

YouTube's "Bad Romance": Exploring the Vernacular Rhetoric of Lady Gaga Parody Videos

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Abstract

While the political aspects of parody have been widely researched, this work has generally focused on institutionally circulated parodies on shows like Saturday Night Live and The Colbert Report. Fewer projects have explored the political potential of fan-created parody videos on social media outlets. In order to gain a fuller understanding of parody's political potential within the YouTube community, this case study puts Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" music video in conversation with fan-created parodies. The author argues that the feminist rhetoric in Lady Gaga's video is disciplined by fan parodies' repressive vernacular, demonstrating the transformative power of user-generated videos. Social media publication is a powerful force to both progress social change and to recoup transformative messages in the mainstream media.

Less than two months after Interscope Records released Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" music video, a group of college students created a low-budget copy in which they reenacted the original video with near frame-by-frame precision. For two days, this video circulated YouTube without much fanfare. Then Lady Gaga posted the video's link on her Twitter feed. Within 10 days, the video had

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received over 650,000 hits; one year later it had been accessed nearly two million times (Shanahan & Goldstein, 2010). This video remake, dubbed “Badder Romance” by its creators, is not an anomaly. In fact, as recording equipment and video editing software become increasingly accessible to amateur music enthusiasts, YouTube has become a haven for fan-created parody videos, many of which have generated followings both inherently connected to and distinctly unique from the parodied artist. While parody and pastiche have long been used as media of comic and satirical commentary, the proliferation of social media outlets has allowed users to publish and distribute their parodic creations. The mass distribution of fan parody videos blurs the line between star and fan creations, destabilizing the distinction between institutional and non-institutional voices on the Internet. As the roles of producer and consumer are reimagined through social media, rhetoric of social change must also be reimagined to account for the politics of participation.

While the political aspects of parody have been widely explored by previous researchers, this research has generally focused on institutionally circulated parodies on Saturday Night Live (Baym & Jones, 2012; Day & Thompson, 2012; Esralew & Young, 2012), The Colbert Report (Colletta, 2009; Burwell & Boler, 2008), and other mass media outlets (Gray, 2007). Fewer projects have explored the political potential of fan-created parody videos uploaded to social media outlets. In the case of “Bad Romance,” Lady Gaga’s institutionally distributed feminist rhetoric complicates social media parody research. If, as Hess (2009) has argued, parodies can overturn and renegotiate the meanings present in the parodied video, then parodies of “Bad Romance” may reclaim Gaga’s political aims in the name of hegemony and anti-feminist rhetoric. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the potential political issues of parody within the YouTube community, this case study will first present a feminist close reading of Lady Gaga’s official “Bad Romance” music video before examining its fan-created parodies. I argue that the feminist rhetoric in Lady Gaga’s video is effectively disciplined by fan parodies’ repressive vernacular, demonstrating the transformative power of user-generated videos. In effect, user-generated content is a powerful force in the political discourse of subversion, but this force has the potential not only to progress social change discourse, but also to recoup transformative messages in the mainstream media.

The Circuits of Cultural Texts

While industry-created media texts are often framed as a one-way monologue from media moguls to consumers, cultural studies scholars have long argued that this process is actually a conversation between industry and audience. In Johnson's (1986) cornerstone model, for example, audiences translate and integrate important elements of media texts into their daily lives, allowing producers to read and adapt those lived cultural elements into newer media. Complicating this model, Hall (1973) has argued that individual audience members use unique interpretive frames, or reading positions, to translate media texts into experience. In Hall's (1973) first reading position, consumers interpret the text as the producer intended, thereby succumbing to the ideological project of the textual production, but audiences may also consume the text from a skeptical position, completely rejecting the producer's intended meaning of the text, or from a negotiated position, taking and leaving individual meanings from the larger text. For both models, power asymmetries are encoded in the text, its producers, and its consumers, creating a lens through which we understand our individual place in the cultural power dynamic.

Though these models of cultural texts focus on institutionally produced media like television and film, their emphasis on corporate influence is also prevalent in social media platforms like YouTube. Though originally developed as a file sharing platform to facilitate user-based video distribution, YouTube has since evolved into a corporate, profit-based operation (Kim, 2012). Google's 2006 purchase of the site corresponded with two changes in YouTube's model. First, as Wasko and Erickson (2009) note, the commercialization of YouTube involved the addition of advertising as a source of revenue for the Google Corporation. By incorporating advertising into YouTube's user-generated content, Andrejevic (2009) argues, the site exploits its users, claiming advertising revenue generated by user-created content. Second, YouTube's integration of commercially produced media like film trailers and music videos provided media corporations with a means of reaching users for marketing purposes, a move that resulted in numerous deals and partnerships between Google and media conglomerates like MGM and Lionsgate (Wasko and Erickson, 2009). Thus, while YouTube's participatory structure gives the appearance of democratic media production, its corporate, commercial revenue

model exploits user content for corporate profit.

Though the free labor of YouTube's user-generated content model is problematic, it also provides an avenue through which non-corporate messages are circulated. The development of participatory and network media has empowered non-institutional voices by providing access to web publishing, which allows social media users to compete with previously overpowering institutional voices. In this way, social media can be understood as a mediated translation of vernacular rhetoric. To borrow from Ono and Sloop's (1995) concept of the vernacular, social media may provide a level of participation for "communities that have been systematically ignored" (p. 20). The oppressed status of the vernacular manifests through the YouTube platform as a lack of access to professional equipment and mass distribution mechanisms associated with institutional or industry discourse (Hauser, 1999), but this does not erase YouTube's power as a disseminating engine. Indeed, Hess (2009, 2010) has argued that YouTube's institutionally developed platform has allowed vernacular voices to challenge institutionally produced political campaigns. My introductory story demonstrates the power of YouTube to spread vernacular rhetoric across its community in numbers that would otherwise be impossible. Thus it is YouTube's institutional privilege that affords power to its vernacular voices.

While the privileged nature of institutional YouTube discourse provides an analytic foil for vernacular rhetoric, the distinction between institutional and non-institutional YouTube discourse is neither constant nor exclusive. First, as Burgess and Green (2009) have argued, the distinction between professional and amateur is fluid at best, since classification according to perceived production quality overlooks the potential for an institutional video to impersonate amateur style or vice versa. Salvato (2009) further argues that the power imbalance between institutional and non-institutional YouTube videos allows professional contributors to manipulate perceptions of sincerity in the YouTube audience. In short, the poor production quality that seems to represent a sincere, authentic, vernacular attempt at message dissemination is easily co-opted by the institutional. Likewise, professional production mechanisms are increasingly available to average YouTube users. The quality of YouTube videos demonstrates the blurred line between the institutional and the non-institutional in social media rhetoric.

Second, as an agent of distribution, YouTube is itself best classified as an institution, blurring the site's identity as a vernacular vehicle. All social media runs through institutionally created agencies, and as such, vernacular politics may be diluted by the presence of institutions. As Howard (2010) argues:

[T]he institutional authorizes the vernacular in the sense that all vernacularity relies on the institutional to create the grounds on which the vernacular can enact its distinction . . . At this structural level, the vernacular is necessarily hybrid in that it must contain the institutional from which to express alterity. (p. 251)

In the online sphere this hybridity precludes the separation of vernacular and institutional, at least in the strictest sense of the terms. This concept is further complicated by YouTube's advertising component since, as Andrejevic (2009) points out, user-generated videos participate in YouTube's business model, funneling profits to the institution through their vernacular messages. In essence, not only is the aesthetic of YouTube vernacular remarkably similar to its institutional counterpart, this vernacular aesthetic is also produced, controlled, and profited from institutionally.

The blurring of institutional and vernacular in social media is mirrored by parody itself, in which institutional media is appropriated by non-institutional voices. In order for parody to be successful, Hutcheon (1989) argues, it must indicate the source text while simultaneously demonstrating its difference from that text. It is knowledge of the institutional original that allows consumers to "get the joke." The close relationship between the copy and the original gives parody its power; since parody can only be understood through the original text, the copy decentralizes original discourses from the inside out. However, Hutcheon (1989) cautions, parody's connection with its source text means that the subversive power of the message is necessarily derived from consumer acceptance of hegemonic social conventions. Parody's power as a vernacular tool is thus both strengthened and undercut by its reliance on the institutional, just as YouTube is both institutionalized and vernacularized by its users.

Music Video, Feminism, and Lady Gaga's Social Media Reign

In modern popular culture, music video discourse has represented a struggle between hegemonic ideologies and subversive rhetoric,

both borrowing from and challenging cinematic production codes. Important to this conflict is the concept of the male gaze. As defined in Mulvey's (1989) now contentious essay, the gaze describes the privileging of the male perspective in narrative cinema, which creates a unity between the spectator and the onscreen male performers. This perspective thus prescribes agency to the male characters, while objectifying and dehumanizing the female presence. As a number of feminist media scholars (e.g. Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Railton & Watson, 2011; Kaplan, 1987) have argued, this situation sexualizes female music video performers, rendering them objects in the male subject's fantasy. However, it is also possible for female lead singers to gain power and agency from their visibility in music video, allowing female activists within the industry to challenge normative gender roles within the larger culture (Wald, 1998; Lewis, 1993). Indeed, the media visibility of megastars like Lady Gaga affords these women a marginal control over their music videos, through which feminist stars may manipulate normative cinematic modes to support their political messages. The tendency for music videos to draw inspiration from previous forms of visual and aural arts can therefore connote both positive and negative implications for the transmission of gendered ideologies into the larger culture.

While much of the early work on the music video genre focused on the structural elements of MTV's broadcast aesthetics, the televised music video has now become antiquated, with most videos produced specifically for Internet-based consumption. The music video originally functioned to promote sales of albums, but the creation of the mp3 format and Internet distribution has largely shifted industry focus away from CD sales, undercutting MTV's original music-video-centric approach (Vidyarthi, 2010). Furthermore, the growing popularity of YouTube during the past decade led users to upload consumer-created music video content, decreasing the demand for industry produced music videos and allowing user-generated content to drive corporate profits. Illegal circulation of industry and fan-produced music videos on YouTube eventually led to the industry production of VEVO, an official online music video source, in April 2009 (Universal Music Group, 2009). The product of negotiations between Universal Music Group (UMG) and Google, this channel resulted not only in the Internet release of UMG's premium content, but also in an

agreement allowing YouTube users to produce fan videos using UMG copyrighted music (Universal Music Group, 2009).

As one of UMG's most popular artists, Lady Gaga has been a leading figure in the developmental success of the VEVO channel. In fact, according to a February 2010 presentation by Ted Mico, Executive Vice President of Digital for Interscope, Geffen, and A&M, Lady Gaga's music and videos have generated approximately one-quarter of VEVO's traffic since the channel's inception (Sandoval, 2010). This figure is impressive considering that the VEVO site hosted 35 million unique visitors in January of 2010 in the combined outreach of Vevo.com and YouTube (Sandoval, 2010). In fact, Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" music video is one of the most popular clips on YouTube, accruing 312,168,746 views in its first year of posting. According to YouTube's statistics at the time of writing, "Bad Romance" is also the second most watched video clip of all time (including non-music videos) and the fifth most discussed clip of all time, denoting Lady Gaga's popularity as a producer of Internet and music industry revenue as well as popular culture iconography.

Lady Gaga's popularity on Internet mediated music video channels has further sparked a wave of user-created parody videos on YouTube, a trend that speaks to the prominence of her music as well as the cultural reading of her videos' symbolism. At the time of writing, a YouTube search for "'Bad Romance' parody" returns 5,230 videos. The initiative required to create a parody video indicates a consumer connection with the original video, which further suggests a meaningful, highly-processed engagement with the text. This situation is complicated by Lady Gaga's highly publicized political views which, as I will argue, are visible in the "Bad Romance" video and its use of feminist symbolism. While YouTube parody videos studied by Hess (2009) and Tryon (2008), for example, reflect the vernacular tendency to overturn repressive, hegemonic messages on YouTube, Lady Gaga's videos are anything but traditional. The proliferation of "Bad Romance" parodies thus offer a unique case study in which the institutional attempts to circulate a transformative message. In this case, social media parody acquires YouTube's institutional power, which it then uses to reverse Gaga's transformative, feminist rhetoric.

Method and Justification

In order to understand YouTube's possibilities as a microcosm

for textual production and consumption, this paper focuses on the discursive evolution of feminist symbolism in Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" and its user-created parodies. To this end, I will first analyze the original video for subversive meanings, before examining the parody videos' appropriation of these meanings. Because YouTube allows users to search for videos based on the uploader-generated labels, the sample includes self-proclaimed parody videos of "Bad Romance." These videos were sorted by relevance, and the first 60 relevant videos were examined as part of the study. Videos were further filtered to ensure that the parody videos made direct musical reference to the original song. Only 4 of the first 60 videos were rejected, and all of these videos were parodies of other songs created by groups whose repertoire included a "Bad Romance" parody. In total, I viewed 56 YouTube parodies of Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance." The parodies, as textual extensions of Lady Gaga's original music video text, reinstate and renegotiate the cycle of cultural production, and as such, this study aims to understand the transformation of subversive symbolism within the YouTube community.

The body of "Bad Romance" parody videos represented diverse discursive strategies, thereby demonstrating the spectrum of readings and reinterpretations available to the YouTube user. First, six videos produced a reading that offered little adaptation or commentary on the original video's symbolism. Rather, videos in this category primarily mimicked the movements and visual imagery of Lady Gaga's original video with very limited adaptation. Second, 19 parody videos displayed an abbreviated form of the negotiated reading. These videos attempt to replicate the original, making minor changes to reflect the lived culture of the video's creators. For example, the parody "Badder Romance" uploaded by BINKproductionz included a narrative progression identical to that used by the original video. However, substitutions were made that seemed to reflect the group's unique subculture; for example, a Beanie Baby pinned to a blanket replaced the bear skin robe with head. In the comments section, this move was identified as indicative of the shared lived culture of the video's creators and friends when a commenter noted, "Simba finally made it into a video!" Within this range of videos, the reading favors form and genre over the content's meaning of the content, rendering Lady Gaga's symbolism irrelevant.

The parody videos that placed a greater emphasis on a translation

of the original video demonstrate the viewers' propensity to create lived experience from reading itself, and these 31 videos are therefore the target of this paper. Within the scope of the parody videos discussed in this essay, most of the videos that clearly communicated a successful reading and efficient translation of message content were those produced by professional and semi-professional operations. Though it is difficult to ascertain the reason for this divide, it is likely that the videos created by home users were more focused on successfully communicating a recognizable form of the original video's complex symbolism, thus rendering the final result a form of pastiche or tribute lacking the discursive distance required by Hutcheon's (1989) definition of parody. Therefore, as outlined in the previous paragraph, the 25 videos that appeared to simply copy the symbols as they appeared within the video (thereby emphasizing sameness rather than difference) were not considered to fall within the realm of parody, and were therefore eliminated from the analysis.

I am not arguing here that no important conclusions could be drawn from these "copies." In fact, while they do not directly fit within the scope of the present study, an excellent case could be made for this type of parody as a more direct window into the lived cultures of fans. These videos are created as copies, but since the circumstances of production vary widely among the parodies, and certainly in their vast differences from the production mode of the original, this type of communication merits future study within a nuanced frame of analysis.

Lady Gaga's Feminist Symbolism

Subversive Appropriation of the Male Gaze

The visual imagery of the "Bad Romance" video emphasizes the female body as object of gaze. The male gaze is most obviously demonstrated in Lady Gaga's performance for a group of male spectators. This scene begins with a group of women stripping Lady Gaga of a trench coat to reveal her sequined white costume. The second shot of the scene moves dramatically backward to include the back of the male spectators' heads within the foreground of the shot, before shifting back to a close-up shot of Lady Gaga's performance. By the end of the sequence, Lady Gaga is clearly being watched; she covers her scantily clad body with her hands as she is carried to the front of the stage by the other women. Though this particular scene is inter-

dispersed with other non-narrative shots, each time the camera returns to the performance scene the same combination of shots are utilized to establish the directionality of the gaze: a medium long shot of Lady Gaga performing, a long shot including the male spectators, and an eyeline match to demonstrate the spectators' gaze falling upon Lady Gaga's performance. This combination of camera shots, reminiscent of the classic Hollywood musical, functions to draw the spectator into the position of the onscreen spectator. In essence, through the use of traditional cinematic camera techniques, spectators are interpellated into the subjectivity of the male spectator (Mulvey, 1989).

While the "Bad Romance" video solicits spectator participation in the dominating gaze, it simultaneously condemns the convention of the gaze. In so doing, it demonstrates a satirical parody of the women's objectification. Rhetorically, this effect is created by first soliciting pleasure through identification with the onscreen spectator, then narratively producing the destruction of the spectator in the final scene when Lady Gaga kills the voyeuristic male. This double-crossing of video's spectators is a form of discursive parody in which the receiver is solicited into guilt before the crime itself is revealed. In the case of this type of subversive parody, Hutcheon (1989) has noted, "[c]omplicity is perhaps necessary (or at least unavoidable) in deconstructive critique (you have to signal – and thereby install – that which you want to subvert)" (p. 152). What is notable about this strategy of subversion, though, is its propensity to create a dialogue from the dominating voice of the male gaze. Indeed, Gray (2006) has argued that subversive parody is at its most effective "against those genres and discourses that purport to dictate, and that have obvious and explicit pretensions to monologic power" (p. 85). By drawing spectators into the subjectivity of the male voyeur then destroying the narrative representation of this subject position, the visual rhetoric of "Bad Romance" effectively increases consciousness of female objectification. In so doing, the video is better able to subvert this otherwise naturalized convention.

The representation of the consuming male gaze appeared in altered form within most of the parody videos studied. Notably, a number of videos created a parodic representation of the gaze itself by focusing on intrusive surveillance as a major theme. For example, the parody video titled "Bad (Bro)mance" altered lyrics and visual imagery in order to incorporate an overpowering male friendship.

Throughout this video, the overpowering and overtly feminized friend, Dicky, gazes longingly at a wall of photographs of the male lead before breaking into his friend's house. Here, the gendered gaze was flipped; rather than represent a female body as the object of the gaze, an effeminate male stalked a normative masculine figure, thus reversing gaze. Indeed, where the gaze was present, it most often positioned a male cast member as the object; even the videos that included female cast members used men to portray Lady Gaga in the video's lap dance scene, seemingly using this scene for comic effect. The professionally produced drag queen parody videos similarly replicated the male gaze onto the drag queens themselves; however, within these representations of the gaze, the drag queens noticeably maintained power within the relationship. For example, in Sherry Vine's parody video "Just Shit My Pants," the gaze is followed through to the burning bed scene in the Lady Gaga video, but the parody scene concludes with Sherry Vine's lover passing out, presumably from the smell of excrement heavily foregrounded in the video's lyrics and visual imagery. In this particular parody video, Sherry Vine, unlike Lady Gaga, is distressed at her lover's fainting, and she appears disappointed and rejected. In all of these cases, then, the male gaze is taken as a naturalized element within the traditional music video, rather than acknowledged as a destructive convention, as in Lady Gaga's video.

Manipulation of the Body and Physical Function

The destructive effects of the male gaze within the "Bad Romance" video are inextricably linked to the video's constant representations of the physical manipulation of the female body. Most obviously, bodily domination is vital to the progression of the video's narrative: Lady Gaga must be drugged and physically wrestled into the performance space before she will submit to the voyeuristic gaze of the male spectators, which advances the narrative through its climax of sexual exploitation. However, the physical manipulation of the body is more subtly apparent in nearly every scene in the "Bad Romance" video. One of the most iconic visual images within the text is the emergence of white, vinyl-clad bodies from a series of pods during the video's second scene. These characters demonstrate physical manipulation through their jerking movements and claw-like hand gestures, both of which are strikingly similar to the move-

ments used by the zombies in Michael Jackson's 1983 "Thriller" video. The contortion of the body is also apparent in the protruding skeletal structure of the white figures and Lady Gaga's naked body later in the video. As the white figures dance during the video's early scenes, their protruding rib cages and spines are not only prominent, they appear to be digitally enhanced in some sections of the video. This visual concept is later present with a more human body during the brief scenes that feature an exaggeratedly thin Lady Gaga naked in a prison shower, as her spine protrudes so radically as to emphasize individual vertebrae. Lady Gaga's transformation into the monstrous demonstrates the dehumanizing surveillance of the media gaze onto the performer.

The dehumanization of both the figures in white and of Lady Gaga herself through the manipulation of the physical body draws upon fan knowledge to illustrate the destructive effects of the gendered performance space. Throughout her career, Lady Gaga has gone to great lengths to denounce what she interprets as the debilitating effects of fame in the culture, even noting of the music video for her song "Paparazzi":

[The video] has a real, genuine, powerful message about fame-whoring and death and the demise of the celebrity, and what that does to young people. The video explores ideas about sort of hyperbolic situations that people will go to in order to be famous. Most specifically, pornography and murder. (In Patch, 2010)

The ideas of pornography and murder translate to the imagery in the "Bad Romance" video through its narrative of sexual exploitation. Further, the distortion of bodies in the "Bad Romance" video demonstrates the physical punishment commonly undertaken in the order to be thin. These images, then, assemble a pastiche of celebrity culture in order to comment on the effects of female body commodification.

In a tangential relationship to the "Bad Romance" video's male gaze commentary, the video's imagery comments on bodily manipulation in the name of profitability and commodity culture. It should be noted that this type of self-referentiality, specifically the parody of commodification within the commodified medium of the music video, threatens to destabilize the parody itself, thus undercutting its subversive power. However, what is notable about Lady Gaga's attempts at subversion from within the system is the demarcation between traditionally commodified views of the female body and the

images of subversion. The “Bad Romance” video crafts a dichotomy between the imagery of bodily manipulation and the imagery of traditional female performer: Lady Gaga alternates between Madonna’s traditional sex appeal and the physical manifestation of monstrous, threatening femininity. By creating a direct comparison between the culturally beautiful image of female stardom and the culturally abject imagery of the monster, then, the commodification of the female form becomes a dichotomous distinction, destabilizing the cultural association of femininity with beauty.

The physically manipulating effects of fame and obsession were also parodied, though once again, the object of the gaze was male and the subject was feminine. First, a video parody by Fakemen featured a female fan whose obsession with *Twilight*’s Robert Pattinson and the Jonas Brothers, among other male stars, led her to comment incessantly on their blogs and official web pages, creating a vernacular commentary on the interactive web community’s discourse. This video, however, is notable in its reversal of the male gaze. This video appears to read the gaze in the same subversive manner as is portrayed in Lady Gaga’s original video, but rather than replicating the destructive force of the gaze on the female body, the parody reverses the threats of the gaze onto the male star figures. In short, this video portrays men as the victims of fame, while women appear as the perpetrators of physically damaging fandom.

Second, a parody video by noted drag queen Hedda Lettuce revolves primarily around the idea of fan obsession, with the video’s primary character singing about and interacting with representations of Brad Pitt. The most graphic of the parodies, this video demonstrates a clear physical control of Brad Pitt as Hedda Lettuce demonstrates sexual positions with near-nude men wearing Brad Pitt masks while lyrically indicating her desire to interact in various ways with Pitt’s excrement. A description of the video’s intent left by Hedda Lettuce in the comments section summarizes the video’s concept succinctly:

Have you ever had a crush on someone so bad that you would even eat their shit? That is just what Hedda’s new parody of Lady Gaga’s *Bad Romance* touches upon. It is sick, gorgeous and horrific all rolled into one video.

Throughout the video, Hedda Lettuce manipulates and controls Brad Pitt, eventually violating his privacy even at the scatological level.

These two videos reverse the female body's physical manipulation in the original video, demonstrating a negotiated and qualified reading of the original video's subversive themes. As such, Gaga's argument about the dangers of physical manipulation and control of the female performer is mocked and dismissed through parody.

Of the subversive themes present within the original Lady Gaga "Bad Romance" video, the most commonly parodied was the manipulation of the physical form and an emphasis on the body. Notably, a number of videos represent scatological bodily functions, a parody theme that seems to stem from a reading of discomfort in the original video's white figures. The "Bubble Gang Bitoy Bathroom Dance" parody and Sherry Vine's "I Just Shit My Pants," for example, both describe discomfort stemming from ingesting junk foods, and both of these videos explicitly describe the effects of the resulting excretion. Additionally both videos distort the original video's choreography to represent this discomfort, thus indicating the reading of the figures in white as an impetus for the scatologically driven parody. Similar interpretations include a parody titled "Peed My Pants" in which the main character urinates a number of times, "Bad Lunch Meat," which discusses food poisoning through Lady Gaga's video, and "Bad B-O" in which a secondary character has a problem with body odor. Throughout each of these parody videos references to the physical form and manipulation of the Lady Gaga character in the original video are parodied as references to excretion and other bodily functions, thereby demonstrating a negotiated reading of this subversive theme within the original video. Gaga's commentary on physical manipulation is reduced to scatological humor parody, reflecting mockery, rejection, or misinterpretation of the original video's symbolism by fans.

"Tough Female Spirit" as Subversion and Comic Threat

Through all of the "Bad Romance" video's commentary on the male gaze and consequent commodification of the female body, Lady Gaga advances the simplest of the subversive thematic icons: the "tough female spirit" (Lady Gaga in Vena, 2009). The narrative of a sexually exploited woman regaining control of her John represents strength in seemingly hopeless situations. This independence and perseverance represents what Lady Gaga refers to as "tough female spirit." However, for Gaga, the primary signifier of this toughness

comes in the opening scene of the video in which Lady Gaga wears the iconic razor blade sunglasses. In a November 2009 interview with MTV News, Lady Gaga notes:

I wanted to design a pair [of sunglasses] for some of the toughest chicks and some of my girlfriends . . . they used to keep razor blades in the side of their mouths. . . That tough female spirit is something that I want to project. It's meant to be, "This is my shield, this is my weapon, this is my inner sense of fame, this is my monster." (In Vena, 2009)

In the context of Lady Gaga's "girlfriends," the razor blades are representative of defensive, rather than offensive, symbolism; this weapon is used in self-defense, connoting vulnerability in an actively threatening culture. However, by reappropriating this symbolism, Lady Gaga creates agency from oppression by releasing the razor blade symbolism from its urban context. The razor blade sunglasses erase the male oppressor from the equation of reactionary toughness by divorcing the signifier from the signified.

Lady Gaga's "tough female spirit" imagery subverts traditional gender roles by challenging the naturalized relationship between male aggressor and female victim. Indeed, this type of symbolic play is one of the strengths of parodic subversion within the realm of gendered power relationships. As Hutcheon (2000) argues,

What is interesting is that, unlike what is more traditionally regarded as parody, the modern form does not always permit one of the texts to fare any better or worse than the other. It is the fact that they differ that this parody emphasizes and, indeed, dramatizes. (p. 31)

In invoking this difference, subversive symbolism calls into question the ideologically naturalized qualities of gender relations. The representation of the "tough female spirit" as oppositional to a falsified male counter challenges and destabilizes traditional understandings of gender. Since the asymmetrical power relationship of the patriarchy is defined through the false dichotomy of gender, challenges to naturalized gender relationships begin to challenge women's socially oppressed position.

References within the parody videos to the "tough female spirit" incorporate the remaining parodic representations of the original video. In the only video that replicated the object of the physical manipulation and gaze as female, "I Am a Cannibal," the bearer of the

gaze was also female: Lady Gaga herself. This video featured imagery strikingly similar to that included within the original video, though the imagery was converted to indicate a predatory nature in the Lady Gaga character's actions and choreography. Indeed, the narrative of this video is reshaped in order to portray Lady Gaga as cannibalistic, which can be interpreted as a gross exaggeration of the "tough female spirit" portrayed by Lady Gaga in the original video.

Other interpretations of this theme revealed a less aggressive appropriation of female independence and strength. For example, Sherry Vine's "Just Shit My Pants" video creates a rendering of the razor blade sunglasses from the opening of the original video using pink disposable razors. This is noteworthy considering the vastly different connotations of these types of razors within the cultural context: while razor blades indicate the toughness described by Lady Gaga, the disposable razors used by Sherry Vine indicate the harmlessness of a safety razor and nod toward women's compulsory personal grooming. The tough female spirit was, therefore, substantially altered, if it was included at all, thus indicating an oppositional reading to the textual connotations included within the original Lady Gaga video text.

Conclusion

The neutralization of the male gaze within the parody videos demonstrates a rift in the communication of subversive messages between Lady Gaga and her parody-creating fans, since the subversive messages were renegotiated and qualified by the parody creators. From this observation, it would be easy to draw a conclusion about the relative triviality of both music video and YouTube parody. Indeed, the tendency for music video parody to critique the source video itself, rather than a larger cultural issue, is a common convention of the modern music video parody. Christian (2010) argues:

Music video remakes represent some form of cultural critique, either directly – flipping gender roles, for instance – or existentially, by suggesting the music video itself is a form for ridicule, not necessarily parody, but instead using the music to create a video that is self-referentially silly. (p. 7)

However, the perception of frivolity makes the YouTube medium susceptible to an oppressive vernacular voice. While it would be easy to overlook the possibility of a power structure in which the ver-

vernacular is hegemonic, failure to observe this type of power relationship is problematic. Lady Gaga's feminist commentary is disciplined, representing first, a rift in communication between producer and consumer and second, the power of vernacular rhetoric to undermine subversive institutional voices.

I do not mean to argue that these videos represent a conspiracy against Lady Gaga's feminist rhetoric. Rather, I believe that the parody-creators read the original video as either purely trivial or as a hegemonic voice in and of itself. Indeed, this is an unsurprising result of the original's classic music video style, which effectively cloaks the anti-hegemonic message in traditional convention. In this case, the accessibility afforded by YouTube creates a situation in which readers are encouraged to produce new texts from readings of previously popularized texts, which may consequently discourage analytic consumption of the original message. While the development of an increasingly democratic medium of mass communication is often understood as a positive development in the empowerment of marginalized voices, this case study demonstrates a moment in which a potentially powerful anti-hegemonic message is rendered impotent by a sea of vernacular musings. The struggle for power between institutional and vernacular voices should therefore be reexamined as it applies to YouTube as a medium of communication.

While parody has long been used as a form of satirical social commentary, these videos demonstrate the tendency of the parody format to destabilize an original video's narrative structure, in this case, undercutting subversive source content. Since the successful transmission of parody is reliant upon the simultaneous communication of recognizable elements within the source text and comedic elements of difference within the parody text, video creators are forced to adapt the most clearly identifiable icons of the original video. In this case, then, the vernacular not only operates within the confines of the institutional medium of YouTube.com; it also must operate within the structure of the original video itself. However, it could be argued that the rhetorical positioning of the parody video as deeply embedded in the original institutional discourse is the key to its powerful potential. These parody videos not only fight the institutional from the inside out; they actually reappropriate that inside as an integral part of the new communication, thus destabilizing the original mode of discourse. Within the context of this case study, a

certain paradox of popularity seems to be at work, in that the mass distribution of a text has the potential to spread a subversive message, but the level of popularity needed for effective subversion also encourages the YouTube community to respond with user-generated parody videos. Since this situation has the potential to destabilize the original subversive message, YouTube's emphasis on popularity and circulation may undercut its capabilities as a medium of social commentary.

As readers within the context of popular culture, the creators of YouTube parody videos understand and recreate the power structures represented within Lady Gaga's original video. However, as Hall (1973) has famously argued, any given text provides the possibility of a number of different readings. Indeed, the possible readings of any given text are as widely varied as are the roles of power they represent within the larger cultural structure. Within the context of the "Bad Romance" video and its parodies, this is further complicated by the original video's juxtaposition of symbols of strength, power, and femininity, a combination most often mocked or trivialized in American popular culture. Therefore, the reappropriation of subversive symbolism as a dominant-hegemonic coding of power is ultimately not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the capacity for the vernacular voices of the YouTube community to fully dilute the context of the highly dominant voice of Lady Gaga, Interscope Records, and VEVO by saturating the institutional channel of YouTube with oppositional appropriations of the original video's symbolism. This speaks to the relative weakness of YouTube as a site for institutionally synthesized subversive rhetoric, as well as YouTube's potential to create a united voice of empowerment from the sea of vernacular contributors.

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