CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Music Video and the Politics of Representation, by Diane Railton and Paul Watson
Authors	Sanna, Antonio
Publication date	2012-06-01
Original Citation	Sanna, A. (2012) Music Video and the Politics of Representation, by Diane Railton and Paul Watson. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 3 (Summer 2012). https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.3.09
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.3.09
Rights	© 2012, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-03 00:40:28
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1440

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

***Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, Diane Railton and Paul Watson. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011 (176 pages). ISBN: 9780748633234.**

A Review by Antonio Sanna, Università degli Studi di Cagliari (Italy)

Music Video and the Politics of Representation furnishes a detailed and sustained consideration of music video, a widely circulated and extremely popular form of art that has been almost ignored in academic and critical debate of the past decades. Considering the few studies published during the 1980s and 1990s, Diane Railton and Paul Watson lament the previous critics' submission of music videos into other paradigms such as theories of the postmodern, cultural politics of race and gender or into analyses of specific performers such as Madonna. This is not a detailed historical record of the academic studies on the subject, but reference to previous works provides a valid and interesting basis for departure of the authors' own analysis, whose clearly stated goal is the institutionalisation of music video as a form deserving of a study in its own right.

The critical atrophy of music-video studies up to the present is therefore immediately set against the surprising success and cultural visibility and accessibility of such a form in contemporary times. The authors proceed to create a very detailed, structural characterisation of this form of communication, establishing a critical vocabulary suitable for the illustration and analysis of its main components and the motivations for its production. In order to do this, they re-evaluate music videos not as mere commercial products associated with the purchase of artists' songs or complete albums, but as primary products in their own right, purchasable or easily available to the public as a separate product. Music videos are indeed born out of the song and music they promote, but music here acts as the agent for a series of visual representations involving and stimulating different political interpretations and readings. Similarly, the voice of the performers—visually translated into the mouthing of lyrics and in the choice of the images accompanying the performance—is reinscribed as a message which is to be studied for its visual codes.

Railton and Watson mainly use an academic vocabulary that, it must be admitted, could create some problems of comprehension for a non-specialised reader, who would however certainly benefit from the book's enlightening contents. Nevertheless, the explanation of the political representations enacted by music videos is indubitably exhaustive and illustrative. Indeed, the authors examine music videos in all of their different components, facets and technical aspects in order to explain the underlying meaning(s) of the images they contain: from the lyrics of the songs and the (biographical) discourses constituting the star image of the artist to the different frames used by a director and the editing techniques, but also from the scenarios in the background (whether real or constructed on a set) and the choreographed dance routines to the artists' hairstyles and outfit changes.

The numerous videos under consideration offer excellent and very efficacious examples of the arguments made: the range of case studies is extremely varied and certainly noteworthy. The volume covers several major artists and groups: from Eminem and Tupac Shakur to Metallica and Prodigy, from Dido and Björk to Kelis and Lady Gaga, to name but a few. The comprehensive analysis goes as far as to consider various versions of the same video, evidencing the implications of different languages and frames. Some of the videos are described in such a detailed way that I was able to visualise the images even ten or fifteen years after they were initially broadcast. Furthermore, in the course of such analyses the diversity of musical genres is never ignored: on the contrary, R&B, rock and pop music are all considered as being based on different heritages and are therefore distinguished according to their conventional representations and the codes governing the actions and behaviours both of the musicians and of their fans.

It is also interesting to note that the volume includes in its analysis the different multiple platforms for the transmission and distribution of music videos, such as dedicated music television channels, video charts, the Internet and screens in the street, in public leisure places or on iTunes, all of these being fundamental for the wider distribution and (re)circulation of this form of art in the present age. The authors thus clearly exemplify the change in the conditions governing access to music video since the inception of the music channel MTV in 1981 and, most importantly, perfectly illustrate the global and pervasive presence of such an artistic form in our contemporary society. In this regard, readers can immediately find the videos under consideration by simply accessing Internet sites such as YouTube to verify the arguments the authors make and to draw their own conclusions.

The first chapter of the book is centred on the representation of normative and subversive conceptions of female sexuality in music videos. Specifically, through the analysis of Pink's 2006 video for *Stupid Girls*, it examines how negative images and misrepresentations can reinforce or reinscribe dominant and hegemonic discourses on femininity. The behaviour exhibited by the female artist and her interaction with the differently-characterised male figures on the screen are used to establish whether the video reinforces the image of the independence of women or the portrayal of female subordination. The authors' argument is continually measured against the reality of women's condition in the world and, most of all, against current theories and debates in the field of gender studies. These are presented through a very clear, succinct explanation of concepts of feminism and post-feminism. Railton and Watson thus demonstrate that academic discourses cannot be separated from popular culture, but are negotiated and (re)produced in it. On the other hand, this allows the interpretation of the videos under consideration to be reinscribed within the major contemporary critical frameworks. As is the case of the rest of the volume, this specific discussion also benefits from many references to and parallels with television series, computer games and a series of cultural products that are currently broadcast to or used by contemporary readers and are therefore familiar to them. Readers (especially, young readers) are thus directed towards clear, easily accessible and very helpful examples.

In the second chapter, we encounter a wide-ranging discussion of the structure, form and narrative style of music videos, with a particular focus on their formal and aesthetic variations. Railton and Watson here provide a very interesting categorisation of music videos into four categories or genres (respectively, pseudo-documentary, art, narrative and staged performance—whose definitions I will leave for the reader to discover). The examination of

these four categories of music videos also takes into account the differences between them, in their most extreme examples, their hybridity and even the possible exceptions to the different categories. Certainly, we should remember that this study offers a provisional categorisation, thus leaving the debate open to future renegotiations, contextualisations and re-categorisations. In fact, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* hopes to stimulate such future debate.

In Chapter Three, the book proceeds to examine the question of authorship in music video, evaluating whether its artistic centre is the director or the performer. In order to do this, the works of several directors, such as Chris Cunningham and Spike Jonze, and their stylistic specificities are set in contrast with the establishment and circulation of the star image of the performer. The authors' conclusion is that authorship comes from the person (whether male or female) who produces the voice and political message of the video.

The fourth chapter focuses on the representation of raced sexuality in music video. It begins with a study of Christina Aguilera's 2003 video *Can't Hold Us Down* and traces the inscription of blackness and whiteness on the bodies of the performer. Most interestingly and unexpectedly, the results are compared to and read through Victorian discourses of evolution, colonisation, exploration and domesticity. The authors argue that iconographical markings of whiteness and blackness still have an impact on contemporary women's experience and make a thorough comparison between Kylie Minogue's video *Can't Get You Out of My Head* (2001) and Beyoncé Knowles's video *Baby Boy* (2003). I personally considered this example as the most accurate and impressive of the entire volume for the different characterisations of raced femininity minutely traced in all of the visual and technical aspects of the two videos.

In the fifth chapter, the representation of Latina identity in the videos of Christina Aguilera is analysed. The chapter begins with the premise that ethnicity is not a neutral term but is predicated on a sense of collectivity. Nevertheless, by means of the examination of the artist's star persona and the representational strategies of videos such as *Genie In A Bottle* (1999), Railton and Watson conclude that Aguilera is able to defy and flout identities, simultaneously inventing and inhabiting different gendered ethnicities.

The authors often return to their previously made arguments and summarise them before moving to the next part of the argument. This greatly helps the reader to follow the various points of their analysis. The volume thus provokes different questions that are answered chapter by chapter. For example, by the fifth chapter I began to wonder whether masculinity and male sexuality should have been considered in this book, the focus having hitherto been mainly on representations of feminine sexuality and identity. I was therefore very glad to find such an absence explained in the sixth chapter as being mainly due to what is, according to the authors, a different style of representation of the male body in music videos, which is defined by the use of animation and in terms of male access to the bodies of women, or else in terms of "exaggerated displays of emotional sincerity" (133), rather than the display of the male body itself. Specifically, through the analysis of videos by Kanye West, D'Angelo, D'Agostino and Take That (amongst others), the chapter considers the frequent elision of the male body from the gaze as due to a series of representational strategies that uncouple masculinity from the flesh and the sex of the body, or abstract it by focusing instead on the actions of the performers. This is seen as a major tendency of music videos, which thus reposition the viewers' attention from the male body to the performer's actions, activities and affirmations.

The endnotes and bibliography demonstrate a comprehensive use of both old and recent sources as well as an extensive gathering of material from both print and electronic sources, although, it should be recognised, the inclusion of photographs or video stills would have made the volume richer and more captivating. The authors' initial aim to present music videos as a form of popular culture capable of sustaining serious scrutiny on its own terms, as well as their intention to demonstrate, in their words, "the ways in which the practices and conventions of representation in music video both constrain and make possible ways of thinking about ourselves as individuals within contemporary society" (10) are fully achieved and, hopefully, will stimulate the future development of this field of study. On the one hand, music videos are presented as composed of a multifarious set of representational strategies, whose complexity is only glimpsed in this volume. On the other hand, they are convincingly shown as cultural products that are politically significant because they both reflect and contribute to the establishment or negation of normative characterisation of male and female sexuality in the contemporary world. Certainly, this could have been a monumental study of the subject and, personally, I became so enthusiastic that I finally wished for the volume to be much longer. However, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* is an instructive and stimulating introduction to this form of popular culture pervasively surrounding us.

Works Cited

Aguilera, Christina. *Can't Hold Us Down*. Dir. David LaChapelle. 2003. Video.

Aguilera, Christina. *Genie in a Bottle*. Dir. Diane Martel. 1999. Video.

Beyoncé, *Baby Boy*. Dir. Jake Nava. 2003. Video.

Minogue, Kylie, *Can't Get You Out of My Head*. Dir. Dawn Shadforth. 2001. Video.

Pink, *Stupid Girls*. Dir. Dave Meyers. 2006. Video.

Antonio Sanna has received his Ph.D. at the University of Westminster in London. His main research areas include horror films, Gothic literature, Victorian culture and postmodern theory. He has published articles in *Kinema*, *Law and Literature*, and *The Journal of Film and Video* (forthcoming). Currently, he is a teaching assistant at the University of Cagliari (Italy).