

Chapter 7

Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly

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A great deal of ink has been spilled in the debate over pop star Madonna's visual image and the narratives she has enacted for music video. Almost every response in the spectrum has been registered, ranging from unambiguous characterizations of her as "a porn queen in heat"¹ or "the kind of woman who comes into your room at three a.m. and sucks your life out,"² to formulations that view her as a kind of organic feminist whose image "enables girls to see that the meanings of feminine sexuality *can* be in their control, *can* be made in their interests, and that their subjectivities are not necessarily totally determined by the dominant patriarchy."³

What most reactions to Madonna share, however, is an automatic dismissal of her music as irrelevant. The scorn with which her ostensible artistic focus has been trivialized, treated as a conventional backdrop to her visual appearance, often is breathtaking. For example, John Fiske's complex and sympathetic discussion of the struggle over meaning surrounding Madonna begins, "Most critics have nothing good to say about her music, but they have a lot to say about her image."⁴ He then goes on to say a lot about her image, and he too has nothing whatsoever to say about the music. E. Ann Kaplan's detailed readings of Madonna's music videos likewise push the music to the side and treat the videos strictly through the techniques of film criticism.⁵

This essay will concentrate on Madonna, the musician. First, I will locate her within a history of gender relationships in the music world: I hope to demonstrate that Madonna has served as a lightning rod to make only slightly more perceptible the kinds of double binds always presented to a woman who attempts to enter Western music. Second, I will turn to her music and examine some of the ways she operates within a persistently re-

pressive discourse to create liberatory musical images. Finally I will present a brief discussion of the music videos "Open Your Heart" and "Like a Prayer," in which I consider the interactions between musical and visual components.

Throughout this essay, I will be writing of Madonna in a way that assigns considerable credit and responsibility to her as a creator of texts. To be sure, the products ascribed to Madonna are the result of complex collaborative processes involving the input of co-writers, co-producers, studio musicians, video directors, technicians, marketing specialists, and so forth. As is the case in most pop, there is no single originary genius for this music.

Yet the testimonies of co-workers and interviewers indicate that Madonna is very much in control of almost every dimension of her media persona and her career. Even though certain components of songs or videos are contributed by other artists, she has won and fiercely maintains the right to decide finally what will be released under her name. It may be that Madonna is best understood as head of a corporation that produces images of her self-representation, rather than as the spontaneous, "authentic" artist of rock mythology. But a puppet she's not. As she puts it:

People have this idea that if you're sexual and beautiful and provocative, then there's nothing else you could possibly offer. People have *always* had that image about women. And while it might have seemed like I was behaving in a stereotypical way, at the same time, I was also masterminding it. I was in control of everything I was doing, and I think that when people realized that, it confused them.⁶

I am stressing Madonna's agency in her own self-representation in part because there is such a powerful tendency for her agency to be erased completely—for her to be seen as just a mindless doll fulfilling male fantasies of anonymous puppeteers. This particular strategy for dismissing Madonna has always seemed odd to me because the fantasies she enacts are not very successful at being male fantasies, if that is their objective: they often inspire discomfort and anxiety among men who wish to read her as a genuine "Boy Toy."⁷ And I am rather amused when men who are otherwise not conspicuously concerned with feminist issues attack Madonna for setting the cause of women back twenty years—especially because so many girls and women (some of them feminist theorists, including even Betty Friedan)⁸ perceive her music and videos as articulating a whole new set of possible feminine subject positions. Furthermore, her spirited, self-confident statements in interviews (several of which are sprinkled liberally

throughout this essay) tend to lend support to the interpretations of female fans.

Yet Madonna's agency is not hers alone: even if she wrote everything she performs all by herself, it would still be important to remember that her music and personae are produced within a variety of social discursive practices. Her style is assembled from the musics of many different genres, and her visual images draw upon the conventions of female representation that circulate in film, advertisements, and stage shows. Indeed, in order to be as effective as she unquestionably is, she has to speak intelligibly to the cultural experiences and perceptions of her audience. Her voices are credible precisely because they engage so provocatively with ongoing cultural conversations about gender, power, and pleasure.

Moreover, as will be demonstrated throughout this essay, Madonna's art itself repeatedly deconstructs the traditional notion of the unified subject with finite ego boundaries. Her pieces explore—sometimes playfully, sometimes seriously—various ways of constituting identities that refuse stability, that remain fluid, that resist definition. This tendency in her work has become increasingly pronounced: for instance, in her recent, controversial video “Express Yourself” (which borrows its imagery from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*), she slips in and out of every subject position offered within the video's narrative context—including those of the cat and the tyrannical master of industry—refusing more than ever to deliver the security of a clear, unambiguous message or an “authentic” self.

Thus I do not want to suggest that she (of all artists!) is a solitary creator who ultimately determines fixed meanings for her pieces. But I will focus on how a woman artist can make a difference within discourse. To strip Madonna of all conscious intention in her work is to reduce her once again to a voiceless, powerless bimbo. In a world in which many people assert that she (along with most other women artists) can't have meant what one sees and hears because she isn't smart enough, claims of intentionality, agency, and authorship become extremely important strategically.

1

Although there are some notable exceptions, women have traditionally been barred from participating in Western music. The barriers that have prevented them from participation have occasionally been formal: in the seventeenth century there were even papal edicts proscribing women's musical education.⁹ More often, however, women are discouraged through more subtle means from considering themselves as potential musicians. As macho rock star David Lee Roth (rarely accused of being an ardent feminist)

observes: “What if a little girl picked up a guitar and said ‘I wanna be a rock star.’ Nine times out of ten her parents would never allow her to do it. We don't have so many lead guitar women, not because women don't have the ability to play the instrument, but because they're kept locked up, taught to be something else. I don't appreciate that.”¹⁰

Women have, of course, been discouraged from writing or painting as well, and feminist scholars in literary and art history have already made the barriers hindering women in those areas familiar. But there are additional factors that still make female participation in music riskier than in either literature or the visual arts. First, the charismatic performance of one's music is often crucial to its promotion and transmission. Whether Liszt in his matinee-idol piano recitals, Elvis on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” or the aforementioned David Lee Roth, the composer-performer often relies heavily on manipulating audience response through his enactments of sexual power and desire.¹¹

However, for a man to enact his sexuality is not the same as for a woman: throughout Western history, women musicians have usually been assumed to be publicly available, have had to fight hard against pressures to yield, or have accepted the granting of sexual favors as one of the prices of having a career. The seventeenth-century composer Barbara Strozzi—one of the very few women to compete successfully in elite music composition—may have been forced by her agent-pimp of a father to pose for a bare-breasted publicity portrait as part of his plan for launching her career.¹² Women on the stage are viewed as sexual commodities regardless of their appearance or seriousness. Brahms pleaded with the aging Clara Schumann (provocatively dressed, to be sure, in widow's weeds) to leave off her immodest composition and concertizing.¹³ One of Madonna's principal accomplishments is that she brings this hypocrisy to the surface and problematizes it.

Second, musical discourse has been carefully guarded from female participation in part because of its ability to articulate patterns of desire. Music is an extremely powerful medium, all the more so because most listeners have little rational control over the way it influences them. The mind/body split that has plagued Western culture for centuries shows up most paradoxically in attitudes toward music: the most cerebral, nonmaterial of media is at the same time the medium most capable of engaging the body. This confusion over whether music belongs with mind or with body is intensified when the fundamental binary opposition of masculine/feminine is mapped onto it.¹⁴ To the very large extent that mind is defined as masculine and body as feminine in Western culture, music is always in danger of being perceived as a feminine (or effeminate) enterprise altogether.¹⁵ And one of the means of asserting masculine control over the medium is by denying the

very possibility of participation by women. For how can an enterprise be feminine if actual women are excluded?

Women are not, of course, entirely absent from traditional music spectacle: women characters may even be highlighted as stars in operas. But opera, like the other genres of Western music, is an almost exclusively male domain in that men write both libretti and music, direct the stage action, and interpret the scores. Thus it is not surprising that operas tend to articulate and reinforce precisely the sexual politics just described. The proceedings are controlled by a discourse organized in accordance with masculine interests—a discourse that offers up the female as spectacle while guaranteeing that she will not step out of line. Sometimes desire is articulated by the male character while the passive, domesticated female simply acquiesces. In such instances, the potential violence of male domination is not necessarily in evidence: the piece seems to unfold in accordance with the “natural” (read: patriarchal) sexual hierarchy.

But a kind of desire-dread-purge mechanism prevails in operas in which the tables are turned and a passive male encounters a strong, sexually aggressive female character. In operas such as *Carmen*, *Lulu*, and *Salome*, the “victimized male” who has been aroused by the temptress finally must kill her in order to reinstate social order.¹⁶ Even in so-called absolute music (instrumental music in which there is no explicit extramusical or programmatic component), the themes conventionally designated as “feminine” must be domesticated or eradicated for the sake of narrative closure.¹⁷

The ways in which fear of female sexuality and anxiety over the body are inscribed in the Western music tradition are obviously very relevant for the would-be (wannabe?) woman musician. First, women are located within the discourse in a position of both desire and dread—as that which must reveal that it is controlled by the male or which must be purged as intolerable. Many male attacks on Madonna unself-consciously locate their terror in the fact that she is not under masculine control. Like *Carmen* or *Lulu*, she invokes the body and feminine sexuality; but unlike them, she refuses to be framed by a structure that will push her back into submission or annihilation. Madonna interprets the problem as follows:

I think for the most part men have always been the aggressors sexually. Through time immemorial they've always been in control. So I think sex is equated with power in a way, and that's scary in a way. It's scary for men that women would have that power, and I think it's scary for women to have that power—or to have that power and be sexy at the same time.¹⁸

Second, the particular popular discourse within which Madonna

works—that of dance—is the genre of music most closely associated with physical motion. The mind/body-masculine/feminine problem places dance decisively on the side of the “feminine” body rather than with the objective “masculine” intellect. It is for this reason that dance music in general usually is dismissed by music critics, even by “serious” rock critics. Recall the hysterical scorn heaped upon disco when it emerged, and recall also that disco was the music that underwrote the gay movement, black urban clubs, *Saturday Night Fever*'s images of working-class leisure, and other contexts that did not conform to the cherished ideal of (white, male, heterosexual, middle-class) rebel rock.¹⁹ Similar dismissals of dance music can be found throughout the critical history of Western “serious” music. To the extent that the appeal is to physicality rather than abstracted listening, dance music is often trivialized at the same time that its power to distract and arouse is regarded with anxiety.²⁰

Madonna works out of a discursive tradition that operates according to premises somewhat different from those of mainstream Western music. Her musical affiliations are with African-American music, with a culture that places great value on dance and physical engagement in music. It also is a culture that has always had prominent female participants: there are no white equivalents of Bessie Smith or Aretha Franklin—women who sing powerfully of both the spiritual and the erotic without the punitive, misogynist frame of European culture.²¹ In critiquing Madonna's music, Dave Marsh (usually a defender of Madonna) once wrote, “A white Deniece Williams we don't need.”²² But perhaps that is precisely what we *do* need: a white woman musician who can create images of desire without the demand within the discourse itself that she be destroyed.

2

Madonna writes or co-writes most of her own material. Her first album was made up principally of her tunes. She surrendered some of the writing responsibility on *Like a Virgin* (interestingly, two of the songs that earned her so much notoriety—“Material Girl” and “Like a Virgin”—were written by men). But in her third album, *True Blue*, she is credited (along with her principal collaborators, Stephen Bray and Patrick Leonard) with co-production and with the co-writing of everything except “Papa Don't Preach.” She co-wrote and co-produced (with Bray, Leonard, and Prince) all of the songs on her most recent album, *Like a Prayer*. It is quite rare for women singers to contribute so much to the composition of their materials, and it is almost unheard of for them to acquire the skills required for production. Indeed, very few performers of either sex attain sufficient prestige and power

within the recording business to be able to demand that kind of artistic control.

Madonna's music is deceptively simple. On one level, it is very good dance music: inevitably compelling grooves, great energy. It is important to keep in mind that before she even presented her scandalous video images to the public, she had attracted a sizable following among the discerning participants of the black and gay disco scenes through her music alone. She remains one of the few white artists (along with George Michael) who regularly show up on the black charts.

Her music deliberately aims at a wide popular audience rather than at those who pride themselves on their elite aesthetic discrimination. Her enormous commercial success is often held against her, as evidence that she plays for the lowest common denominator—that she prostitutes her art (and, by extension, herself).²³ Moreover, the fact that her music appeals to masses of young girls is usually taken as proof that the music has absolutely no substance, for females in our culture are generally thought to be incapable of understanding music on even a rudimentary level. But surely Madonna's power as a figure in cultural politics is linked to her ability to galvanize that particular audience—among others.²⁴

To create music within a male-defined domain is a treacherous task. As some women composers of so-called serious or experimental music are discovering, many of the forms and conventional procedures of presumably value-free music are saturated with hidden patriarchal narratives, images, agendas.²⁵ The options available to a woman musician in rock music are especially constrictive, for this musical discourse is typically characterized by its phallic backbeat. It is possible to try to downplay that beat, to attempt to defuse its energy—but this strategy often results in music that sounds enervated or stereotypically “feminine.” It is also possible to appropriate the phallic energy of rock and to demonstrate (as Chrissie Hynde, Joan Jett, and Lita Ford do so very well) that boys don't have any corner on that market. But that beat can always threaten to overwhelm: witness Janet Jackson's containment by producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis in (ironically) her song “Control.”²⁶

Madonna's means of negotiating for a voice in rock resemble very much the strategies of her visual constructions; that is, she evokes a whole range of conventional signifiers and then causes them to rub up against each other in ways that are open to a variety of divergent readings, many of them potentially empowering to girls and women. She offers musical structures that promise narrative closure, and at the same time she resists or subverts them. A traditional energy flow is managed—which is why to many ears the

whole complex seems always already absorbed—but that flow is subtly re-directed.

The most obvious of her strategies is irony: the irony of the little-girl voice in “Like a Virgin” or of fifties girl-group sentiment in “True Blue.” Like her play with the signs of famous temptresses, bustiers, and pouts, her engagement with traditional musical signs of childish vulnerability projects her knowledge that this is what the patriarchy expects of her and also her awareness that this fantasy is ludicrous. Her unsupervised parody destroys a much-treasured male illusion: even as she sings “True blue, baby, I love you,” she becomes a disconcerting figure—the woman who knows too much, who is not at all the blank virginal slate she pretends to present. But to her female audience, her impersonation of these musical types is often received with delight as a knowing wink, a gesture of empowerment.²⁷

Madonna's engagement with images of the past is not always to be understood as parody, however. Some of the historical figures she impersonates are victims of traditions in opera and popular culture that demand death as the price for sexuality.²⁸ Principal among the victims she invokes are Carmen and Marilyn Monroe, both highly desired, sexual women who were simultaneously idolized and castigated, and finally sacrificed to patriarchal standards of behavior. It is in her explicit acknowledgment of the traditional fate of artistic women who dare be erotic and yet in her refusal to fall likewise a victim that Madonna becomes far more serious about what have been referred to as “sign crimes.”²⁹ If the strategy of appropriating and redefining conventional codes is the same in these more serious pieces as in the “True Blue” parody, the stakes are much, much higher.

3

In order to account for the radical quality of the music in “Live to Tell” (and later, “Like a Prayer”), I must once again return to the assumptions that guarantee the tonal narratives of the masculine canon since the seventeenth century. Since these assumptions have been discussed at length in previous chapters, I will only reiterate those that seem necessary for the purposes at hand. [Tonal music is narratively conceived at least to the extent that the original key area—the tonic—also serves as the final goal. Tonal structures are organized teleologically, with the illusion of unitary identity promised at the end of each piece. But in order for pieces to have any narrative content, they must depart from the tonic and enact an adventure in which other key areas are visited (theorists sometimes say “conquered”) and in which the certainty of tonal identity is at least temporarily suspended. Otherwise there is no plot. Yet with the exception of a few pieces in the nineteenth century

and early twentieth that deliberately call into question the premises of this narrative schema, the outcome—the inevitable return to tonic—is always known in advance. To the extent that “Other” keys stand in the way of unitary identity, they must finally be subdued for the sake of narrative closure.³⁰ They serve as moments both of desire (because without the apparent longing to approach these other keys, there is only stagnation) and of dread (because they threaten identity).

As we have already seen, such narratives can easily be observed in nineteenth-century symphonies, in which lyrical “feminine” themes are encountered and then annexed (for the sake of closure and generic convention) to the key of the “masculine” theme. The more seductive or traumatic the encounter with the Other, the more violent the “necessary” heroic reaction. Beethoven’s symphonies are especially telling in this regard: in the *Eroica*, an unprecedented level of dissonant bashing seems “required” to maintain thematic, rhythmic, and tonal identity. The struggle appears justified in the end, however, when we get to hear the uninterrupted transcendence of the theme in its tonic homeland.³¹ In the Ninth Symphony, in which identity is marked as far more tentative, the violence levels are even higher. The arcadian third movement (a rare moment in which Beethoven permits dialogue and freedom of movement without the suggestion of overt anxiety) is self-consciously obliterated by the crashing dissonance introducing the finale’s so-called “Ode to Joy.”³²

Most popular music avoids this schema, for songs typically are content with the sustaining of harmonic identity. There is usually no implied Other within these musical procedures, no structural obstacle or threat to overcome. However, all that is required to transform these stable procedures into narratives is for a detail to be problematized—to be construed as Other and as an obstacle to the configuration defined as Self or identity. In such songs, time becomes organized around the expectation of intensified conflict, climax, and eventual resolution. They adopt, in other words, the same desire-dread-purge sequence that characterizes the narratives of so much classical music and literature.

Rock songs that work on the basis of this sequence can be found from Led Zeppelin to The Cult’s “Fire Woman [you’re to blame]” or Dokken’s “Kiss of Death.” I will discuss as examples a couple of songs by the heavy metal band Whitesnake. Several of Whitesnake’s songs quite clearly enact within the music the excitement of interacting with the area of the Other (personified in their videos by Tawny Kitaen as temptress) and yet the horror of being sucked in by that area, which precipitates and justifies outbreaks of violence for the sake of identity consolidation.

“Here I Go Again” defines the sixth degree of the scale as the moment of desire and also of potential entrapment. The choice of that scale degree is not accidental: there is a strong gravitational tendency in tonal music for six (a relatively weak position, sometimes referred to as “feminine”) to resolve down to five, which belongs to the (“masculine”) tonic triad. In pop as in classical music procedures, the tonic is rather boring by itself, and lingering on the sixth degree can create a delicious tension. However, if six threatens to take over, then identity may be destroyed. In “Here I Go Again,” so-called deceptive cadences on the sixth degree repeatedly rob the piece of certainty, yet create precisely the sense of nostalgic longing that characterizes the song. Its spectacularly enacted “climax” occurs only after a prolonged episode in which the harmony seems paralyzed on the “feminine” modal degrees, and the violence of the climax permits the return to the progressions that define quintessential masculine cadential control. The piece concludes, however, not with certainty but with a fade; and in the video, the fade is accompanied by images of a devouring Kitaen hauling lead singer David Coverdale over into the back seat of the car he is driving. This is what happens, apparently, when the purge is unsuccessful.

In “Still of the Night,” the threat is far more intense, both musically and theatrically. At the end of the first verse (on the words “in the still of the night”), Coverdale strains upward—both vocally and physically, as though in orgasm—to hold onto the sixth degree, before returning decisively to tonic control. The second time through, however, both the heroic Coverdale and the harmony get trapped for what seems an interminable duration in that position which has been so carefully defined as that of desire. The energy drains away, the musical and physical gestures mime impotence, and Kitaen struts about striking menacing poses. For a long time, there seems to be no possibility of escape or return. When the musical energy finally manages to extricate itself from the abyss, the rest of the piece is concerned with attempting violently to purge the contaminating element. In the video, this eradication sequence is dramatized visually as Kitaen is dragged off and tossed into a paddy wagon marked “Sex Police.”

What we have here once again—in the abstract symphony as well as these particular metal fantasies—is the playing out in music of the same classic schema of Western masculine subjectivity we have been tracing throughout all of these essays. Of course, music is not the only cultural artifact that operates in this manner. John Fiske has written about how it informs the narrative conventions of popular episodic television shows such as “Magnum P.I.”:

Like all ideological constructs, masculinity is constantly under threat—it can never rest on its laurels. The threats come

internally from its insecure bases in the rejection of the mother (and the guilt that this inspires) and the suppression of the feminine, and externally from social forces, which may vary from the rise of the women's movement to the way that the organization of work denies many men the independence and power that their masculinity requires. Thus masculinity has to be constantly reached, rewon. This constant need to reach masculinity is one of the underlying reasons for the popularity of the frequent televisual display of male performance.³³

Likewise, critics such as Teresa de Lauretis, Susan Bordo, and Mieke Bal have written about how the schema is inscribed and transmitted in literature, film, philosophy, theology, science.³⁴ But our topic here is music, and, as we have seen, a great deal of music too is organized in accordance with this pattern. Indeed, music without words (so-called absolute music) is especially prone to relying on it, to treating it as though it were a design dictated by natural or metaphysical law.

But it is one thing to be aware of this schema and its implications as an analyst and theorist. It is quite another to take the formal procedures conventionally inscribed within these discourses and cause them to tell another story. Especially if one finds oneself always already cast by society in the position of the Other rather than that of the "universal" (i.e., masculine) Self.

4

In the stage performance of "Live to Tell," the backdrop of the stage is filled with a huge projection of Madonna as Monroe, the quintessential female victim of commercial culture. The instrumental introduction sets up a bass pedal on D, performed by an inert synthesizer sonority utterly lacking in warmth. Over the pedal, a series of bleak open fifths mechanically marks the pulses of the metric order as though they are inevitable. This stark image alternates with an energetic pattern that emerges suddenly in the area of the relative major, F. The second sound-image differs from the opening sonority in part because the major key is semiotically associated with hope. Moreover, the bass is active rather than static, and it resists the apparent inevitability of the opening meter by anticipating slightly each of its changes: it seems to possess freedom of motion. However, just as this passage seems on the brink of establishing F major as the principal point of reference, it is re-contained by the clanging fifths and the empty pedal on D. A traditional reading would understand D (with its pedal and fifths) as fundamental (as that which defines identity) and F major as the "feminine" region, which—

even if it offers the illusion of hope, escape, and freedom—must be contained and finally purged for the sake of satisfactory closure.³⁵

When she begins singing the verse, Madonna steps temporarily outside of this dichotomy of D-versus-F to sing over a new pedal on C. As she sings, her voice repeatedly falls lethargically back to the void of the C-pedal, as though she cannot overcome the gravitational pull it and the meter exert. Her text suggests that she has a weighty, long-buried "tale to tell," and her language ("I was not ready for the fall," "the writing on the wall") resonates with biblical references. If she as a woman is necessarily identified as the Other, as she who is held responsible for "the Fall," how is she to enter into narrative? How to step into a musical procedure in which the choices are already so loaded?

With the chorus ("a man can tell a thousand lies"), she opts for the warmer major key of F, her momentum picks up, and she begins to sound as though she will establish this more affirmative region as her tonic or point of reference. However, to close in this second region—conventionally the "feminine" position—is to accept as identity the patriarchal definition of femininity. Moreover, to the extent that F major is not the opening key, to cadence here is to choose fantasy; for while this key is reassuring and nurturing, it is not "reality" as the piece defines it initially. And formal convention would dictate that this second key area must eventually be absorbed and purged. Thus closure here is revealed as perilous. At the last moment before the implied cadence ("it will burn inside of *me*"), she holds to a pitch incompatible with harmonic closure. The age-old contrapuntal norm would dictate that her melodic pitch (once again the sixth degree, the image of desire in the Whitesnake piece) must resolve down to conform with the bass. Instead, her melodic pitch and the harmonic backdrop hold in a standoff until the bass—not the melody—moves to conform to the melody's (that is, to *her*) will.

The pitch cadenced on, however, is D; and while it defies immediate closure, it also strikes the common tone that permits the pitiless pedal of the beginning to return. As before, Madonna steps outside the dilemma to C for a verse in which she wearily comments on her subjective knowledge of beauty, warmth, truth, light even in the face of this apparent no-win situation. But eventually she must rejoin the world in which she has to engage with the choice between F and D, and once again she works to avoid closure in either.

Finally, after this escape-recontainment process has occurred a couple of times, the bottom suddenly drops out. It sounds as though the piece has ended in the foreordained defeat of the victim—she who is offered only the second-position slot in the narrative schema. In her live performance, at this

point Madonna sinks to the floor and lies motionless for what seems an interminable length of time. There is silence except for the low, lifeless synthesizer drone on D. For someone like myself who is used to this scenario as the inevitable end of my heroines, witnessing this moment from a performer who has been so brash, so bursting with erotic energy and animation, is bitter indeed. But then she rises from the floor, bearing with her the ghosts of all those victims—Marilyn most explicitly, but also Carmen, bare-breasted Barbara Strozzi, and all the others who were purged for the sake of social order and narrative closure—and begins singing again.

In order to take charge of the narrative procedure, Madonna begins to oscillate strategically between the two tonal poles on D and F. As she sings “If I ran away, I’d never have the strength,” she sings over a bass that moves up and down indecisively between D and A (mediant of F, but dominant of D), suggesting a blurred region in which both keys cohabit. When the opening dilemma returns, she prevents the recontainment gesture of the fifths by anticipating their rhythmic moment of reentry and jumping in to interpose the F-major refrain instead. So long as she manages thus to switch back and forth, she can determine the musical discourse. To settle for an option—either option—is to accept a lie, for it is flexibility in identity rather than unitary definition that permits her to “live to tell.” The piece ends not with definitive closure but with a fade. As long as we can hear her, she continues to fluctuate.

This extraordinary song finally is not about unambiguous triumph: triumph would be easy to simulate, since this is what tonal pieces conventionally do. Yet given the premises of this song, triumphant closure would be impossible to believe. Moreover, it would merely reproduce the structure of oppression that informs narrative convention. Rather it is about staying in motion for the sake of survival, resisting closure wherever it lies in wait.³⁶

By thus creating songs that refuse to choose between identity and Other—that invoke and then reject the very terms of this schema of narrative organization—Madonna is engaged in rewriting some very fundamental levels of Western thought. In “Live to Tell,” the two clear regions of the traditional narrative schema seem to be implied. Semiotically, the unyielding fifths are “masculine,” the lyrical, energetic refrain, “feminine,” and the early part of the piece reveals that the fifths are formally designed to contain the excess and relative freedom of the refrain. But to the extent that identification with the feminine moment in the narrative spells death, the piece cannot embrace this space as reality without losing strategic control. Thus the singer risks resisting identification with “her own” area, even if it means repeated encounters with that which would contain her. In a sense, she sets up residence on the moments of the harmonic context that fluctuate be-

tween desire and dread on the one hand and resolution on the other. Rather than deciding for the sake of secure identity (a move that would lapse back into the narrative of masculine subjectivity), she inhabits both and thus refuses closure.

Formulations such as this are all the more remarkable because the ideological implications of musical narratives are only now beginning to be analyzed by cultural critics. The fact that some of Madonna’s music enacts models of organization that correspond to formulations of critics such as Teresa de Lauretis need not suggest that Madonna is a connoisseur of critical theory. Yet to the extent that de Lauretis and Madonna inhabit the same historical world and grapple with the same kinds of problems with respect to feminine identity, their similarities are not entirely coincidental either. And Madonna is as much an expert in the arena of musical signification as de Lauretis is in theoretical discourse. It seems clear that she has grasped the assumptions embedded within these basic musical mechanisms and is audaciously redirecting them.

It must be conceded that male musicians could construct forms along these lines if they wanted to do so—there is nothing essentially feminine about what Madonna is doing in this piece. But most men would not perceive that there was a problem in the standard narrative, would not enact struggles that involve resistance to purging the alien element.³⁷ The strategies of Madonna’s songs are those of one who has radically conflicting subject positions—one who has been taught to cheer for resolutions in cultural narratives, but who also realizes that she is of the sort that typically gets purged for the sake of that resolution. Madonna’s refusal of definition (which infuriates many a critic) goes beyond the paradox of her name, her persona, her visual imagery. It also produces brave new musical procedures.

5

Having thus been converted to Madonna as a musician who dares to create liberatory visions, I find the necessity of reading her music videos all the more urgent. Visual images seem to speak much louder than music—at least critics of Madonna’s videos have found it difficult to notice the music, given the provocative nature of the pictures. Yet it is generally accepted that music in film covertly directs the affective responses of viewers far more than they know. I would suggest that the *music* in music videos is largely responsible for the narrative continuity and the affective quality in the resultant work, even if it is the visual images we remember concretely.³⁸

I was acquainted with the song “Open Your Heart” long before I saw the video attached to it. While affectively much more upbeat than “Live to

Tell," the musical imagery of "Open Your Heart" shares many of its resistant qualities: up against the shimmering, pulsating energy of the backup, Madonna avoids conforming to the beat; and, at cadences, she subverts expected points of arrival. But unlike in "Live to Tell," in which resistance indicates sheer survival, the play with closure in "Open Your Heart" creates the image of open-ended jouissance—an erotic energy that continually escapes containment.

By contrast, the video of "Open Your Heart" begins not in a visual field of open erotic joy but rather in the confined environment of a peep show. Madonna sings the song from the center of a carousel that revolves to display her to the gazes of customers peering safely from their cubicles. Here she becomes Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*, her usually exuberant motion restrained to what she is able to accomplish with her only prop: a stationary chair. At one point in the first segment of the video, she is filmed dancing; but the camera is almost still, and her motions are confined to the small range the static camera can take in.

This confinement is especially noteworthy given the extraordinary exhilaration of the music: the tension between the visual and musical dimensions of the video is extremely unsettling. Only when she disappears from the carousel and reappears to run away from her patriarchal boss with the young boy do the music and visuals begin to be compatible. In other words, two very different narrative strata are present in the video: that of the relatively consistent rhythmic energy in the music versus that of the transformation from patriarchal puppet to androgynous kid in the visuals.

Like many of Madonna's strategies, the one she attempts in this video is quite audacious. For instance, the peep show situation is shot in such a way that the leering patrons are rendered pathetic and grotesque, while she alone lays claim to subjectivity: thus, the usual power relationship between the voyeuristic male gaze and object is here destabilized. Likewise, the young boy's game of impersonating the femme fatale and Madonna's transvestism at the end both refuse essentialist gender categories and turn sexual identity into a kind of play. Still, the video is risky, because for all those who have reduced her to "a porn queen in heat," there she is: embodying that image to the max. Those features of the video that resist a reductive reading of this sort—the nonfit of the music, the power inversions, the narrative of escape to androgyny—can easily be overlooked. This is, of course, always the peril of attempting to deconstruct pornographic images: it becomes necessary to invoke the image in order to perform the deconstruction; but, once presented, the image is in fact there in all its glory.

In this video, Madonna confronts the most pernicious of her stereotypes and then attempts to channel it into a very different realm: a realm where the

feminine erotic need not be the object of the patriarchal gaze, where its energy can motivate play and nonsexual pleasure. The end of this video is as tenuous as the transcendent pitch in "Live to Tell": it speaks not of certainty, but of horizons, of possibilities, of the hope of survival within available discursive practices.

6

These themes—survival, pleasure, resistance to closure—are reengaged most dramatically in Madonna's recent song and video, "Like a Prayer." In contrast to the relationship between sight and sound in "Open Your Heart," the tensions she is putting into play in this music video are virtually all audible within the music itself, prior to the visual images. Moreover, many of the tensions that have always surrounded her personae are here made explicit.

The central dichotomy she inevitably invokes is that of the virgin and the whore.³⁹ Her name (actually, fortuitously, her given name: Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone), her apparently casual flaunting of crucifixes and rosaries as accessories, and her overtly erotic dress and behavior have consistently thrown into confusion the terms of that standard binary opposition; but what precisely she means by this play of signs has never been obvious. Indeed, many critics have taken her use of religious imagery to be a prime example of what Fredric Jameson calls "blank pastiche": the symbols are seen as detached from their traditional contexts and thus as ceasing to signify.⁴⁰ However, Madonna's insistence on the codes of Catholic iconography has always at least potentially engaged with the sedimented memory of that tradition, even if only negatively—as blasphemy. In "Like a Prayer," the religious connotations of her entire project are reactivated and reinterpreted. But although this set of issues is finally foregrounded, her treatment of these highly sensitive themes is quite unexpected and, as it turns out, highly controversial.

The song draws upon two very different semiotic codes associated with two very different forms of Christianity: Catholicism and the black Gospel church. These codes would seem at first glance to be incompatible. But Madonna is tapping into a tradition of Catholicism that has long been suppressed: that of the female mystics such as Saint Teresa who claimed to have experienced mystical union with Christ.⁴¹ In Saint Teresa's writings, religious ecstasy is described through images of sexual ecstasy, for the intensity of her relationship with the deity could only be expressed verbally to other human beings through metaphors of submission, penetration, even orgasm. In the seventeenth century, composers of sacred music freely borrowed im-

ages of desire and eroticism from the steamy operatic stage for purposes of their devotionals and worship services, for these experiences were thought to be relevant to the new forms of personalized faith encouraged by both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation.⁴²

After the seventeenth century, this strain of religious erotic imagery was purged from most mainstream Christian denominations, only to reemerge occasionally during moments of intense emotional revivalism. Certain forms of charismatic fundamentalism since the eighteenth century have employed erotic imagery for purposes of inducing personalized meditation or even trance states and speaking in tongues. Both Bach's pietistic bride-and-groom duets (see *Cantata 140*) and Jerry Lee Lewis's evangelical rock 'n' roll ("Whole Lot of Shakin' Goin' On") testify to this phenomenon. However, the semiotic connections between religious and sexual ecstasy are most consistently apparent in the black Gospel churches. Throughout its history (as preserved on recordings), Gospel has freely borrowed musical and poetic styles from the secular music of its day: witness, for instance, the mergers with jazz, blues, funk, and rap evident on present-day Gospel radio stations—or, for that matter, the entire career of Aretha Franklin. Moreover, the Gospel church continually produces new generations of black pop musicians whose music is fueled by the fervent energy of that spiritual context.

"Like a Prayer" opens with an invocation of stereotyped mystical Catholicism: with the halo of a wordless (heavenly) choir and the fundamental accompaniment of a "timeless" pipe organ as she sings of how "Life is a mystery." But with the words "When you call my name" (when, in other words, she is hailed as a new kind of subject), Madonna breaks into ecstatic, funky, Gospel-flavored dance music. These two moments are distinguished for narrative purposes through the same harmonic contrast between D minor and F major as in "Live to Tell." What seems to be a struggle between mystical timelessness on D minor and exuberant, physical celebration on F major ensues. This time, however, she is not afraid to embrace F as tonic, especially when halfway through, on the words "your voice can take me there," she lands decisively on that pitch.

But D minor does not disappear entirely—it reenters for a long, rather sinister return of the beginning material in the middle of the song. Eventually, however, the music is channeled back to F major for more celebration. Gradually D minor comes to serve only for "deceptive" cadences. Traditionally deceptive cadences spell disappointment, a jarring intervention at the promised moment of identity. But in "Like a Prayer," they provide the means of avoiding closure and maintaining the dance. Finally, in the long, ecstatic coda to the song, F major and D minor at cadences become in a sense interchangeable: no longer self and Other, they become two flickering

moments in a flexible identity that embraces them both, that remains constant only insofar as both continue to be equally present.

This is similar to the strategy of "Live to Tell," except that here the music itself does not involve the suggestion of threatened annihilation. But the controversial video released with the album sets up something like the external threats of containment articulated in "Live to Tell." The video is organized in terms of an inside and an outside. Outside the church is the world of Ku Klux Klan cross-burnings, of rape and murder, of racist authority. One of the most striking moments in the video occurs when Madonna dances provocatively in front of the burning crosses, aggressively defying those who burn crosses to contain her and her sexuality as well. And, indeed, Madonna has testified to having planned originally to present an even more extreme scenario: "I had all these ideas about me running away with the black guy and both of us getting shot by the KKK."⁴³ Video director Mary Lambert says of the segment with the burning crosses: "That's an ecstatic vision. The cross is a cautionary symbol and Madonna's performance throughout has been tortured and emotional. The inference of Ku Klux Klan racism is there, but the burning cross is an older symbol than the Klan. Saints had it. It symbolizes the wrath of God."⁴⁴

But inside the church is the possibility of community, love, faith, and interracial bonding. The references to Catholic mysticism and the black Gospel church are made explicit in the visuals, with a heady mixture of a miraculously weeping statue, the stigmata, the Saint Teresa-like union between the saint and the believer, and the highly physical musical performance by the Andraé Crouch choir. Within the security of the church, difference can be overcome and the boundless joy of the music can become reality.⁴⁵ As in "Live to Tell," this song is about survival rather than simple triumph. And it is about the possibility of creating musical and visual narratives that celebrate multiple rather than unitary identities, that are concerned with ecstatic continuation rather than with purging and containment.⁴⁶

In a world in which the safe options for women musicians seem to be either denying gender difference or else restricting the expression of feminine pleasure to all-women contexts, Madonna's counternarratives of female heterosexual desire are remarkable. The intelligence with which she zeroes in on the fundamental gender tensions in culture and the courage with which she takes them on deserve much greater credit than she usually is given. That she manages both to outrage those who would have her conform and to delight those who are still trying to puzzle out their own future options within this society indicates that her strategies are by and large successful. If

Madonna does, in fact, “live to tell”—that is, survive as a viable cultural force—an extraordinarily powerful reflex action of patriarchy will have been successfully challenged.