

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

"Constructing Genre in Narrative Music Videos: Intersecting Identities of Gender, Sexuality, Race, Class, Age and Ability in Word, Music and Image"

Team Members

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Project Summary

Our research objective is to examine the discursive construction of gender, sexuality, race, class, age and ability in popular music videos while, at the same time, thinking critically about how videos rely on the workings of genre in order to be both intelligible and meaningful. Our study will undertake genre-based discourse analyses of narrative music videos in six meta-genres: pop, hip-hop, R&B, rock, heavy metal and country. We will interpret the form and content of selected music videos using an approach that grows out of popular music studies and cultural studies, and consists of an integration of genre theory, critical discourse theory, intersectional theory and theories of participatory culture. Our approach considers video content as it is expressed through music, words and images in three related contexts: production, distribution and reception.

Music scholars have examined videos in relation to specific *music genres* (i.e., Beebe 2007, Fenster 1993, Strachan 2006, Walser 1993) and cultural studies scholars have analyzed *video genres* in relation to what they communicate visually and, by extension, culturally (i.e., Kaplan 1987, Frith 1988, Lewis 1990, Railton & Watson 2011). But there has been no comprehensive examination of distinct video genres across diverse musical genres that allows for a deeper understanding of how video genres operate in different music contexts as well as in the popular cultural sphere. Our interdisciplinary approach will allow us to explore music videos in terms of both musical culture (music genre) and visual culture (video genre). The result will be a fine-grained analysis of music videos and the representations to which they give rise.

With the advent of MySpace in 2003, YouTube in 2005 and VEVO in 2009, and the proliferation of handheld technologies and social networking sites, the music video has become instantly available to millions worldwide. While cultural critics once warned of its imminent demise (Beebe 2007), there is now renewed enthusiasm for the video across the music industry; so much so, in fact, that some now see the industry as having made a “turn to video” (Holt 2011). The turn to video has coincided with the unprecedented rise of social media and the resulting increase in digital music sales (Mjos 2012).

Developing a more nuanced understanding of the music video in this period of major industrial and technological change is, therefore, a relevant and timely task.

Genres are constituted by and through discourse and are bound up with the exercise and effects of power. Discourse and power work together to construct the intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, race, age, class and ability in particular ways depending on the genre in question. Audiences relate both individually and collectively to genres through the stories they tell. And, of course, in contemporary “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006), audiences use the social media resources at their disposal to shape these stories and the genres out of which they grow. In the early post-millennium, audiences can be seen as “citizens” of popular music culture insofar as they have become—through a variety of online tactics and strategies—active producers of its meaning (Hermes 2005).

The meanings and messages associated with a video emerge not only from the materials of the video text itself (i.e., music, lyrics, images) but also from a range of different contexts such as: the production context (i.e., how the video is made and by whom); the historical context (i.e., how the video is influenced by the time-period in which it is made); the economic context (i.e., how the video has been affected by industry trends); the artist’s career context (i.e., how the video relates to the artist’s persona); and the reception context (i.e., how the video is distributed and delivered as well as interpreted, parodied, remixed and reconfigured by both engaged and estranged audiences). All of these contexts will be considered as we reflect on how genres shape and are shaped by music videos.

In keeping with Kellner’s (2011) call for “critical media literacy,” we propose to examine the dynamic workings of discourse and power across the narrative music videos of six meta-genres in popular music. We hypothesize that the intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, race, class, age and ability will be constructed differently depending on the musical genre we are examining. The film-like, cinematically-inspired narrative video—more than the concert

video or abstract art video—encourages us to ask a number of questions as they relate to each meta-genre such as: What stories are being told?

How are they being told and who is doing the telling? Why are some stories told while others are not? And how are they bound up with broader relations of power? Put differently, we are interested in exploring how genre functions to normalize some stories while marginalizing others. Doing so will allow us to think critically about how these normalized stories are either accepted or resisted by audience members as they respond to them in an increasingly participatory popular culture.

Narrative music videos are not confined to a particular music genre but can be used to tell stories in any genre. As previously mentioned, however, we hypothesize that videos arising from different music genres will be characterized by distinct aesthetic, expressive, representational and referential conventions. If we are correct, then it follows that the intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, race, class, age and ability will also be constituted by and through these distinct conventions. In sum, our hypothesis is worth testing because it will allow us to shed new light on how the workings of genre intervene in the construction of both individual and collective identities in popular music videos.

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