

# Reading Contemporary "Bad Girls": The Transgressions and Triumphs of Madonna's "What It Feels Like For a Girl"

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## Abstract

Through an analysis of Madonna's "What it Feels Like for a Girl," I problematize the impulse to dismiss women who transgress boundaries and challenge gender norms in spite of their complicity within systems of power and privilege.

## Résumé

Par l'entremise d'une analyse de la chanson de Madonna 'What it Feels Like for a Girl', je problématise l'impulsion qu'on a de ne pas tenir compte des femmes qui transgressent les limites et défient les normes assignées à chacun des sexes en dépit de leur complicité à l'intérieur de systèmes de pouvoir et de privilèges.

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## Introduction

The "bad girl" figure plays a predominant, but often ambiguous, role in popular culture. These ambiguities lie in the multiple interpretations of what it means to be "bad": the seemingly symbiotic connection between being "bad" and highly sexualized, the actions/ behaviours for which she is labeled a "bad girl," and a "bad girl's" prevailing impact on the world. Turning to the United States (US) pop icon Madonna, and the "bad girl" figures she presents in the music video and stage performances of her song, "What it Feels Like for a Girl," I offer a response to and intervention in current debates on how to read contemporary "bad girl" figures. Beginning with a contextual analysis of the televised *Too Much For Much* episode where the video content and whether or not the video should be banned from, or restricted to a later hour in rotation on the Canadian specialty television channel MuchMusic was initially debated, I call into question the impulse (by some feminists) to dismiss women pop stars like Madonna who transgress boundaries and challenge gender norms, in spite of their own complicity within traditional systems of power and privilege. Rather than rejecting outright the "bad girl" figures and the controversy caused by Madonna's behaviour in these performances as simply another marketing strategy, I suggest a shift in focus towards the possibilities of an alternative interpretation of these "bad girls," as well as a critique of reading practices which continue to be reliant upon conventional ideals of morality, heteronormative codes, and the perpetuation of power relations based on gender inequalities and binary oppositions.

Drawing on Donna Haraway's (1991) "Cyborg Manifesto," Jennifer González's (2000) understanding of imaginary cyborgs as an empowering metaphor particularly for women,

and Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of the male gaze, I argue that in Madonna's performances of "What it Feels Like For a Girl" she plays with the boundaries between reality and fantasy, embracing her cyborgian self as a means to critique and take on the world - "a man's world." As part of this process, and through her use of fantasy and the "bad girl" trope, the audience is introduced to Madonna's "imaginary representations of cyborgs" and more importantly, to how these imaginary cyborgs "take over when [her] traditional bod[y] fail[s]" (González 2000, 61). By embracing the "bad girl" and her mythical abilities to respond to the "horrific" experiences of "being a girl in this world," Madonna challenges the inequalities and injustices of such realities. This make-believe narrative captures the terrors, anxieties, and pleasures of resisting normative ideas and queering gender performances resulting in the transgression and transformation of what it feels like for a girl. Through a close reading of the music, images, lyrics, and characters presented in the music video and two stage performances of "What it Feels Like For a Girl," I argue that Madonna's "bad girls" may also be read as imaginary cyborgs who defy the male gaze and subsequently, in disrupting the gaze, negate its power.

### **Too Much for Much**

In March 2001 Kim Cooke, then Managing Director for Warner Brothers, Deborah Powell, a representative from the organization FACT (Fathers are Capable Too), Jane Stevenson (*Toronto Sun* columnist), Kieran Grant (*Toronto Sun* music columnist), and I were invited to participate as part of an expert panel for MuchMusic's television show *Too Much For Much*, offering our interpretations of the previously unaired music video for "What it Feels Like for a Girl." Along with viewers, fans, and the host, George Stroumboulopoulos, we discussed, via a variety of interactive media technologies (email, websites, fax, mail, phone), the controversy surrounding the video, resulting from its content. Unlike the previous controversies concerning sex, sexuality, and cultural appropriation, Madonna's music video for "What it Feels Like for a Girl" (2001) was initially banned and/or censored by the US-

based specialty channels MTV and VH1 because of its graphic use of violent imagery. Considering its reception in the United States, *Too Much For Much* offered viewers a chance to participate in the decision around whether or not the music video was "too violent" or "too graphic" to air on MuchMusic.<sup>1</sup>

Host George Stroumboulopoulos initiated the on-air discussion with a contextualization of Madonna's previous controversy surrounding the video for "Justify My Love" and some reasoning for why "What it Feels Like for a Girl" should be included as it addressed concerns related to gender. Stroumboulopoulos' introduction concluded with him looking into the camera to directly address the viewing audience, asking "What do you think?" What followed was the debut airing of "What it Feels Like for a Girl" on MuchMusic.

### **"What it Feels Like..."**

The first thing one notices about the video is that a dance remix version of the song has replaced the original released in 2000 on Madonna's album, *Music*. The difference between the two, a ballad pop song and a pulsating dance remix, signifies to the audience a change in what the music conveys, how it affects the listener, and a new way of thinking about "what it feels like for a girl." Musically, the remix creates a film soundtrack sound rather than a typical pop song from the album, which has an immediate affect on the reading of the video. The idea of the remix itself is indeed a cyborgian entity in that it is a synthesis of different forms of musicality and a combining of the "organic" song with "technology." But how does the change in music contribute to the viewer's interpretation of the video content? Is one seduced to listen to the song differently? What do these new readings mean for Madonna's "proto-pop feminist anthem" (O'Brien 2003, 122)? Does the musical track - pulsating, quick tempo, heavy-bass, dance remix - heighten our reading? Does Madonna perpetuate or confront the problematic notion of a "sisterhood" experience based on gender oppression? Is her critique of gender norms valid in spite of the pitfalls of identity politics?

Madonna employs musical discourse to produce and share her knowledge claims. The

creation of knowledge claims within the realm of fantasy allows one to move beyond the confines of material reality. Fantastical places, events, bodies, stories, provide the means to reflect on and/or reinterpret lived experience provoking new readings of one's reality. Music functions well in these contexts because of its enigmatic qualities and its reception. How one determines musical meaning is a subjective process, and yet, one's interpretations are bound by experience, socialization, and learned reading practices.

Filled with explicit images of the daily harsh realities for a girl, the video portrays examples of sexual harassment, poverty, exclusion, violence, police oppression, sexism, and misogyny within a fictional (yet real) narrative. Drawing on the real and imaginary, using metaphor, symbolism, and affect, Madonna responds to these circumstances by becoming a "bad girl." This role-play enables Madonna to enact a different kind of behaviour - behaviour read and understood as socially inappropriate for a girl/woman. Because of its inappropriate and violent nature, Madonna's actions are surprising and unexpected to both the fictional characters to whom she reacts, as well as to the real viewing audience. Through such actions, Madonna creates counter-hegemonic knowledge claims.

Within the first few frames of the video the audience is introduced to the two protagonists - Madonna and her companion, an elderly woman. The connection between the two women becomes more apparent as the narrative progresses; theirs I read as an intergenerational relationship rather than a familial one. These women share experiences of oppression, pleasure, pain, and a desire for freedom. But it is Madonna who offers a means to achieve this state - a purely mythical state - as the two begin their journey. From the putting on of their armour - for Madonna this means the bullet proof vest, her blue coveralls, her spiked stilettos, her black leather driving gloves, her earrings, and for the elderly woman this means putting on her glasses, strapping on her leg brace, buckling up her seatbelt, and for both women the car also becomes another layer of armour - Madonna and her companion embrace their cyborgian selves. Within the

narrative of the song these characters illuminate the instability of binary categories (nature/ technology, young/ old, pleasure/ pain) and the anxieties that accompany a disregard for deeply entrenched ideologies.

At times in the video there is a reclamation of and play on particular words - language which is often used to oppress - words such as "pussy," appearing on the front license plate of Madonna's car, only to have the back plate spell out the word "cat." When Madonna arrives at the senior's complex to pick up her companion, a sign above the door reads, "Old Kuntz Guest House." The play is on the word "cunt" and all its embedded meanings, insults, and abjection associated with the aging female body. The significance is emphasized as the camera pauses on the sign not allowing the viewer to look away. This language politicizes the ways women are forced to negotiate the world as one's identity and value change with age. By drawing viewers' attention to these words it forces us to consider their meaning in more complex ways. Reclaiming language that is used to oppress and silence women is one way to confront and challenge patriarchal relations of power. Michel Foucault (1978) argues language can be both enabling and constraining. Here, in calling attention to the words "pussy" and "cunt" and manipulating and playing with words such as "cat" and "lady," Madonna reclaims these words and contests their signified gendered meanings.

Madonna's decision about which lyrics to include and which to omit is another significant use of language. Rather than embedding all the lyrics from the original song to convey the story, Madonna makes use of metaphorical images and musical codes. The lyrics are pared down so the listener hears only the chorus - "Do you know what it feels like for a girl. Do you know what it feels like in this world for a girl?" - and the prelude to the song, a segment of dialogue from the 1993 film *The Cement Garden*<sup>2</sup>: "Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short; wear shirts and boots, cause it's okay to be a boy. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading. Cause you think that being a girl is degrading. But secretly, you'd love to know what it's like. Wouldn't you?"

There are two moments in the video where the prelude is heard. Actor Charlotte Gainsbourg speaks about how it is okay for girls to take on some of the conventions of being a boy, but how a boy's desire of wanting to know what it feels like to be a girl is forbidden - because being a girl is degrading. The combination of lyrics and dialogue conveys the naturalization of conventional gender categories ("being a boy"/ "for a girl"), the consequences of transgressing these norms ("you think being a girl is degrading"), the desire to perform the other ("secretly you'd love to know what it's like"), and a lack of understanding or willingness to know the affect of being a girl ("in this world"). The film clip occurs consistently over sixteen measures and is accompanied by more subdued music, drawing attention to the dialogue. At the conclusion of these sections there is a dramatic break in the music creating a tension that is resolved slightly on the downbeat of the next bar. Throughout the song however, there is a continuous building of musical tension, broken only as the video comes to an end.

The sequence of events is not chronological. Prior to the images of Madonna and her companion in their preparation stages, Madonna purposefully drives into another vehicle with three men inside who, when stopped at a traffic light just prior, make sexual gestures towards the women. Following this sequence, Madonna steps out of the car holding a Taser and walks towards a man in a business suit at an automatic bank machine. In the next frame he is on the ground and Madonna walks back towards the car with fistfuls of cash in her hand dropping money without seeming to care. This "senseless" act becomes much more meaningful in the following sequence as Madonna literally stuffs the money into a waitress' pocket at a diner. These actions comment on class struggles, and the inequity of power between men and women in the working world. Not only is Madonna taking from the rich to give to the poor, she draws attention to the ghettoization of women in low paying jobs.

As the women leave the diner, Madonna sideswipes a police car with both officers standing next to it, eating take out. The

two white male police officers stare in disbelief as Madonna pulls up alongside them, takes out a silver pistol, aims at their heads pulling the trigger twice. A stream of water hits between the officers' eyes. The music used as Madonna shoots the water gun sounds directly on the beat for emphasis, yet the sounds are playful, not foreboding. The gun can easily be read as the all-powerful phallus; however, the water is slightly more ambiguous. On one hand, the liquid may represent "sperm" with Madonna holding the phallus and "ejaculating" into the officers' faces. With this action she certainly disrupts conventional power relations, authority, and the law of the father. On the other hand, the gun shoots streams of water not bullets, and despite the metaphoric violence, Madonna does not kill - her actions are startling, provocative, and challenging, but not literally violent. These outcomes challenge the naïve readings that this video is merely about retaliation; Madonna is playing with the relationship between power and unearned privilege and the fear and anxieties associated with the loss of such power.

As the police begin to chase the women, Madonna reverses into their vehicle disabling the car by activating their air bags. The women drive off and into a parking lot where a group of boys are playing hockey - there are no girls playing here. Both implicit and explicit issues of exclusion and privilege continue throughout the video, and her ongoing critique of brotherhood and male privilege even reflect back to examples evident in childhood. Next Madonna drives the vehicle through the hockey game knocking down and running over several of the boys. At the end of the parking lot she stops, drops her fries into a garbage can and speeds off. During these moments the images of the sexual harassment, the bank machine incident, and the disruption of the hockey game, Madonna sings, "Do you know what it feels like for a girl in this world." The singing of the chorus stops altogether during the sequence with the police officers - a comment on the silencing effect of the law.

The next sequence is initially shot from above; the screen is filled by a red sports car with a painted firebird on the hood being fueled by its owner at a petrol station. As the owner

focuses on filling his tank, Madonna assists the elderly woman out of their wrecked car and into his car. Madonna jump starts the engine and pulls away. The gas hose is left flailing as fuel spills all over and the owner chases after the car. Madonna turns the car around, runs the owner down, speeds off but then stops, lights her Zippo, and drops it onto the trail of gas. The explosion is witnessed through reflections in the car windows.

At this moment in the song the audience is taken back in time, back to a sequence of Madonna and her companion preparing for their ride. Madonna slams the door of her motel room causing the last digit in the room number to invert revealing 666 - the mark of evil, alluding to women as evil - as being in cohorts with Satan in order to deceive and lure men to their deaths. Madonna's tattoos - a smoking gun on the inside of her left forearm, a cross on the inside of her right forearm which reads "no surrender" and the word "loved" on the back of her neck are revealed. The elderly woman, who may look catatonic, shows signs of agency. As she watches a vehicle crash on television she squeezes her armchair in excitement, preparing herself for what she knows will come. Both times the film clip plays the audience is privileged to these preparation stages. The music plays an essential role here in letting us know that both women are fully aware. In the final segment of the video Madonna revs the engine and speeds towards a pole. The wings of the firebird on the hood rise up on impact, wrapping around the pole and seemingly taking flight. As the tension builds with the use of techniques such as sound layering, silent pauses, pushing the beat, quick image changes and heightening the pitch, the audience is finally given release as the women crash into the pole and the wings lift.

Throughout the video Madonna strategically embraces the "bad girl" metaphor and all its symbolism as a strategy to reveal hegemonic gender norms and to challenge the perpetuation of such norms within popular discourses. Although reminiscent of other instances where women's lives must end once they have stepped outside the hegemonic gender roles, the final image can be interpreted

as a smashing of tradition and freedom through flight or release. The video has a non-linear narrative emphasizing the need to break out of the norm - it is not organic. This non-sequential effect aids the viewer in understanding that much of what is going on in the narrative is "unnatural." Madonna is playing with the "nature of things." The images in the video create jarring effects because Madonna - a woman - has taken on roles and actions typically reserved for men. And although the video may seem to cry out retaliation, it provokes much more than this. In donning a conventionally aggressive masculine role which includes specific kinds of freedoms and privileges, Madonna presents the stark contrast between gendered roles. By including the elderly woman who appears catatonic along for the ride, there is a struggle to wake her from this state, to release her from an entrenched tradition. Another aspect of this jarring effect occurs at the video's conclusion when the final crash shakes the audience out of the visual trance.

### Reactions

Initial reactions from panelists, audience members, and fans included adjectives such as cheeky, irreverent, extreme, violent, degrading, victimizing, self-indulgent, and evil. This language illustrates diverse reactions to the video, as well as to Madonna. As the responses continued throughout the broadcast it became evident that Madonna had once again succeeded in provoking controversy and debate concerning hegemonic ideas about women's roles in society and in popular culture. In spite of differing opinions about the content of the video, there was agreement that Madonna challenged some normative strong holds.

One of the first issues raised was the double standard imposed upon women concerning violence and sex in music videos. If a video features a male artist, or is in a genre engendering a masculine identity or feel, such as rock or hip hop, portrayals of graphic violence and explicit sexuality are questioned less, especially if the violence is perpetuated by a man and it is women who are highly sexualized as objects or commodities to be possessed. The romanticization of violence and

sex is often considered an integral component of commercially successful videos for such genres and do not seem out of place or controversial. However, when a woman commits violent acts, audiences tend to respond in a different, often contemptuous manner. During *Too Much for Much*, many of these attitudes surfaced. For example, Stevenson described Madonna as self-indulgent, while another interactive viewer claimed Madonna was "masturbating her ego again." Comments like these are problematic in that they contribute to a discourse of morality for women, a discourse that dramatically differs for men. More importantly, these are the very ideas that Madonna calls into question within the narrative of the song and the video.

In her assessment, Powell suggested that although Madonna sings about the degradation of women in the song, she "brings out an awareness that women are also violent" and that too often women are only seen as victims. Although Powell's argument that women are often read as victims within larger social discourses is a legitimate concern, her reading of this video demonstrates a lack of understanding concerning the mythical and fantastical proportions of Madonna's actions, and her use of metaphor and symbolism to challenge what she sees as shared experiences of many girls/women. Powell reads the video straight without realizing the broader context and playfulness of "What it Feels Like for a Girl" and the character of Madonna herself.

Contrary to Powell, Grant suggested that Madonna was acting out a "sisterhood of destruction" as a form of retaliation to protest the exclusion of women, most apparent to him during the scene where she runs over the boys playing hockey. From Grant's comments, it seems that the process of identification with some of the supporting characters plays an important role in how one interprets and responds to the actions in the video. As many theorists have argued, one's experience, socialization, and context become an essential tool in reading media. During the televised conversation I wondered about Grant's identification with the young boys playing hockey and why he chose not to identify with

Madonna's character. Also there did not seem to be consensus around the idea of retaliation. For one audience member, although there were a number of meaningful and recognizable fear-inducing symbols with which he could identify (i.e., 666), he stated, "there was nothing that made me scared to be a man."

Another important figure taken up by both panelists and the interactive audience was Madonna's companion. One viewer suggested the character was a grandmother and Madonna represented a younger version of her. Grant suggested some sort of cathartic exchange between "the rebel Madonna and the granny" had occurred and was an important component of determining the significance of their violent actions. My reading of the relationship as an intergenerational one moves beyond a purely self-reflective response and familial connection to something more complex, illuminating experiences burdened with substantial history of gender inequality and subordination - a history that impacts current lived experiences of women and girls - but also a history of resistance.

### **Fantasy, Responsibility, and Cyborgs**

Central to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is an argument for an interjection of irony, for "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" and for "responsibility in their construction" (1991, 150). By arguing for an ethics of responsibility, Haraway reframes the relationship between subject and object as dialectical, allowing for more complex and productive interpretations of the cyborg. Haraway insists "[t]he machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they" (1991, 180). It is with this sense of responsibility in mind that I apply the cyborg metaphor to Madonna's "What it Feels Like for a Girl."

According to Haraway a cyborg is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991, 149). The cyborg embodies both reality and fantasy - it is constructed from lived realities and fantasies and thus, it can "[n]o longer [be] structured by

the polarity of public and private" (1991, 151). In the video for "What it Feels Like..." there are representations and the fusion of reality and fantasy as a means to call into question such categories and the power relations constituted through narrowly articulated dichotomies. The cyborg creates the potential for a disruption of dualistic categories of male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, self/other. And yet, cyborg bodies (like Madonna's body) are somewhat ambiguous; there is no one specific definition that applies to all cyborgs (nor to the many reinventions of Madonna). Adaptation of the cyborg, its contextualization, and its determined site gives it meaning leading to contradictory and fragmented interpretations. In other words, cyborgs may be used to re-interpret or transform gendered power relations, but in some moments the cyborg can also be used as a tool to restrict and limit the social, cultural, and political movements of women.

Within a capitalist framework the cyborg often becomes a symbol of increasing efficiency, productivity, and sterility. As a result the cyborg is sometimes "more trapped by her mechanical parts than liberated by them" (González 2000, 61). In many commercial Hollywood films cyborgs obey rather than disrupt conventional categories of femininity/masculinity. A cyborg gendered female often performs the traditional female categories - virgin/mother or whore - whose goals, despite however heroic or villainous, can only be reached through subjugation, purification and/or death (i.e., Maria from *Metropolis* (1927), Rachael from *Blade Runner* (1991), Ripley from *Alien 3* (1992), the Borg Queen from *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), Trinity from *Matrix Revolutions* (2004), Pam from *Death Proof* (2007)). This argument could also be made around the final scene when Madonna wraps the car around the pole. With Madonna, however, it is essential to understand that symbolically Madonna never dies, rather she always re-invents herself. The final scene is not a death scene, rather it offers change and renewal.

In contrast, a cyborg gendered male is often understood as a powerful hero (the protagonist) or villain (the antagonist) rationally using logic, cunning and physical aggression to

achieve his ultimate goals (i.e., Luke/Darth Vader from *Star Wars* (1977), Picard from *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), Neo/Smith from *The Matrix Revolutions* (2004), Stuntman Mike in *Death Proof* (2007)). Here too, these signifiers can be mapped onto Madonna and her companion. They play both protagonist and antagonist, and draw on many signifiers understood as masculine.

The appropriation of the cyborgian body is also evident within the music industry, particularly when it comes to constructing/marketing a star identity in the feminized genre of pop. An example worth studying is in the March 6<sup>th</sup> 2001 issue of *Time Magazine*. On the cover there is a photo of singer Christina Aguilera with the caption, "The Making of Christina Aguilera." Alongside the article she is depicted as half computerized or cyborgian with the caption: "Building a 21st century star." The comments read: "Behind her music - so you want to build a teen pop star? In Aguilera's case, it started with talent. But these promotional steps didn't hurt." The captions detail how Aguilera's image was produced through Disney, online websites and marketing gimmicks. The reader is reminded that it is the industry that creates stars, particularly young female stars like Aguilera. Aguilera is stripped of all agency; literally and figuratively she is represented as a cyborg, part human and part machine, controlled by those who hold power in the music industry, primarily men. From this perspective Aguilera is just another cog in the well-oiled music industry machine.

The discourse surrounding Madonna and her "Queen of Pop" status is quite different from artists such as Aguilera. Madonna's agency concerning the construction of her identity is not in question. Madonna is both applauded and criticized for constructing an image founded in controversy, exoticism, sex, and cultural appropriation. Because she draws on archetypal figures to continually re-invent her image, one could argue Madonna reflects rather than resists hegemonic constructions of femininity. And yet, the female body, although "subordinated within institutionalized systems of power and knowledge and crisscrossed by incompatible discourses, is not fully determined by those systems of meaning" (Balsamo 1996,

39). Undeniably Madonna is a highly sexualized and objectified woman and yet, she is publicly recognized as a successful, strong business-minded subjective woman who commands all aspects of her career including her sexualized and objectified image.<sup>3</sup> Rather than being trapped by such contradictions, Madonna performs a plurality of identities, re-conceptualizing the boundaries determining the personal and political. Similar to the cyborg, used to both reinforce and challenge gender norms, Madonna's interpretations of "being a girl" are relevant in today's world.

The cyborg body as a meaning-making apparatus not only embraces impurity and infection - indeed Madonna can infect any thing - but the cyborg body also has the power to resist pure and contained bodies, and to transform the category of woman. And if Madonna's body can be read as a cyborg body, it is essential to resist the argument that Madonna either perpetuates or challenges hegemonic norms, towards a more complex analysis founded within the following questions: What happens when normative categories break down or are abandoned? What happens when traditional bodies disappoint us and imaginary cyborgs take over? When bodies begin to seep beyond their borders? Where is the resistance and empowerment of Haraway's cyborgs - the shapeshifter, the trickster - taking us? Should such categories be applied to Madonna's video and stage performances of "What it Feels Like for a Girl"?

### **Drowned World Tour**

In her *Drowned World Tour* performance (2001) Madonna continues to address ideologies of gender using both animé and material cyborg bodies. Approximately half way through the concert another remix version of "What it Feels..." begins. The focus turns to a massive screen hanging at centre stage playing a Manga *animé*. Within the animation there are numerous images of girls/women: some with super human strength, others ordinary in prom dresses; there are images of women fighting, running, chasing, being chased, being violent with each other, and being raped by a monster. At two moments the dialogue from *The Cement Garden* is played.

This time however, the accompanying music is urgent, aggressive, louder, and driving the beat. The only lyrics sung by Madonna (pre-recorded) are "for a girl" and "in this world." Diegetic sound effects<sup>4</sup> are also audible - specifically the characters' screams and moans. There are numerous moments of tension and release in the music, with the music building to a painful climax, agitated by the heightened pitch and intense drum tracks. In the final moments when one of the female characters screams out during a violent rape scenario, a male voice yells, "Hold it everyone. We have to move the cameras." The man/actor who is on top of the woman spurts out, "I'm really sorry." She replies, "No, it's all right." Then she jolts awake.

This explicit and violent animation is interesting because the story is being produced as a fictional performance within the already fictional animation. In other words, the audience is meant to believe that the violence, struggle and degradation of being a girl are fictional twice removed. Revealing the apparatus and production calls attention to the reality expressed as imaginary, and more importantly, even within a non-real world, a girl's experiences are embedded within conventional gender narratives of exploitation, power, and violence.

Toward the end of the concert the song is performed again, but this time it is similar to the album version. There are three distinguishing elements: The instrumentation uses strings and additional percussion; the dialogue is omitted; and Madonna sings the lyrics in Spanish. It is essential to call into question the reconstruction of her white American body as an exoticized "Other." This is not the first time Madonna sings in Spanish or invented this representation of herself.

As the music plays dancers appear on the candle-lit stage, all women wearing pin-stripe suit trousers, tank tops, suspenders, black leather gloves and sporting short hair or closely shaven heads; women simultaneously performing both masculine and feminine. The conventional signifiers exposing their femininity are high heels, makeup, their visible bodies, and gestures. This blurring of feminine and masculine is indeed cyborgian and the audience is given twenty-four measures of



music without Madonna's presence to gaze only on these bodies. In response they too gaze at each other and out at the audience as they wait for the real object of their desire. Then a large black box (Pandora's box) rises up from below and the sides fall open to reveal Madonna inside. The dancers' masculine signifiers contrast against Madonna's femininity, emphasizing her role as both desiring subject and object of desire. For the majority of the song she remains inside the parameters of the box while the dancers tempt her out. Once she moves outside the boundaries she too begins to dance, dancing with each woman closely, expressing her own agency and desires. As she moves from person to person they gaze at her longingly. As she leaves each one, they move off the stage until Madonna is left singing alone and the stage goes dark.

Here we are reminded of how Madonna has made queer culture consumable through a heteronormative gaze - a gaze that titillates and gives space to heterosexual male fantasy. In contemporary queer culture however, Madonna is also an important figure of resistance - she is emulated in drag, danced to in queer clubs and on the gay circuit, and represents queer women's sexual desire. Through her playful perversions Madonna (re)presents queer desire as flowing into her heteronormative practices. Madonna as "bad girl" unsettles boundaries.

### Conclusion

In the video and stage performances, Madonna embraces the "bad girl" figure in order to disrupt and challenge gender norms. She uses her cyborgian body to "represent that which cannot otherwise be represented" (González 2000, 59), to blur boundaries between real and imaginary, and to move in and out of ideological borders. Drawing on the realm of fantasy, Madonna contributes to an ongoing dialogue countering the naturalization of women's/girl's oppression through practices of exclusion, violence, capitalism, and exploitation. Through counter-hegemonic knowledge claims that depict both lived experience and fantasy, Madonna utilizes the tools of oppression to metaphorically disrupt the norms of "what it feels like for a girl." Aided by her imaginary cyborgs, Madonna defies

hegemonic gender norms, displacing the female body from its prescribed position, while simultaneously problematizing the actions associated with the masculine through humour and play.

Madonna's "bad girls" illustrate that anything from dominant society can be appropriated - anything is up for grabs. Madonna can infect anything. To blur boundaries it is imperative to be able to move freely around the contradictions of the middle without needing to resolve them. Madonna does not resolve these contradictions, she adds to them. But what then does Madonna's appropriation of the conventional do for cyborg strategies? Madonna's playful, perverted, and controversial performances calls into question points of crisis for her audience and in so doing, she opens up and cultivates new possibilities. Through Madonna's performances, it is apparent that fantasy and the cyborg have become points of intervention in popular culture. Through such interventions, "what it feels like for a girl," even a contemporary "bad girl," is redefined.

### Endnotes

1. For a discussion on MuchMusic outlining its mandates, as well as content and delivery style, refer to Pegley 2008.
2. The film is an adaptation of Ian McEwan's 1978 novel bearing the same title.
3. Marsh and West (2003).
4. Diegetic sound describes sound where the source is visible on screen.

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