike his comrades, this soldier's legs are wrapped in fishnet stocking and his cap is slightly tilted. The image is highly eroticized, and as an entire video, "Alejandro" is far more sexual than any other video surveyed. Diane Railton and Paul Watson sum up the politics of sexuality and pornographic imagery in music videos:

Indeed, to some extent this exhibition of the sexualized body in music video is inevitable insofar as its primary function is to promote songs which themselves often contain narratives of romantic love, tales of sexual yearning or simply accounts of sex itself. The fact that such sexualized displays may be predictable does not, however, lessen their significance. Quite the contrary, far from neutralizing their political charge, it is the very ubiquity of music videos and the apparent inevitability of their eroticized content that makes them a particularly fertile cultural resource in the attempt to understand the link between forms of representation and the way those representations define, delimit or expand ways of being in the world. As we have argued elsewhere, the display of the sexualized body as an object of desire is crucial to music video's economies of both pleasure and profit. (115)

The soldiers of the “Alejandro” video are worlds removed from the images of soldiers that become cultural cornerstones during the Reagan era. The large muscles, grizzly facial hair and chiseled jaw are replaced by slender and delicate curves in “Alejandro.”

The scene shifts to a bridge of soldiers, clad in leather shorts and army boots, making their way down a corridor. Their movement is a hybrid of a traditional march and choreographed dancing. From above, Gaga watches with black goggles concealing her eyes. The male gaze is reversed. The soldiers are objects of Lady Gaga’s eyes, which are concealed. The video subverts the orthodox image of soldiers carrying their comrade in a coffin. Gaga marches in front of the soldiers with a macabre heart held in her hands. Like Carrie Underwood in “Just A Dream,” Gaga is fashioned with a mourning gown as she leads the funeral march. Her platinum hair contrasts with the black attire of the soldiers. The camera zooms in on the soldiers’ eyes and they remain directed to the ground, unable to look at the female leading them.

The scene returns to Gaga in a balcony above the soldiers, who are busy executing a dance-like march. Gaga reveals her eyes to the audience, but the photography makes it apparent that the soldiers are not allowed to see her face. The soldiers engage in militaristic training, which includes an act that has them strangle each other. The soldiers, dressed in bodies and shorts, reiterate the notion that violence is an element of masculinity. From this scene on, the important role of fashion in the video becomes explicit.

More than any other music video surveyed, the fashion and attire of “Alejandro” confront restrictive and stereotypical gender norms. The role of clothing selection cannot be

underestimated, and fashion has often held a crucial role in the world of music videos, as Carol Vernallis illustrates:

Like settings, costumes in music video fulfill a number of functions – a quick sketch of a character type or a general statement about the world – before evoking a particular place inhabited by a character who possesses peculiar foibles and assets. More than advancing a story, clothing can serve to mark off the boundaries between performer, supporting characters, and view. Like the use of color in music video, which immediately signal mood, song identity, and timbre, clothing here quickly shows a character's role and its relation with others. (100-01)

The attire on display throughout the “Alejandro” music video is founded on religious regalia and military garb that resembles Soviet uniforms from the past. The fashion traditional male/female fashion dichotomy is subverted in the video. Despite the video's obsession with fashion and its relationship to gender norms, the video ultimately remains stagnant in conventional gender norms. The men are “feminized” simply by wearing stilettos. This type of gender subversion is not progressive or reactionary. It is transparent and one-dimensional. Gaga gallivants around in a bra supplemented with machine-guns. The machine-gun bra may merge the martial nature of war with the reproductive and nurturing aspect of the female breast in an attempt to present a warlike female leader, but the image of military Gaga commanding her manicured soldiers is highly vexed. For one, the soldiers must become “feminized” by wearing typical female shoes in order for Gaga to command the troops. The other problem comes in the forms of gender norms and sexuality. Does the soldiers' source of sexuality emerge from their androgynous nature? Of

course, the image could also be read as an attack on the superficiality of assigning antiquated gender norms to sexuality. The fashion of her capable soldiers is moot because Gaga is leading the brigade. The video's message could be that sexuality has no relevancy in one's ability to execute an objective, and thus "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" becomes obviously ridiculous.

In another scene, Gaga hovers above a male soldier on an army-style bed. Dressed in similar garment, Gaga dances erotically behind the male before simulating anal penetration. In both clothing and the perceived sex act, Gaga has made herself equal to the man in question. In her study of pornography, "Anal Sex Instructional Videos for Women," Michelle Carnes argues that "because the anus is neither unique to men or women (but shared by all)" the anus acts as "the equalizer" (158). Yet equality does not seem to be the intent of Gaga's motivation; instead she forcefully uses her body to control the body of the man. The following scene reveals her leading a dance among the soldiers and in the sequence's final motion, she strokes at her pelvic region as if to masturbate an imaginary phallus. Like the video's play of gender and fashion, Gaga's dance move is highly problematic. She has positioned herself as the leader of the dance, and equalizes herself among her soldiers by dressing similarly; however, her salute to power comes from a very masculine action. If the intent is to make sexuality and gender moot in order to mock the policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," it is worth noting that Gaga exercises her power by simulating male masturbation.

Gender is not the only fixation that the fashion of the video has. Religious iconography becomes more apparent towards the video's final arc. Against a leather bed, Gaga is dressed in a latex habit meant to evoke the imagery of Catholicism. Lisa A. Lewis defined the role of the

Catholic Church in Madonna's music videos as a "regime of sexual repression that must be resisted" (137-38). That same line of criticism is applicable to the religious imagery in the "Alejandro" video. In the video's climax, Gaga is consumed by a mass of bellicose soldiers, who adamantly attack at her and tear at her limbs. A blood-red cross (Moralde calls "the cross of Gaga") stands in opposition to the stark white nun outfit the singer wears as submits to the ferocious crowd of soldiers. The oppressive force of religion becomes depleted by the sheer will of the soldiers. The role of religion has been unequivocal in the delay of gay and lesbian rights, and Gaga's video ends with the singer relinquishing her habit-like gown and submitting to the crowd of soldiers as they consume her. The message of victory against groups like the Family Research Council remains apparent as her face evaporates into the screen before the clip ends.

Asides from the homoeroticism of the music video, another element that elicits commentary is the figurehead that Lady Gaga portrays in the video. As a character defined as "icy and remote, yet with a beckoning sexuality corralled by authority and power" (Moralde), Gaga serves the militant matriarch over the brigade of soldiers who parade, dance and fight throughout the music video. While earlier videos such as Madonna's "Express Yourself" and Pat Benatar's "Love Is A Battlefield" premised themselves on a liberated female leader, few have attempted to paint an army led by a single woman. The role of a female leader in Gaga's video is more reflective of the society that consumed the video. Hillary Clinton garnered several primary victories in the 2008 presidential election and Nancy Pelosi had established herself as a potent Speaker of the House. During the year "Alejandro" was released, Hillary Clinton served as the third female Secretary of State while Janet Napolitano headed the Department of Homeland

Security. The roles women played in government institutions and the influence women were exercising in policy and military issues were becoming less of a novelty and more of a reality.

Ultimately, “Alejandro” produces more questions than answers in its relationship to gender and power. Is the female leader only capable of influencing and controlling her army when the members of the army are “feminized”? Could a female position herself as a militant chief in softer hues and fabric or is the obvious correlation between leather and dominance essential? Is it necessary for a female to adopt an aegis or façade of masculinity in order to lead? The video, and Gaga herself, could be simply dismissing any notion of gendered dichotomy with the video. The dearth of precedence placed on gender conventions and stereotypes of sexuality become frequent citations for proponents of repealing the military’s gay-ban policy. In blurring, contorting or simply omitting gender conventions and their relations to power, “Alejandro” attempts to become the music video equivalent of repeal proponents’ argument.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the music videos released during the era of the Iraq War tend to the multitude of concerns faced by the American electorate. Issues of national security, pro and anti-war movements and gender relations among military ranks are sources of inspiration and topics addressed by various artists. The music videos act as reflections of the personal politics of the artists and how those artists interpret and react to the established, institutionalized political power. Toby Keith's work echoed the sentiment of the Bush Administration, while Green Day's acted as the antithesis of the administration. Lady Gaga's rally to repeal the military's policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" manifested itself in a video that questions the validity of gender norms and sexuality in relation to the military's professionalism. By incorporating images from America's collective cultural psyche (the folded flag, military garb, funeral scenes, etc.) and merging them with contemporary contentions, the music videos of the Iraq War area act as vital voices in America's dialogue concerning the Iraq War and relationship to the military and politics in general.

This project generates further questions to explore, including a study of audience reaction and reception to the music videos. This can be a difficult task given the nature of how music videos are tracked. Unlike songs and albums, there is no chart for following the popularity of music videos. Countdown television shows do exist, but they are genre-specific. There is no countdown show that is inclusive of all genres. Countdown shows also abbreviate music videos that extend beyond a certain amount of time in order to fit their format. This causes a problem

for lengthy music videos such as Green Day's "Wake Me Up When September Ends" and Lady Gaga's "Alejandro." The number of views on YouTube appears to be insightful; however, there are a number of problems with this system. For one, some music videos were released before the advent of YouTube. The comments made on these videos are not indicative of the audience's reaction at the time of the music video's release. In a two year time period, the public opinion of something as controversial as war can dramatically shift. Ergo, the response to the jingoism of Toby Keith's video cannot be gauged by comments made in 2005. Views of a video can also be diluted when various users upload the same video. Madonna's original video for "American Life" was not released until years after its intended date and it was only released via the internet. Finding an audience response to a video that was not released is a near impossible task.

This project also brings into question the relevancy of music videos. Where does the music video fit into the modern popular culture sphere? Music television channels are rapidly becoming infiltrated by reality television shows and the popularity of music videos on stations like MTV is on the decline. MTV UK's director television, Heather Jones, has stated, "Yes, of course there was a time when if you wanted to see a music video you would go to MTV. Now we're very aware that you have to go online" (Sharp). New technology is making accessing the internet more efficient than ever before. The smart phone's ability to connect a user to the internet without the assistance of a computer has given the music video a new mobility. But how many users watch music videos on their smart phones? Furthermore, how many music videos are viewed on the internet? It is an area that is in need of a "huge amount of research," according to Jones (Sharp). This research is crucial to understanding the role of music videos in the public

arena. If music videos are losing their relevancy and popularity in popular culture, the effect they have on an audience could be nonexistent.

The relationship between image and music is another point of further inquiry. For tactical reasons, I omitted most work relating to lyrics and music from my analysis. However, the role of the actual songs and their relationship to the music video is an area worth exploring. The lyrical content of Worley and Keith's songs supplement the imagery of patriotism and military intervention; however, the videos for Green Day's "Wake Me Up When September Ends" and Lady Gaga's "Alejandro" deviate from the lyrical content of their respective songs. Topics such as narrative in relationship to song structure and lyrics, framing and editing of a video to fit the song's structure and how lyrics and music influence the audience's interpretation of a music video deserve critical attention. Andrew Goodwin's book *Dancing In the Distraction Factory* offers a solid foundation for further work on the subject.

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