POPULAR HERMENEUTICS:
A Comparison of Roman Catholic and Secular Responses to Sexual Imagery in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Roman Catholic and secular responses to sexual imagery in popular culture. The Catholic and socio-philosophical responses may be subdivided according to specific ideal types to elucidate the major ideological and ethical movements operative within these two hermeneutical traditions. I use the media luminary Madonna as a case study to illustrate the inadequacy of much that Catholic and secular cultural critics have written about religiously ambiguous and sexually provocative popular culture phenomena. Typically, secular critics neglect the religious implications of such phenomena, while Catholic critics overlook their ideological implications. I shall demonstrate both that hermeneutical exclusivity weakens the two major approaches and that only methodologies which take seriously both Catholic and secular insights are appropriate for analyzing this aspect of popular culture.

RESUMÉ

Ce memoire de maitrise examine les réactions de l'église catholique romaine et du monde laïc à l'imagerie sexuelle dans la culture populaire. Les réactions catholiques et socio-philosophiques peuvent être subdivisées selon des types modèles spécifiques pour clarifier les mouvements idéologiques et ethiques majeurs qui opèrent à l'intérieur de ces deux traditions d'analyse. L'étoile médiatique Madonna est utilisée pour illustrer les insuffisances généralement rencontrées dans les écrits des critiques culturels catholiques et laïcs à propos de phénomènes culturels populaire, qui sont sexuellement provocant et dont la connotation réligieuse est ambigue. Typiquement, les critiques laics négligent les implications réligieuses de ces phénomènes, tandis que les critiques catholiques passent sous silence les implications idéologiques. Je démontrerai que ces deux approches majeures temoignent des faiblesses associées avec une certain étroitesse d'analyse, et que les deux approches sont nécessaires pour une compréhension globale de la culture populaire.

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This thesis is dedicated to my best friend, Rebeccah McArton.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The conventional boundaries of academic religious discourse now appear somewhat constraining as scholars of religious studies venture into the realm of the social sciences. This growing concern with the relation between things cultural and things religious has opened up an exciting new area of religious reflection. Still in its infancy, one of the most interesting fields within this somewhat amorphous area is the study of the relation of religion to popular culture.

Before I proceed, I should clarify what I mean by "popular culture". The term denotes those movements and media in our society[1] which enjoy broad, that is to say, popular support. It is distinguished from "high culture", with its connotations of the world of symphonies, operas, philosophy and non-representational art. Sociologist Andrew Greeley suggests that popular culture is produced by "the people", as opposed to "high culture" which is produced by "the self-defined élites" (Greeley 1988, 10). Although these categories have become considerably more ambiguous in this century as artists and intellectuals "deconstruct" conventional media and artistic classifications, they still function usefully as ideal types of cultural analysis.

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[1] I focus primarily on North America; but as Joseph Nye points out, "the United States...has a universalistic popular culture and a major role in international institutions" (Nye 120).

refers to localized cultural forms (e.g., the culture of Inuit hunters) while the former, at least in the manner I am using it, refers to a largely international phenomenon governed through the mass media by large corporations often catering to a young audience.

Marshall McLuhan's famous axiom, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 8) communicates the now obvious insight that every medium is predisposed towards a particular type of message. One can also argue that every cultural medium has a fairly characteristic manner of presenting particular images (and the messages they imply). For my purposes, it is important to observe that the media normally associated with popular culture have unique ways of portraying images related to human sexuality and eroticism.

This thesis represents a consideration -- or perhaps reconsideration -- of the relevance of religious responses to that great behemoth called popular culture. I should emphasize that "relevance" is the crucial issue. For unless religious responses are addressed to the social realities and couched in the language of contemporary people, the yawning gap which often separates increasingly secularized individuals from their original faiths seems likely to widen considerably. This analysis shall consider Catholic and secular responses to sexual imagery in pop music, videos and their derivative celebrity systems.

This thesis consists of four chapters. The introduction presents the general problematics of the relation between Catholic sexual ethics and culture. This chapter also introduces the celebrity who will serve as a case study for this thesis. Moreover, it introduces some of the theory behind the discipline of cultural criticism.

The second chapter examines the official and unofficial Roman Catholic responses to my case study. This should illustrate fairly clearly the major schools of thought in modern Catholicism with regard to the application of Catholic ethics to popular culture.

In order to illustrate a more widely espoused hermeneutical alternative to the Catholic approaches explored in the second chapter, in the third chapter I consider responses to my case study based strictly on social scientific or philosophical models of cultural criticism. Selected for this survey are analyses derived from semiotics, critical theory and postmodernism.[2]

Throughout the second and third chapters, a modest attempt is made to situate each of the Catholic and secular commentators (and the socio-philsosophical or theological movements they represent) on an ideological spectrum relevant to their respective traditions. I maintain that no response is politically neutral; that all responses to popular culture bespeak to varying degrees unique ideological agenda. For the purposes of clarity, in chapters two and three I employ two sets of "ideal types" of cultural criticism. One set organizes and explains the Roman Catholic responses, the other organizes and explains the secular responses.

In the fourth and final chapter I present the conclusions of my research. While the critical-comparative approach operative in the second and third chapters obviates the specific limitations of both the Catholic and the secular responses to my case study (and popular culture in general), in this chapter I briefly summarize these findings more generally. That is, despite the differences and the weaknesses, I endeavour to make

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[2] I will define and discuss these terms throughout this thesis.

observations concerning the fundamental characteristics of "the Catholic" and "the secular" approaches to popular culture. More specifically, in the fourth chapter I address whether or not approaches to popular culture which depend *exclusively* on either the Catholic or secular traditions are sufficient for analyzing ambiguous popular cultural phenomena such as my case study.

The Madonna Phenomenon

Before I proceed, I should introduce my "case study". I have selected the popular musician Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone (her real name), or simply Madonna, to serve as the "text" for this study.

Born 16 August 1958 in Detroit, Madonna was raised in a strict Italian Roman Catholic family (Lewis 100). Always a precocious child, at the age of nineteen she left her middle-class environs in Detroit for the streets of New York, intent upon pursuing a career in music or dance. Initially, life in New York was less than glamorous for her; often relying on hand-outs from friends, she sometimes scrounged for food in alleys (Andersen 32-50).

After some persistent self-promotion, it was not long before Madonna attracted the attention of various people in the New York music business. After a few years of playing in "garage bands", she recorded her first two albums, *Madonna* (1983) and *Like a Virgin* (1984), which sold an estimated nine million copies combined. While the critical response to her music was subdued at first, she was by all accounts an unqualified public success quite early in her career.

Her visual appeal is unique and syncretistic. She often performs and appears publicly in stylized lingerie; and almost always, crucifixes and costume jewellery adorn her apparel. Her refusal to limit herself to a single musical or personal "style" may account for her provocative visual presence. Thus, she confounds conventional categories which normally identify and secure both one's genre and audience.

Madonna is a true multi-media celebrity. Although her voice has matured over the past nine years, her sustained stardom and cultural prominence remain largely dependent on her music videos, movie appearances and televised public appearances. Although her lyrics themselves are addressed occasionally in popular commentaries, the primary medium to which she owes her popularity (film and video) tends to obscure her lyrics by emphasizing her renowned visual, in fact largely sexual, appeal.

Sex is by far the most prevalent subtext in Madonna's work. The significance in Madonna's work of sexual imagery and the gender issues this imagery connotes is impossible to ignore. In fact, one might plausibly assert that all writing about Madonna as a cultural phenomenon is *de facto* writing about sexual imagery and gender politics in popular culture.

Since the mid-eighties, she has been the reigning queen of the popular music world, with a reported net "worth" of well over $125,000,000 (Shewey 40). Her international popularity and recognizability are nothing short of astonishing, and she has had an unusually tenacious career for a female pop music performer. By describing her as "the world's most famous -- and infamous -- female entertainer", Brian D. Johnson echoes the description of most commentators in the popular media (Johnson 45).

During the past few decades scholars have increasingly turned their attention toward the ways in which popular culture affects ourselves and our world.[3] Consequently, over the last nine years whole lakes of ink have been spilled on Madonna commentaries in both popular and academic periodicals.[4]

It is interesting to observe the variety of opinions these articles often reflect. While in one issue of *Harper's* magazine Louis Menand of CUNY writes that "Madonna has done more to affect the way young people think about sexuality than all the academic gender theorists put together" (Menand 49), a recent issue of *Harper's* features a more pessimistic article by Daniel Harris. Harris bemoans the ascendancy in North American universities of what he calls "Madonna Studies" (Harris 30). He laments that "Madonna has been drafted into the staggeringly implausible role of spokeswoman of the values and professional interests of university instructors", when in fact she is nothing but "the rubbish of popular culture" (Harris 30-2). For Harris the saturation of the North American academic scene with absurdly earnest and ambitious interpretations of every imaginable nuance of Madonna's work[5] (and other examples of popular cultural rubbish) bespeaks

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[3] For two of the very few serious interpretations of religion and popular culture, see Paul Nathanson's *Over the Rainbow* or Quentin Schultze's *Dancing in the Dark*

[4] For popular responses, see Fisher, Johnson and Anderson's articles. I have selected academic responses which represent the two dominant trends in secular cultural criticism. Readers interested in further analysis of the secular responses to Madonna may be interested in the forthcoming collection of scholarly articles entitled *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities and Cultural Theory*, edited by Cathy Schwitchenberg. I found so few Catholic responses that I have included them all.

[5] See David MacFarlane's article in *The Globe and Mail* entitled "Lingerie as Language: Madonna's Great Code". MacFarlane refers to publications with such curious titles as "Material Girl: Madonna, Boris Pasternak, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union"

the intellectual bankruptcy of the fashionable "postmodern" criticism.

On the other hand, Andrew Greeley argues that the pejorative connotation usually attached to popular culture arises from the implicit élite assertion that "if a work is popular it cannot be any good. And indeed, if ordinary people like something, it must of course be trash" (Greeley 1988, 10). Greeley contends that popular culture should be taken seriously as a provider of "paradigms of meaning" (Greeley 1988, 13), and therefore as a *locus theologicus* (Greeley 1988, 9). The huge popularity and global dissemination of these paradigms of meaning clearly necessitate a thorough analysis of the mechanisms and agenda of North American popular culture.

While Harris's view represents an increasingly common backlash against the academic interest in popular culture -- which he calls "slumming" (Harris 32) -- and its new manifestation in "Madonna Studies", his critique and others like it do not warrant extended consideration in this thesis. For I am not at all concerned about whether the proponents of "Madonna Studies" are making fools of themselves by their choice of subject matter. I am also not particularly interested in Madonna herself, nor whether she deserves all this scholarly attention. This study is not, in other words, a contribution to "Madonna Studies". The mere fact that such a wide array of critics have seen fit to address Madonna makes the responses themselves excellent evidence for a comparative investigation into the dominant trends in Catholic and secular criticism of popular culture.

Having briefly considered her hotly debated character and public influence, I can

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by H.P. Selinki and "The Astronomical Implications of Truth or Dare: Madonna, Steven Hawking and the End of the Universe" by Z. Stobij.

now outline the two major contexts from which the responses explored in subsequent chapters arise.

Catholic Sexual Ethics

Since Madonna has emerged from and constantly refers to an explicitly Catholic background, and since it is the combination of sexual and religious imagery in her work that has attracted much of the secular and almost all of the Catholic attention, I should briefly outline the present state of Catholic sexual ethics. Such an outline will elucidate subsequent observations about the position of the various Catholic commentators within their own tradition.

Modern Catholics[6] are heirs to a twenty-centuries old tradition of teaching on the subject of sexual morality. Whether or not they remain committed to all elements of this tradition, almost all Catholic moral theologians -- even the dissenters -- feel compelled to remain in dialogue with it.

While Lisa Sowle Cahill maintains that Catholic sexual ethics cannot be based squarely on an explicit set of biblical doctrines,[7] she observes that in addition to the general trends in the Bible (Cahill 148), the towering figures of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas remain the pillars of Catholic sexual ethics. These thinkers clearly continue

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[6] To limit the scope of this project, unless otherwise indicated, the term "Catholics" denotes North American Catholics.

[7] Cahill writes that as the "study of New Testament...has made perfectly clear, moral norms and criteria for application do not -- in the best of Christian tradition -- amount to an...ahistorical, and unchanging code....Responsibility is no more an either/or, black-and-white matter" (Cahill 150-1).

(albeit often only implicitly) to influence many of the Catholic commentators I will discuss. A very brief introduction to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas's views on sexual morality is therefore in order.

Historian Peter Brown observes that

> Sexual love remained, for [Augustine], the leaden echo of true delight. He dearly wished that he had grown up chaste from his youth, his heart kept open by the discipline of continence. (Brown 394)

Attributing human misery to the loss of a harmony which once existed between mind (or will) and body, Augustine focused on the sexual drive as evidence of a "*discordiosum malum*, an abiding principle of discord lodged in the human person since the Fall" (Brown 408). Although Kosnik argues that one finds in Augustine a rarely explored ambiguity about sexuality (Kosnik et al. 37), most writers have concentrated on Augustine's sexual pessimism. Augustine's "darkened humanism" (Brown 426) continues to colour Catholic reflection on sexual morality.[8]

Thomas Aquinas's thirteenth century writings on sexuality are marked by a concern for the order of nature generally and that of human nature more specifically.[9] Like many medieval writers, Thomas's work is riddled with now inflammatory assertions about the inferior biological and intellectual status of women and the superiority of virginity to marriage (Cahill 105). Although Cahill argues that his views on sexuality

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[8] For an excellent discussion of many other important aspects of Augustine's sexual history and historical context, see Peter Brown, pp. 387-427; for a polemical account of his significance, see Uta Ranke-Heinemann, pp. 75-98.

[9] Thomas was primarily preoccupied with the question: "What is it that is the most genuinely human?" (Cahill 137)

were less problematic and pessimistic than Augustine's (Cahill 114), Uta Ranke-Heinemann contends that Thomas merely updated and attached an Aristotelian scientific rationalization to the existing pessimistic Augustinian perspectives (Ranke-Heinemann 184).

Another crucial aspect of the historical development of Roman Catholicism has been and continues to be the emphasis on the sinfulness of non-marital and non-procreative sexual activity. While the traditional teaching arm of the church considered most moral transgressions either "mortal" or "venial" sins[10] depending on numerous variables including the context of the act, the degree of intentionality and the consequences of the sin, quite a different tendency prevailed in terms of sexual transgressions. For all such acts, regardless of their context or extenuating circumstances, were deemed mortally sinful. One was free of sin as long as one's sexual appetites were immediately repressed. However, once one allowed such an appetite either to linger in one's mind or provoke one to seek its fulfilment, one had committed a mortal sin.[11] Rooted in Augustine and Aquinas, this (pre-Vatican II) technical assessment reflects a profound "problematization" of sexuality at the heart of traditional Catholicism.[12]

Many "progressive" theologians have abandoned -- and on the whole Vatican II

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[10] A mortal sin cuts one off from God, whereas a venial sin only impedes one's relationship with God. Put another way, venial sins are at variance with natural law, while mortal sins attack its very substance.

[11] For a fuller explanation of the intricacies of this issue, see volume 14 of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, pp. 4-11.

[12] "Problematization" is borrowed from Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. On this general issue see Uta Ranke-Heinemann's analysis of women and sexuality in the Catholic church.

(1962-65) tends to mitigate against -- this tradition. However, the sexual teaching firmly in place previous to Vatican II -- and still not fully abrogated in tone or effect -- placed a tremendous burden on many Catholics over whom perpetually hovered the spectre of mortal sinfulness. Analyses of the Catholic responses to Madonna illustrate that despite the changes advocated by certain theologians after Vatican II, the deeply entrenched problematization of sexual activity by virtue of its mortally sinful nature still influences the way highly sexualized public figures such as Madonna are interpreted.

Modern Catholicism is in the midst of an extended debate about the appropriate contemporary role of Augustine, Aquinas and the traditional mortal sinfulness of many sexual acts. Catholic writers on sexual morality are characterized by the degree of loyalty they exhibit toward these classical resources and the magisterial traditions they have spawned.

Moral theologian Charles Curran observes that

> many Roman Catholic moral theologians no longer see their function primarily as defenders...of the hierarchical magisterium.... [And] there exists a definite chasm between the way many moral theologians do moral theology and the approach employed in the official teaching of the hierarchical magisterium. (Curran 1979 17-18)

Curran criticizes the official doctrine for what he calls its "physicalism", the tendency on the part of conventional Catholic teaching to absolutize the physical act (Curran 1988, 76). Whereas generally speaking the classical tendency which physicalism bespeaks has been on the wane since Vatican II,[13] he argues that in the area of the church's official

[13] See Gregory Baum (1973) for a synopsis of the major changes in unofficial Catholic sexual theology after Vatican II.

teachings on sexuality it has remained oddly unmodified.[14]

Furthermore, Christian historian Philip Sherrard asserts that at the core of traditional Catholic sexuality is the contradiction that God both wills *and* taints sexuality. The longevity and intractability of this contradiction confounds many contemporary moral theologians who, like Sherrard, argue that it "indicates the basic insufficiency of the teaching which it purports to interpret and apply" (Sherrard 316). Since "the vast majority of theologians express significant disagreement from [official and traditional] teaching" (Curran 1988, 76), official Catholic sexual ethics appears increasingly anachronistic. As Catholic theologian Gregory Baum commented, "Catholic sexual morality needs a new start" (Baum 1973, 38).[15]

Curran and Sherrard's approach to sexual morality is diametrically opposed to that of moral theologians Ronald Lawler, Joseph Boyle, and William May who propose the more traditional notion that Catholics are not at liberty to prefer their consciences to the rulings of the church (Lawler et al. 112). The debate about one's relation to official church teachings on sexual morality is in fact part of a larger debate about the authority of the magisterium. The latter issue is well beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to acknowledge it as the stage on which many of these derivative debates are held.

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[14] Curran writes: "Whereas the official social teaching has evolved so that it now employs [an] historical consciousness, personalism, and a relationality-responsibility ethical model, the sexual teaching still emphasizes classicism, human nature and faculties, and a law model of ethics" (Curran 1988, 107).

[15] Although Baum wrote this in 1973, a review of the recent and still largely polemical literature suggests that little has changed in the meantime.

Although the Lawler, Boyle, and May text represents a quite conservative strain of Catholic sexual ethics, for which it received the *imprimatur*, Philip Keane's book, *Sexual Morality*, received the same doctrinal honour. While Keane does reiterate and support his tradition's emphasis on heterosexuality and a conservative interpretation of the categories of objective moral sin and evil, he nevertheless attempts to redress the implicit physicalism of Catholic sexual ethics.

Despite their differences, Keane agrees with Curran that among theologians there has been a shift away from the conventional Catholic emphasis on the physical objectivity of individual acts (Keane 40). This new movement[16] illustrates the inadequacy of previous -- and some contemporary -- approaches which gave and continue to give to the sexual act an objectivity which minimizes the context of the act and the complexities of the actors.

This brief overview of the state of Catholic sexual ethics is intended to illustrate the enduring tension between the classically oriented official teachings of the church and the usually more "progressive" approach of many contemporary theologians. Despite occasionally irreconcilable (and often highly public) differences,[17] very few of them completely sever their ties with the tradition or the magisterium.

Despite the strides many reformers have made in the direction of liberalizing the magisterium's teachings, it is hard to gauge the effect of their reforms on the so-called

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[16] Usually called the "fundamental option" approach.

[17] In August 1986, the Vatican informed Curran that because of his views on sexuality and authority he was no longer fit to teach Catholic theology (Curran 1988, 7). Anthony Kosnik met with a similar fate (Curran 1988, 76).

"common person". After all, Vatican II was relatively recent and many of the theologians and clergy who were hostile to its reforms are still teaching theology or ministering to parishioners. The problematization of sexuality discussed above has proven itself a durable moral tradition, the ghost of which is exceedingly hard to exorcise. The slight liberalization of Vatican II's teaching on sexuality will likely take a long time to affect the fundamental values of North American Catholics. It is difficult, therefore, to determine the extent to which the average Catholic accepts -- or even acknowledges -- the new sexual theology being promulgated in the aftermath of Vatican II.

Moreover, the category "North American Catholics" hardly signifies a homogenous group. In fact, Catholics in North America are divided along class, ethnic and racial lines.[18] Their heterogenous backgrounds indicate that one must be cautious when making generalizations about "North American Catholics".[19]

While some Catholics remain to some extent ensconced in the pre-Vatican II deontological tradition of physicalism, many others have long since abandoned this aspect of their tradition in favour of a more liberal interpretation of Catholic doctrine. Modern Catholicism may be characterized by just such a tension between its adherents' often divided loyalties to traditional Catholic teaching on the one hand and a relatively permissive secular society permeated by sexual imagery on the other (Greeley 1989, 448).

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[18] Consider, for examples, the various differences between Philipino Catholics of Vancouver, Irish Catholics of New York, and French Catholics of Quebec.

[19] These methodological problems do not seriously hamper this project, since I am not concerned with the sociological question of popular Catholic opinion. These problems are simply important background issues to bear in mind during my thesis.

Of the new and increasingly dialectical reality in which contemporary Catholics find themselves, Andrew Greeley writes that "sexual teaching that does not address itself to this changed situation, however wise it may be, simply will have no impact at all" (Greeley in Hanigan 1982, 66).

Modern Catholicism is the site of several awkward tensions: between classical sources and modern scholarship, physicalism and "fundamental options", classical guilt and sexual liberation, and finally between contemporary moral theology, the magisterium and secular society. These tensions continue to inspire debate and not a little disarray. The diversity of the Catholic responses to Madonna and popular culture in general illustrate the many dimensions of this tension.

Consumption and Modernity

The architecture of human identity and social relations has for the majority of western history been heavily influenced by religion, and for the most part, Catholicism. There is nothing unusual or surprising about the involvement of the church in these spheres, but the sweeping changes effected in the secular realm, especially over the last three centuries, have diminished the church's impressive hegemonic power in the western world.

That is not to say that the church once had a monopoly on the formation of human identity and social relations, nor that it is now impotent in these arenas. However, that the portion of cultural and social influence once maintained by the Catholic church in the pre-modern era has since shrunk is self-evident. For a number of reasons -- The

Enlightenment, The Reformation, the democratic and industrial revolutions to name but a few -- the Roman Catholic church saw its power to influence what was rapidly becoming "modern" life change drastically. The waning of its social and political influence naturally corresponded to or perhaps resulted in its weakened control over the consciences, identities and social institutions of most Europeans.

Catholic theologian Michael Warren comments that by offering its adherents a system for imagining what individual and social life should be, religion is one of the "zones of influence among other influences" (Warren 1991, 20). Warren argues that

> the process of establishing an identity is in part a process of imagining for oneself possible forms of behaviour, possible attitudes and values, goals, and ultimately, a possible future. (Warren 1991, 18)

It is therefore of religious and social scientific interest to consider briefly the well-developed socio-philosophical discourse which focuses on the relatively new secular institutions and ideologies which create and mediate these imagined possibilities. Such an overview should provide some context for the critics examined in the third chapter. Because the methodologies employed by many of those I shall consider in the third chapter tend toward highly terminological theorizing, these preliminary remarks should clarify the larger and sometimes idiosyncratic context in which this "postmodern" vernacular has meaning.

Karl Marx's interpretation of the profound role of the economy and the social realities which inevitably flow therefrom have inspired several philosophical and social scientific schools of thought. The cultural criticism, or "critical theory" which emanated from the "Frankfurt School" in Germany represents one of the first clearly articulated

applications of Marxist theory to mass culture.

According to Theodor Adorno, one of the Frankfurt School's main proponents, people are at the mercy of "the culture industry", controlled by -- and for the sole benefit of -- powerful capitalist interests. The audience or consumers of the products of this industry are "dupes of mass deception", fooled into accepting a version of reality which only perpetuates their servitude (Bernstein in Adorno 18). Adorno cites the conformity of all areas of popular and high culture to its requirements as an example of the insidious hegemony of the culture industry.

By taking the production of culture -- i.e., the control over the production of cultural artifacts and the dissemination of their attendant "meanings" -- out of the hands of the people, the culture industry robs people of their right to creative expression in the context of their own society. By replacing consciousness with conformity, this industry "impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals" (Adorno 92). For if, as Warren suggests, constructing an identity requires an ability to imagine possible forms of behaviour, values and goals, Adorno asserts that a person's ability to imagine such possibilities is severely limited, if not completely determined, by the culture industry. People are left with few options but "to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests" (Adorno 91).

One can easily detect the aspects of Adorno's approach which are derived from Marx's critique of capitalism.[20] Adorno's emphasis on the exploitation of the masses, his critique of the loss of control of the means of -- in this case, cultural -- production,

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[20] See Arato and Gebhardt, pp. 185-225; also Bernstein, pp. 1-25.

and his sense that modern people are falling for what he called "the swindle" of the culture industry (Adorno 89), all bespeak his Marxist frame of reference.[21]

However, certain key components of Marxist cultural criticism have themselves been subjected to criticism. For example, Michael Warren observes that "Marx's followers came to view culture as not concrete or 'material' enough to be studied as one of the bases of society". Culture involved merely "ephemeral realities" which were in fact determined by more substantial economic forces (Warren 1991, 75). Daniel Miller adds to Warren's critique that "because there is no independent consideration of the cultural construction of consumption, this area becomes merely the logical outcome of the sphere of production" (Miller 48).

While established Marxist thought holds one's proximity to and control over the means of production to be the major indicator of one's social status (and therefore identity),[22] there has been a significant philosophical reorientation among many thinkers of the left. Instead of relegating consumption "to an outcome of conflicts centred elsewhere" (Miller 49), this shift posits that the consumption of cultural and consumer products is now the dominant sphere in the determination of social relations and individual identity.[23] Professor Alan Tomlinson writes:

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[21] For a brief explanation of his alteration of and addition to the Marxist critique of society, see Bernstein, pp. 1-25.

[22] Marx writes: "The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life" (Marx 51).

[23] "Cultural products" connotes what Daniel Miller calls "the externalization of society in history, through which it is enabled to embody and thus reproduce itself" (Miller 33). Miller's definition is applied more generally to "culture", but it suits my use of "products", since he implies here and elsewhere that a culture is its "externalizations".

> It is in the sphere of consumption -- conspicuous leisure on the basis of adequate disposable income -- that many will seek to express their freedom, their personal power, their status aspirations. The effect of such a trend upon collective consciousness and cultural relations in particular societies cannot be understated. (Tomlinson 6)

However, the introduction of a new locus of identity and social organization does not completely undermine the earlier tradition of critical theory. Post-Marxist cultural critics[24] still maintain a critical approach to both the control of cultural production and modern consumerism. However, the following analysis shall demonstrate that what they examine (e.g., youth fashions and popular music instead of factory ownership and union movements) and the language they use to conduct this discussion (e.g., "signs" instead of classes) are quite different from their "vulgar" Marxist forebears.

An axiom for this loosely defined group of thinkers might be: "Serious [cultural] critique requires nuanced judgement of inadequacies and stupidities as well as appreciation of excellence" (Warren 1991, 83). These writers do not exhort people to renounce modern culture, but rather to adopt (in very different ways) a critical standpoint which challenges the alienating features of mass culture while remaining open to the potential that one might find in cultural products and consumption practices certain liberating possibilities.

Secular cultural critics fall into two distinct groups according to their

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[24] To be more explicit about these writers, I am referring to critics such as Lewis, Ewen, Baum, Fiske, Miller, Warren, Tomlinson and Kaplan, to whom I shall refer in subsequent chapters. Despite the significant religious and ideological differences between these thinkers, they all -- more or less -- share an openness toward possible positive functions of consumption

hermeneutical practices and presuppositions. One group represents "postmodernism", a recent movement which challenges traditional hierarchies (not to mention traditional cultural criticism). The other group foregoes the deconstructive, and in practice often nihilistic tendencies of postmodernism in favour of a revision of Marxist philosophy combined with the insights of modern sociology and hermeneutics.

Although the two major perspectives within secular cultural criticism propose very different visions of our society, both groups of critics share a few things in common. For example, they both favour a model of social analysis in which conflict between social groups is considered normative. As well, they both rely to some extent on the categories and lexicon of Marxist analysis. Both groups share a fundamental interest in popular culture, especially in the ways "style", identity, cultural subtexts and consumerism interact.

There is also a common conviction among these critics that there is something of an ideological battle being waged in popular culture over the autonomy and integrity of the modern identity and the structure of modern (or postmodern) society. In a society in which the way one consumes, and not produces, tends to structure one's identity and social relations, the cultural consumer -- of goods or images -- and the culture of which s/he is a part become increasingly complicated sites of "semiotic" struggle over meaning.[25]

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[25] For a helpful introduction to semiotic (or "semiological") analysis, see Berger and/or Deely.

Conclusion

But what, one may wonder, does this have to do with Madonna? Michael Warren writes that "cultural system[s]...are...supported by a system of images" (Warren 1991, 47). Therefore, if one seeks critically to understand one's culture, one must examine the *élan vital* of the system of images which supports it. Over the last eight years, Madonna has become an integral part of the dominant system of images operative in North American popular culture. Critics disagree on whether she exemplifies the superficiality, ambiguity, power, possibility or corruption of this system. Through analyses of popular culture and/or consumption, they all grapple (though in many different ways) with the presentation of sexual imagery in popular culture.

Having briefly outlined the salient features of my case study and the theoretical framework employed in this thesis, in the following chapters, I explore the various ways critics have applied their perspectives to Madonna. I intend to demonstrate that the Catholic and secular critics have unique yet quite problematic ways of responding to Madonna, ranging from the philosophical to the sociological to the ethical to the theological. At the very least, these critics share an interest in Madonna as an influential public figure whose presence in popular culture must be taken seriously if only because it already has been similarly appraised by a very large section of our society.

And so it is first to the Catholic responses that I now turn my attention.

CHAPTER TWO

The Catholic Responses to Madonna

Although Roman Catholicism is certainly the most centralized Christian denomination in North America, it sustains a considerable amount of internal debate regarding human sexuality and the prominent role of sexual imagery in popular culture, hardly peripheral religious or ethical issues. This diversity does not, however, justify the conclusion that Catholicism lacks a traditional set of assumptions about what is and is not sexually and socially appropriate. In fact, while they may generate diametrically opposed positions, most of the radical dissenters still feel compelled to construct and articulate their ethical systems in some kind of relation to this body of conventional standards.

Since the most provocative aspect of Madonna's craft is without a doubt the prominence of sexual imagery -- and by extension, gender politics -- in her videos, lyrics, and public appearances, and since most commentators respond almost exclusively to this dimension, it should be revealing to consider the relation between the various responses and the Catholic ethical tradition I outlined in my introduction. Although in one or two cases it is practically impossible to detect this relationship, most of the texts I consider submit rather easily -- if not absolutely -- to such an analysis.

For this purpose, I have created three ideal types -- *affirmative, condemnatory* and *critical* -- to serve as categories of analysis and description. A detailed illustration of the

contours and implications of these three types will emerge in the process of their application.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, in addition to categorizing the responses according to their position in the spectrum of Catholic sexual ethics, I shall attempt to characterize them in ideological terms as well. For while it may be occasionally difficult to assign a given response to a specific category with regard to its bias towards the Catholic (sexual) ethical tradition, it is simpler to assign these texts to general ideological categories. To this end I shall employ the ideal types of *liberal, conservative* and *radical,* as articulated by Robert Nisbet in his classic text, *The Sociological Tradition.*

Although my ideal types will guide my evaluation of the relation of these responses to a particular aspect of a specific tradition, Nisbet's ideal types shall help situate these responses in the much larger ideological context. The correlation between Nisbet's types and my own will become apparent as the analysis unfolds. In fact, at times the two sets of ideal types with which I am working will conflate, so that a given response or critic may be described as "conservative-condemnatory", "radical-critical", or "liberal-affirmative". Since, as I have mentioned, certain responses do not clearly betray their relation to the Catholic tradition, this conflation allows me to situate a given response within a more general framework. Such a general classification will clarify the major similarities and differences between these Catholic and the following chapter's secular responses so that the underlying question of the appropriateness of uni-disciplinary responses to popular culture may be succinctly addressed in the final chapter. As far as the future application of this approach is concerned, it is my hope that a comparative ideal

type analysis of responses to Madonna will exemplify a *modus operandi* for analyzing the relevance of religious responses to other figures and movements within North American popular culture.[26]

I should underline two things before I begin. First, if my own sympathies are not yet obvious, I should confess that I prefer the "radical-critical" approach to popular culture. In the final chapter, I shall flesh out this assertion somewhat. Secondly, ideal types are by their very nature, artificial. Unlike categories such as cat or spinach, the categories of liberal, conservative, affirmative, critical, etc., lack objective antecedents against which one can compare, in this case, a given response to Madonna. Although I have tried (as I am sure Nisbet has) to fashion my ideal types in a way which fairly represents the logical arrangement of the texts, the categorizations made in this and the following chapters may at times appear less than precise.

The Catholic Subtext

An exploration of the Catholic responses to Madonna would be quite inadequate without some account of the most common elements in question. Since a complete analysis of the highly provocative fusion of Catholic and sexual imagery found in Madonna's stage shows, videos and public appearances is well beyond the scope of the present project, I shall list only a few prevalent features. First, although she cannot be

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[26] There is no reason, however, that this methodology should be limited to North American culture. Madonna, for example, is a prominent part of an increasingly international popular culture. The application of variously differentiated ideal types to other aspects of culture, and to other cultures seems, therefore, to be a useful tool for other social scientific endeavours.

credited inventing her birth name, it must be held at least partly responsible for some of the antagonistic Catholic attention she has attracted. Secondly, people even remotely aware of popular culture are by now accustomed to seeing photographs and film footage of a lingerie-clad Madonna with crucifixes dangling from rosary beads worn as necklaces. Thirdly, her recent documentary film, *Truth or Dare*, portrays her leading her dancers and backup singers in prayer before each concert. Finally, in her "Like a Prayer" video she dances in front of a field of burning crosses, has a love affair with the black saint, Martin de Porres, and receives the stigmata.

The division between the sacred and profane is one of the most central and revered elements of Roman Catholic life. Not surprisingly, throughout history certain symbols (the crucifix, rosary beads, icons, etc.) have taken on a uniquely sacred aura. Conversely, certain patterns of personal behaviour (e.g., the overt eroticism found throughout Madonna's work) and their popular manifestations (e.g., her provocative clothing and erotic mode of expression) have been negatively problematized.[27] Sexual problematization may explain both Madonna's popularity and her critics' often vehement invectives. For her work often amalgamates the previously separated realms of the sacred and profane. Her use of *Catholic* symbols and rituals to express largely secular and always explicitly sexual messages, combined with her use of explicitly *sexual* imagery to articulate typically Catholic motifs and narratives, make her work an excellent target for

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[27] Contesting popular wisdom on the subject, Michel Foucault argues that modern society has not become progressively liberal about sex. In fact, he contends that sex has been increasingly exploited, and as he puts it, problematized, "as *the* secret" (Foucault 35). He cites as evidence the ever-increasing volume and intensity of discourse on sexuality.

condemnation from a wide array of secular and religious critics.

But this facile observation should not blind us to the probability that the above fusion is also responsible for her tremendous success. The various entrenched polarities within any culture do not all possess the equivalent potency. Madonna's success does not derive from the fact that she links two polar opposites, but rather that she joins what many (especially young female Catholic) North Americans consider the ultimate opposites. I doubt that she would be enjoying so much sustained prosperity and critical attention if her preferred polarity was Judaism and Nazism, war and peace, or communism and capitalism. Critics and audiences alike tend to tire of such gimmicks, whereas the proper mixture of Catholicism and overt eroticism has, as Madonna said, "pushed the buttons" of a huge number of people (Johnson 45) and made Madonna a household name.

Commentary on Available Sources

Considering this unique fusion and the attention it has attracted, one may be surprised to discover that in all but one Catholic category the secular responses vastly outnumber the explicitly Catholic responses. After a year of research, I am practically certain that I have collected -- and in a few cases solicited -- all of the major (though it is hard to believe they are the only) explicitly Catholic responses to Madonna. Before I begin my analysis, a brief speculation about the paucity of sources is in order

In *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Jeffrey Stout refers to the "secularization of public...moral discourse" (Stout 80-1) which has

diminished the pre-modern prominence of the religious dimension of public moral issues (e.g., the debate over Madonna's portrayal of sex and religion). Religious-ethical concepts and terminology which were at one time central to moral discourse have for a variety of reasons become less essential to the moral debates in our society (Stout 161). Moreover, Stout argues that for the most part North American "academic theology seems to have lost its voice, its ability to command attention as a distinctive contributor to public discourse in our culture" (Stout 163).

Or perhaps the lack of response has a simpler explanation than Stout suggests. It is conceivable that the Catholics one might expect to comment on this sort of issue are simply embarrassed by Madonna; embarrassed not only by her unorthodox use of Catholic imagery, but by her general sexual audacity. Or their silence may imply that religious scholars are not immune from the traditional academic elitism which disparages anything so unabashedly and now integrally part of popular culture. Calling the absence of many substantial Catholic responses to Madonna a "curious cultural silence", James Hanigan of Duquesne University writes in a personal letter that

> for some reason a great silence about sexuality seems to have fallen on those who might be expected to address sexuality from a normative perspective. No doubt religious leaders, churches, parents, and teachers are at something of a loss as to what to say. (Hanigan 1991)

On the other hand, Michael Warren recently proposed in a letter that this silence may be justified.

> There may be a good reason why religious people have not responded to Madonna: because they don't want to do more nay-saying and there is little of value in what she does. Myself, I prefer to leave Madonna to the secular writers who are doing a splendid job of showing how shallow is her music and film.

(Warren 1992)

Warren's ambiguous opinions (on Madonna and popular culture in general) will be considered at greater length in the following pages. And I shall have to put aside speculations about the origins of this silence; but for now I would like to suggest that allowing secular writers to do all the criticism of celebrities who exert extraordinary cultural influence probably contributes to what Stout might call the laryngitis of academic theology.[28] When it comes to a woman whose fame and sheer public power are so obviously indebted (though not reducible) to her use of religious imagery and motifs, theological silence may reinforce the perhaps already entrenched popular opinion that one's religious, cultural and ideological affiliations are not necessarily linked. Stout asserts that even though public moral discourse has undergone a marked process of secularization, this

> does not mean that religious assumptions and categories play no essential role either in what people actually say as participants in public discourse or in the moral deliberation of many people in our society. (Stout 188)

As well, Stout argues that if we want to understand the cultural influence of the major figures in our culture -- and like it or not, Madonna must be considered among their ranks -- "we had better develop the means for understanding the moral languages, including the

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[28] In response to my queries, John Pungente of the Jesuit Communication Project, Antony Kosnik, Charles Curran, and James Hanigan were enthusiastic about this topic, respectively calling it "very interesting", "interesting", "a fascinating subject", "a significant contribution to the field" (Pungente; Kosnik; Curran; Hanigan, personal letters). None of them, however, has commented on this phenomenon, nor knew of anyone else, besides Greeley, who had.

theological ones, in which they...address us" (Stout 188).

Before I categorize the various responses to Madonna, I should comment on their sources and authorship. I have received two responses in the form of personal letters from Michael Warren and James Hanigan, American academic theologians. In addition to these personal responses and a chapter from Andrew Greeley's *God in Popular Culture,* the other responses originate in the following periodicals: *Christianity and Crisis, The Catholic New Times, The National Catholic Reporter, L'Osservatore Romano, Cambio 16, The Western Catholic Reporter, America* and the bulletin of *Servizio Informazione Religiosa.* To concentrate my research base, I shall assess only those responses written by Catholics in patently Catholic periodicals or texts.[29]

In the summer of 1990, almost every article on Madonna in the North American press referred in passing to several clashes she had with Catholic officials during the Italian leg of her Blonde Ambition tour.[30] Unfortunately, these references merely paraphrased the original Italian comments. Since the salient dimensions of the Italian debacle were widely publicized in the North American press, I consider this conflict relevant to this thesis. As such, I have had several original Italian texts on the subject translated so I can provide a clear picture of the initial reaction.

These sources reflect a wide array of Catholic commentary. In addition to the comments I have solicited from professional theologians, the above texts range from

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[29] Although *Christianity and Crisis* is a Christian, but not exclusively Catholic, periodical, the fact that the author is Catholic justifies its inclusion in my research.

[30] For example, see Liam Lacey's *Globe and Mail* article "Bless Her Father for She has Clout".

popular lay Catholic to more academic journals to the official Vatican newspaper to the newsletter of the official Italian Catholic news service (*SIR*) to a text devoted entirely to popular culture. This ensures that the documents I consider are intended to be relevant to a fairly broadly based and self-identified Catholic reading audience.

I can now turn my attention to the responses and ideal types they represent.

Ideal Type A: Affirmative-Liberal

Of the few affirmative Catholic responses to Madonna, those of the irrepressible American Catholic sociologist-theologian, Andrew Greeley, have been the most widely circulated. For his is the most sustained and fully articulated opinion on Madonna. Interestingly enough, the many Catholic moral theologians I wrote who indicated that they have no published or unpublished opinions on Madonna themselves at least knew that Andrew Greeley does.

People familiar with Greeley's perspective on Catholicism and contemporary society[31] may not be surprised by his approach to Madonna. Greeley asserts in *God in Popular Culture* that "the Catholic analogical imagination, precisely because it says 'both/and' as opposed to the dialectical imagination which says 'either/or'" (Greeley 1988, 14), is bound to affirm aspects of popular culture other forms of imagination might

[31] Especially indicative of Greeley's approach is his invective directed at the church's "preferential option for the poor" (Cf. Greeley 1988, 17, 74, 140-1). See also Gregory Baum's review of Greeley's *The New Agenda*, in which Baum observes that "thinkers of the Catholic Left would probably argue that Andrew Greeley does not pay sufficient attention to the cultural and political crisis in which the world finds itself" (Baum 1975, 178).

dismiss.

Through Greeley's application of the analogical Catholic paradigm to Madonna, she emerges as the consummate example of the modern Catholic feminist who embodies "the feminism of having it both ways" (Greeley 1988, 160). By "both ways", Greeley reveals his essential presupposition that the desire "to be both siren and virgin" is characteristic of all modern women. This sheds some light on his assertion that "Madonna is the perfect test case for whether [Catholics] really accept the analogical imagination". For Greeley contends that "she is one of our own who is preaching effectively a component of [the Catholic] tradition of which we are afraid -- the sacrementality [*sic*] of human eroticism" (Greeley 1988, 168).

To Greeley, Madonna represents a powerful reminder of a central aspect of the Catholic tradition -- the unity of womanly eroticism -- which was lost or subverted somewhere in its long history. The incommensurable clash between women's elemental wish to be both virgins *and* sirens simultaneously causes a tremendous crisis for modern women (Greeley 1989, 448). According to Greeley, many Catholic women labour under the weight of an unnatural bifurcation championed by both conservative Catholicism and mainstream secular society.[32] To the extent that Madonna rejects such a "guilty" and

[32] Greeley comments that "guilt is the central theme of contemporary Catholicism", largely because this disjunction of womanly eroticism usually results in frustration on the part of women aspiring to embody one or the other extreme, or some degree of failure and shame for the majority of women whose aspirations are not so polarized (Greeley 1988, 163).

However, missing from Greeley's analysis is an analysis of the social construction of the desire to be "both virgin and siren". The categories of virgin and siren found in secular and religious thought are categories which determine women entirely in terms of their past or possible sexual relationships with men, and not in terms of themselves or other women. This may shed some light on the curious and appealing stigma attached to

(dialectically) corrupting influence on Catholicism in favour of a celebration of the sacramentality and (analogical) unity of human -- especially female -- eroticism, she "sings like a Catholic" (Greeley 1989, 448).

But what, one might ask, does Greeley have to say about the features of Madonna's craft which seem so regularly to irritate Catholics and Protestants alike? What about her lingerie, her use of Catholic images and motifs in her stage shows and videos, the rosaries and crucifixes dangling between her barely-clad breasts? "Those who find this dimension of her show offensive", Greeley replies, "*must bracket it* if they wish to search for an underlying message that might be graceful" (Greeley 1988, 162, emphasis added) He laments that "the paraphernalia of the Madonna persona has blinded [Catholic and secular critics] to the message behind the mask" (Greeley 1988, 168).

In a reversal of Marshall McLuhan's famous axiom, Greeley proposes that, at least in this case, one must disregard the medium as much as possible to see the message clearly. One is presumably empowered to bracket these potentially objectionable aspects of Madonna's work by what Greeley extols as the capacity of the "reflective intellect [to] operate in 'background mode' while enjoyment is taking place" (Greeley 1988, 293)

In an article written for the *National Catholic Reporter*, John Boerner echoes aspects of Greeley's approach. He writes that

> the singer Madonna has, like other artists throughout history, offered new interpretations of Madonna [Mary] and God. These new views don't subtract from previous ones, but instead add to them, creating more accessibility to God by redefining images and symbols in a manner that has relevance to our current society. (Boerner 1989)

Madonna, who refuses to dwell too long at either pole.

Counselling Catholics to "give Madonna a second listen" (Boerner 1989), Boerner's approach betrays a confessional agenda. Although his literary demeanour seems rather immature, even pretentious at times, and in this aspect differs from Greeley's fairly sophisticated approach, nonetheless, the symmetry between his response and Greeley's is evidenced by his whole-hearted affirmation of Madonna's added interpretation of Madonna [Mary] and God The notion that Madonna's additional theological "interpretation" ameliorates the accessibility to God is central to Boerner's thesis that her impact is overwhelmingly positive.

I call this approach "affirmative" because it focuses strictly on the positive aspects of Madonna's craft. In fact, Greeley reduces the mainstream (condemnatory) Catholic critique of Madonna to the consequence of prudish predispositions toward sexuality in popular culture. Commenting on Madonna's controversial "Like a Prayer" video, Greeley concludes that "only the prurient and sick...[with] their...twisted sexual hangups" would consider this text objectionable (Greeley 1989, 448).

Since neither Greeley nor Boerner makes any explicit attempt to situate their responses in the context of official Catholic sexual ethics, one has to extrapolate such a situation from the presuppositions apparent in their texts. This Catholic affirmative approach does not, as one might expect, align itself with the permissiveness of secular culture. It still works within the Catholic moral spectrum illustrated in the first chapter. Moreover, it would appear that the critics of this ideal type tend to favour the position

articulated most fully by Philip Sherrard and Charles Curran.[33] That is to say, they rely on the growing sensibility within modern Catholicism that the physicalism which characterizes traditional Catholicism is based on an insufficiently nuanced vision of both human sexuality and human nature. The growing anti-physicalist sensibility is, I suspect, the subtext to Greeley's disdain for Madonna's "prurient", "sick" and "twisted" critics.

As far as the ideological implications of this ideal type are concerned, this approach bears a striking resemblance to Nisbet's "liberal" category. By liberal, I mean an approach to popular culture which celebrates it as part of the positive mosaic of our culture without examining its alienating potential or its legitimating role in the prevailing social structure. Insofar as Greeley and Boerner accept Madonna's work as is, and insofar as they oppose -- in Greeley's case, categorically -- or neglect negative or critical readings of her work, they tacitly condone the ambiguous political and economic implications of her work. After all, what else is meant by the encouragement to enjoy Madonna with one's critical faculties operating "in background mode"?

The relation of Madonna's work to the negative aspects of North American culture is left unexplored in part because liberals tend not to believe that our culture is fundamentally flawed. Moreover, Catholic liberals are concerned mainly with making popular culture palatable to modern Catholics, and the revised (Vatican II) tenets of modern Catholicism palatable to those secularized (or disaffected) Catholics already enamoured by popular culture.

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[33] See Andrew Greeley's *Sexual Intimacy* for a Curranesque discussion of sexuality, embellished somewhat by Greeley's folksy pastoral evaluation of modern sexuality.

This mediation agenda is clearly illustrated by Greeley and Boerner, who exhort modern Catholics to "give Madonna a second listen". Such a second listen should persuade devout Catholics that far from epitomizing the profane and anti-Catholic dimension of popular culture, Madonna as it were resurrects the essentially Catholic value of the sacramentality of erotic energy (Greeley 1988, 164) and improves one's accessibility to God (Boerner 1989). This liberal-affirmative embrace of Madonna should also persuade her "lapsed" Catholic fans that modern Catholicism can accommodate their previously disparaged patronage of popular culture.

Ideal Type B: Condemnatory-Conservative

The second ideal type approximates what many consider a " ypically Catholic" approach to Madonna. It certainly represents the most common variety of Catholic response I have found in recent Catholic literature. It is characterized by what Michael Warren calls the "nay-saying" of Catholic writers who focus strictly on the negative aspects of Madonna's work (Warren 1992).

The first response comes in the form of an innovative advertising campaign launched by a Minnesota group called "The Church Ad Project".[34] The group promotes newspaper advertisements which, as the headline puts it, "help [the] church appeal to the masses". One of their ads features a reproduction of a sixteenth century Raphael painting of Mary and Jesus, above which is written: "Introduce your children to the original

[34] An article on this campaign was featured in a recent edition of the *Western Catholic Reporter* (Catholic News Service 1). All references to this campaign refer to this article.

Madonna". Below the painting is an explanation for the advertisement. It reads: "Do you want your children to grow up thinking that Madonna was nothing more than a Material Girl? This Sunday introduce your children to the original. And the miracle of Jesus Christ".

There are several interesting dimensions to this advertisement. First, its references to the celebrity Madonna presuppose a familiarity with Madonna's popular status. The reference to her as "the Material Girl", and a pretender to the title of Madonna, evidence both that the reader is expected to have seen, or heard about her "Material Girl" video or song, and that the reader is expected to *be* aware -- or *be made* aware -- of the subtextual religious allusions to the original Madonna in the name and/or work of the celebrity Madonna. Secondly, the equation of Madonna with one of her character traits in "Material Girl" illustrates a common misreading of this video. While one of Madonna's characters plays Marilyn Monroe's role in "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend", this video is more complex than simple mimicry. Although I cannot indulge in a full exploration of this text,[35] suffice it to say that the Madonna-Monroe character[36] is shown being courted by several men, all of whom offer her extravagant gifts; however, in the end she (Madonna, playing an actress playing Monroe) runs away with the man who offers her a simple bouquet of daisies. This simplistic equation of Madonna with a single aspect of Monroe's personality exemplifies a common but erroneous interpretation of this video.

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[35] See John Fiske, pp. 95-132; or E. Ann Kaplan, pp. 116-126.

[36] The implication is that Madonna is expressing her own thoughts through this off-stage character.

The third and related -- and perhaps most significant -- dimension of the ad is found in the question: "Do you want your children to grow up thinking that Madonna was *nothing more* than a Material Girl?" [emphasis added] Even if one ignores the misreading of Madonna's clear and unambiguous materialism, the reduction of Madonna to "nothing more than a Material Girl" seems to place this advertisement firmly in the conservative-condemnatory ideal type. For such a reduction clearly denies alternative -- perhaps more accurate and non-materialistic -- interpretations of her work.[37] Rob Dalton, the director of the Church Ad Project stated: "Religion should be speaking about contemporary issues and it needs to stay current with the trends in the lives of people". By now such an observation is almost self-evident, but the crucial issue is the use to which religions will put this familiarity with current trends. If the implicit message of a given response seems to be -- as I think it is in this case -- that religions need to learn about these trends in order to thwart them, rather than to appreciate critically their function in society and peoples' lives, such a response fits neatly into the conservative-condemnatory ideal type.

The second example of this type comes from a 1991 issue of the Toronto-based *Catholic New Times*.[38] The author, Andrew Cash, writes that his main interest is how by restricting her work mainly to provocative issues of power and sexuality, in two years Madonna "has gone from being just another pop poseuse doing the same old sex for

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[37] Lisa Lewis writes that references to the classical Madonna made famous by Raphael's paintings frame "popular culture in an oppositional relation to the normative standard of high art and high culture -- a classic ideological scheme to devalue popular culture" (Lewis 201).

[38] All subsequent references to this article refer to page 6 of *The Catholic New Times* of 23 June 1991.

stardom routine to being taken seriously as a progressive activist and critic". Cash contends that while no one would ever have taken a member of the Partridge Family or John Travolta very seriously as "a cultural icon or sage", many critics have bestowed this cultural honour on Madonna.[39]

Although he appears to be aware of the secular debate raging over Madonna's "sage" status, in the end, Cash concludes that Madonna's work is merely "a peep show for a culture of voyeurs -- a society which wants only to skim the surface of our beings" As in the previous response, Cash (incorrectly) points out that "as one of Madonna's early hits will tell you she is a 'Material Girl'"[40] In essence, Cash argues that the freedom Madonna represents is nothing "but a bizarre display of indentured labour where one is only free to be a slave". To the common theory that Madonna is "pushing the boundaries of what's acceptable in terms of sexual expression" Cash adds that she is "actually entrenching and affirming what is the status quo". Finding nothing of value in Madonna's work, he denounces it as an illustration of our culture "groping at anything to legitimize its own importance".

Another response comes in a reply to a query I sent Michael Warren Warren's comments on Madonna are rather puzzling. For he seems to belong to both this and the third ideal type (radical-critical). On the one hand, his *Communications and Cultural*

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[39] Cash overlooks the iconic status of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and the Beatles, all of whom were producing their generation's popular music.

[40] Either Cash has not seen her video (which is unlikely, given its wide circulation), or he fallaciously presupposes that a song's lyrics necessarily describe its singer's personality.

Analysis: A Religious View, is replete with balanced analyses of popular culture and critical statements such as the one I called in the first chapter an axiom of cultural criticism: "Serious critique requires nuanced judgement of inadequacies and stupidities as well as appreciation of excellence" (Warren 1991, 83). On the other hand, his commentary on Madonna focuses exclusively on her stupidities and inadequacies. In fact, as I mentioned, he maintains that Catholics are wise simply to refrain from addressing Madonna because secular writers "are doing a splendid job of showing how shallow is her music and film" (Warren 1992). Warren writes in a recent letter that with regard to a religious perspective on popular culture, "much needs to be done -- not along the lines of condemning but along those of analysis" (Warren 1992). However, his commentary on Madonna is curiously one-sided and condemnatory, deferring such analysis to secular writers. Where is his "appreciation of excellence" when it comes to Madonna?[41] Because his evaluation lacks such an appreciation, it is difficult not to place it in the condemnatory category.

A word of caution is in order. The responses I have collected do not each admit of a simple categorization within the Catholic tradition of sexual ethics. On the place of Michael Warren's comments within this spectrum it is perilous to speculate, since he seems to straddle two quite different perspectives. Andrew Cash, too, is difficult to situate since his approach does not betray his loyalties to a particular ethical position.

However, the most straightforward examples of this ideal type come in the form

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[41] He analyzes a video by Rod Stewart which lacks any religious subtext (Warren 1991, 170-6). The reason he considers Stewart and not Madonna a suitable subject for a religious response remains unclear.

of several commentaries which appeared in a variety of official Italian Catholic sources. Commenting on her scheduled Roman concert of July 1990, the official Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano* called her show "sinful" (Thomasson 7). A few weeks later, the newspaper criticized Italy's state television network for broadcasting one of Madonna's recent concerts which it said "violated good sense, good taste, and decency" (*L'Osservatore Romano* 6). An editorial published in the *Servizio Informazione Religiosa*, the official Catholic news bulletin, claimed Madonna's work was of poor substance, exceeded the limits of taste and offended general moral sensibilities (*SIR* 4 July 1990).

Although the headlines of Italian newspapers featured incendiary titles such as "Madonna on Bishops' Black List", "Madonna Not Even Worthy of Hell", "Madonna the Heretic", and "Bishops Excommunicate Madonna", journalist Tullio Melli argues that the official Catholic reaction was more muted than these headlines suggest. Melli contends that the official response to Madonna betrayed "no spirit of crusade, no search for censorship... simply a placid death sentence for insulting good taste". Mariela Tagliaferri maintains that the church adopted such a subdued official position to avoid giving Madonna any "undeserved publicity" (*SIR* 11 July 1990).

However, Madonna's Italian tour evoked the most scathing castigations from other less prominent Italian clerics. Despite the relatively moderate tone of the official Catholic response to Madonna, several Italian bishops denounced her as "blasphemous, pitiful, poor and lacking in musicianship". Warning that "one must not mix the sacred and the profane", Virgilio Levi, a representative of the Public Relations Office of the Curacy of Rome, declared that Madonna's show demonstrated "vulgarity without limits". Finally,

Father Giuseppe Lepore, a priest from Madonna's parents' home town, protested that "she is evil, a woman who radiates sin. She is an infidel and a blasphemer" (Alcazar 141).

The Italian responses typify the conservative-condemnatory ideal type. The Italian clerics' unequivocal and unexplained notions of sin, sensibility, decency and taste reflect their presupposition that these categories do not require any qualification. While most contemporary Catholics will understand the conservative moral subtext of these terms, it is quite unclear whether such words are adequate tools for addressing the contemporary phenomenon that Madonna personifies.[42] For no attempt is made to consider the potential uniqueness or ambiguity of contemporary popular culture, nor to address the widely held opinion that denotations of decency and taste are locally determined by dynamic historical factors, and thus vary from culture to culture and decade to decade.

Although *Truth or Dare*, the documentary of her 1990 tour, indicates that Madonna was extremely shaken by the vitriolic reaction of the Italian clerics, her reply to these accusations spoke volumes about her awareness of the issues at hand.

> I am aware that the Vatican and other Catholic communities are accusing my show of sinfulness and blasphemy. If they are so sure that I am a sinner, let those who are without sin cast the first stone. (Thomasson 1990)

The theological subtext of Madonna's response affirms Jeffrey Stout's suggestion that one needs to be able (not to mention willing) to understand the theological and moral languages in which -- in this case popular -- cultural icons like Madonna sometimes

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[42] Italian sociologist Gabriella Turnaturi comments on the Italian scandal that "it seems like we're back in the 50's when the prevailing culture and religion...[imposed] their own vision of reality" on the general public (*SIR* 11 July 1990).

address us.[43]

The relation of this ideal type to Catholic sexual ethics is much easier to discern than the first type. All of the examples of this type (excluding Warren and Cash's responses) rely on a view of human sexuality and contemporary culture which presupposes clear boundaries between the sinful and the chaste, the sacred and the profane, the decent and the indecent, the vulgar and the refined. The use of terms such as blasphemous, tasteless, evil and sinful to describe Madonna's moral transgressions -- associated mainly with her proclivity towards combining Catholic iconography with ribald hyper-eroticism -- suggests this type's affinity to the traditional "physicalist" dimension of Catholic sexual ethics.

The ideological implications of this ideal type must be considered "conservative". That is to say, this approach to sexual imagery in popular culture disregards potentially positive aspects of popular culture, "preferring to groan long and loud for the reinstatement of some vague code of yore" (Warren 1991, 83). Some proponents of this ideal type -- in this case, Warren and Cash -- do ask perceptive questions about how Madonna's "fame came about, how it was crafted, manufactured, handled [and] massaged" (Warren 1992). But their analysis lacks a consideration of the positive values[44] perhaps only implicitly present in Madonna's work -- some of which were

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[43] This does not mean that Madonna is a part time theologian or moral philosopher, but simply that she (or her press agent) is sensitive to the still influential Catholic subtext in North American culture.

[44] Most of these "positive aspects" are examined by the secular writers to be considered in the third chapter.

articulated earlier by Greeley and Boerner. Despite Warren's demonstrated sympathy for and sophisticated insight into popular culture, he states flatly that "there is little of value in what [Madonna] does". Cash similarly couches his firm condemnatory conclusions in the rhetoric of sociological argumentation.

The conservative tendency to consider all things modern by definition inferior to all things pre-modern, or at least inherently suspect of being so,[45] may explain why the most sophisticated commentators (Warren and Cash) lack a more nuanced approach. The conspicuous presence of academic discourse should not obscure the fundamental exclusion of moral ambiguity, the clearest indication of the conservative-condemnatory nature of a response. I suspect that Madonna aggravates so many conservative critics because she personifies archetypically modern, urban and individualistic characteristics many conservatives execrate. Bemoaning popular culture as modern society's most insipid manifestation, conservatives mount a virulent attack on its very foundations -- normally through the public censure of popular culture icons like Madonna -- without carefully investigating its social functions, graceful content (Greeley), ambiguous implications or powerful potential.

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[45] See Nisbet's explanation of the conservative tradition/ ideal type (Nisbet 12-16).

Ideal Type C: Radical-Critical

The "radical-critical" ideal type may be characterized as an approach to popular culture which brings to the fore both its positive and negative aspects. It is best exemplified by a 1991 article written by Kathleen Talvacchia and published in *Christianity and Crisis*. The article takes the form of a review of Madonna's recent documentary film *Truth or Dare*, but does not limit its commentary to the film.

Talvacchia's main interest is the relation between the political stance Madonna takes in her inversion of conventional gender stereotypes and Madonna's lived experience. To illustrate "gender bending that challenges passive female reality", Talvacchia points to Madonna's "Express Yourself" video in which she wears a man's pin-striped suit the chest and crotch of which have been cut out to reveal pink satin lingerie (Talvacchia 232). This androgenous look is completed by garter belts hanging over the waist of her pants and the stereotypically male gestures which punctuate the song's message about the importance of free sexual expression.[46]

On the one hand, Talvacchia observes that Madonna's work makes the point that "sexual power can be the realm of women also" (Talvacchia 232). On the other hand, she contends that Madonna's gender-bending implies "that to be liberated all a woman need do is act 'like a man'" (Talvacchia 233). As well, Talvacchia observes a certain incongruity between Madonna's radical stance on gender issues and her personal safety.

> Madonna's efforts to play with reality so as to expand and thereby transform it serve as useful social critique of a rigid system. However, the critique is blunted

[46] Practically any of her videos would exemplify the phenomenon Talvacchia describes.

> by the safety in which she can poke and prod entrenched systems of gender oppression. (Talvacchia 232)

By observing that "the consequences of 'acting like a man' would be greatly changed if she were a lesbian" (Talvacchia 233), Talvacchia elucidates the contradiction between Madonna's public persona and her daily life. Although she markets herself as a champion of the marginalized,[47] and her message as a confrontation with mainstream -- especially Catholic -- sexual mores, Talvacchia contends that "wealth, fame, heterosexuality, and whiteness shield Madonna from the threats marginalization brings" (Talvacchia 234).

Since Talvacchia's position affirms the validity of gender-bending, and clearly sympathizes with homosexuals' quest for role models and deliverance from their oppression,[48] on the spectrum of Catholic sexual ethics her response should be located as far away as possible from the officially sanctioned position articulated by Lawler, Boyle and May. Thus, she writes from a position somewhat more liberal or "progressive" than Charles Curran's.

Talvacchia's article is critical in that, on the one hand, it seriously considers Madonna's political (gender) agenda and sympathetically analyzes what attracts people to her work; and on the other hand, it criticizes the absence of a "social analysis of the patriarchal structure that creates rigid gender roles and behaviour". Talvacchia argues that while Madonna does challenge the "walls of gender oppression", she appears not to see

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[47] The third chapter shall clarify that her fans among the "marginalized" are mainly teenage girls; but many homosexual men have also adopted her as a heroine.

[48] See the other half of her review which evaluates a documentary film about New York's homosexual bar scene (Talvacchia 233-34).

the patriarchal construction of these walls (Talvacchia 233). Talvacchia contends (against Greeley's unification thesis) that by employing -- and profiting from -- the traditional categories of good girl/bad girl, Madonna does nothing to destabilize or challenge, and in fact implicitly sanctions, this fundamental dichotomy.

Similarly, the aspects of Talvacchia's approach which are ideologically radical from Nisbet's perspective include primarily her concern with the economic issues involved in Madonna's stardom. By economic issues, I wish to imply the broadest definition of this term to include Talvacchia's reflection on the entrenched problems of social marginalization and systemic economic inequality in North American society (Talvacchia 234). Her consideration of gender politics within the larger context of the North American social structure also reflects her radical sympathies. That she begins her interpretation of Madonna by noting that liberation theology has taught us "that a person's location within a power structure affects how that person interprets what is real", is the final confirmation of her position on Nisbet's ideological spectrum [49]

[49] Immediately following Talvacchia's article, Mark Hulsether praises Madonna's "Like a Prayer" video. He writes: "This video is one of the most powerful statements of the basic themes of liberation theologies I have seen in the mainstream media. It .. emphasizes Jesus's human solidarity or identity with victims of oppression, places the cross in the context of sociopolitical struggle and persecution and presents the church as a place of collective empowerment .. [and] stresses the importance of the erotic for conceptualizing faith" (Hulsether 234-6). He also outlines the video's limitations. Although his analysis is relevant enough to my research to merit its inclusion in this note, unfortunately for my thesis, Mr. Hulsether is a Protestant.

Conclusion

In the first chapter I outlined the growing movement among many Catholic theologians away from the physicalist tendencies so deeply entrenched in Catholic sexual ethics and toward the so-called fundamental option approach. One suspects that despite their demonstrated differences, most of the commentators I have considered (with the noted exceptions of the Italian clerics) would find this liberalization amenable to their approaches. Ironically, while many of the critics surveyed in this chapter are forging a new path for Catholic sexual ethics, Madonna continues to capitalize on the lingering pre-Vatican II attitudes towards overt sexuality which persist among Catholics. And yet, while she profits from these ingrained (sometimes even socially subterranean) physicalist values, she challenges and derides them.

It is unlikely that one could find two responses to Madonna which differ as much as Andrew Greeley's and Virgilio Levi's. For responses which were both written by and for Catholics, the religious and ideological distance between these two responses could not be greater. The clearest explanation appears to be that the wide ideological and ethical spectrum represented by these responses to Madonna reflects precisely the same theological, ideological and moral diversity within the present Catholic world.[50] One may conclude that the same degree of diversity with regard to Catholic sexual ethics which was evidenced in the first chapter also exists in the realm of Catholic perspectives on the sexual content of popular youth culture (as embodied by Madonna).

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[50] However, the fact that there were only three responses that were not conservative-condemnatory seems to indicate the prevailing mood in modern Catholicism.

This symmetry may be easily explicated, since the sexual dimension of youth culture appears to be the main source of aggravation for those Catholics who espouse the conservative- condemnatory worldview.[51] For them a response to popular culture -- and especially Madonna as a representative thereof -- is a *de facto* response to the insidious dimensions of modern sexuality, so one expects a certain resemblance between their ethical positions on popular culture and modern sexuality in general.

But there is no trace of dogmatism in either Michael Warren's or Andrew Cash's responses. Nor do their responses appear to represent any specific position with respect to Catholic sexual morality; so one must acknowledge diversity even within the three ideal types. In fact, the similarity among the conservative responses -- that they focus strictly on the negative aspects of Madonna's work -- should not distract one from their substantial differences, especially in terms of the types of moral discourse and the degree of cultural sensitivity they exhibit. The same degree of difference might also be demonstrated between Greeley's and Boerner's responses.

It should be obvious by now that the responses made by the various commentators suggest a substantial degree of internal dialogue within the Catholic world. For example, Greeley's response clearly reacts against what he sees as ossified Catholic doctrine with regard to sexuality, epitomized by the Italian responses to Madonna. The Italians, one would suspect, are in turn reacting against the North American permissive liberalism of which Greeley and perhaps Madonna are proponents. The radical position in the debate

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[51] However, concern about the increasing prominence of overt sexuality in the popular youth media is shared by critics from all ideological and religious traditions.

reacts against both positions, seeing in them the hermeneutical myopia which mitigates against relevant analyses of ambiguous socio-religious phenomena.

Throughout this chapter I have endeavoured to make some critical comments about the three ideal types I have devised. In the next chapter, which explores the contemporary secular discourse on Madonna, I shall advance the same type and amount of criticism in relation to the two ideal types I shall posit. For constructive dialogue between the Catholic and secular critics of popular culture can only proceed in an atmosphere where the limitations of their respective approaches are honestly acknowledged. In the final chapter, where I present an overview of the Catholic and secular responses, the overall weaknesses of these approaches will be outlined to illustrate the shortcomings of uni-disciplinary analyses of popular culture. And so it is to the alternative secular responses that our attention shall now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

The Secular Responses to Madonna

The discipline has many names: Popular Culture Studies, Communication Studies, Media Studies, Mass Culture Studies, Cultural Criticism. Yet behind these explicitly different names is a fairly singular and relatively new movement within the academy. The eclectic training of its theorists -- with backgrounds in women's studies, philosophy, political science, literature and sociology, to name but a few -- make this a truly interdisciplinary movement. Beyond the explicit differences denoted by their various disciplines, the proponents of the above "studies" -- I shall call it "cultural criticism" -- are ideological descendants of the leftist critique of society.

That Madonna has attracted the attention of this "discipline" should come as no surprise, since she is, by all accounts, a media superstar. But we have seen that she is more than just that; after all, Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jordan are also media superstars, but unlike Madonna, they have not been the subjects of any serious cultural criticism. For Madonna's life, work, and opinions are held by many of the writers surveyed in this and the previous chapter to be of the utmost importance as indicators of everything from general public morality to the position of women in society

To reiterate a point I made in the first chapter, this thesis is not an interpretation of Madonna's work (i.e., it is not an example of what Michael Harris called "Madonna

Studies"). I shall leave this task to the popular critics whose careers depend on credibly commenting on every possible aspect of her work and lifestyle. Nor will this thesis arrive at any definite conclusions about Madonna, her music, or "Madonna Studies". Although this thesis clarifies and contextualizes many of the responses to Madonna, my interest remains the analysis of the paradigms employed by those who mine her work for intimations of political, sociological, feminist, or existential significance.

In order to compare these secular and the preceding Catholic responses to Madonna, I will explore the intellectual frameworks which underlie the hermeneutical practices of these writers. After I have illustrated the most common secular interpretations of Madonna, I shall briefly outline the major criticisms presently aimed at each one. This should allow me in the final chapter to draw some conclusions about the differences between Catholic and secular responses to sexual imagery in popular culture, and finally, the relevance of strictly Catholic or secular approaches.

Like any major element in North American popular culture, Madonna can be understood, in the words of many cultural critics, as a cultural "commodity". Theodor Adorno wrote: "Cultural entities are no longer commodities also, they are commodities through and through" (Adorno 86).[52] This places Madonna and mundane ("normal") commodities such as blue jeans and beer on essentially the same plane.[53]

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[52] The global circulation and popularity of Madonna's image, music and reputation, not to mention the tremendous fascination people seem to have with her, suggests that she may be one of the fundamental North American cultural commodities of our time.

[53] The scope of this project does not permit a deep reflection on the substantive differences between reified subject-commodities (celebrities) and object-commodities ("things"). For the purposes of this thesis, the commonalities between these two types of commodities justifies my reference to celebrities and objects as social

In a departure from more literal definitions of consumption and identity, the cultural critics I consider presuppose that commodities function as signs or symbols which, when purchased, espoused, or otherwise consumed, manifest one's actual or desired social status and class affiliations. In fact, that one is consuming images, ideas and styles rather than jeans and hamburgers may make this act of consumption an even more significant expression of one's desired social status than the conventional act of object consumption. For the "style" constructed from the consumption of music or film idols (and the attendant clothing and behaviour) is, as Stuart Ewen comments, "the most constantly available lexicon from which many of us draw the visual grammar of our lives" (Ewen 42). Daniel Miller also contends that commodities, or cultural entities

> represent culture, not because they are merely there as part of the environment within which we operate, but because they are an integral part of that process...by which we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices. (Miller 215)

David Tetzlaff neatly summarizes this theory when he writes: "This is the postmodern ideology of non-conformism: free identity construction through consumption, be-what-you-want translated as buy-what-you-want" (Tetzlaff 27).

The term "semiotics"[54] will appear frequently in this chapter to refer to a socio-philosophical movement which explores systems of signs within a given text or culture. This approach is used extensively by many if not all of the commentators I shall examine. To oversimplify a very sophisticated movement, semiotics contends that we exist in a

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commodities/products.

[54] Also called "semiology".

world in which every object, and many people, function as "signs" of one variety or another. As semiotician John Deely writes: "the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs" (Deely 5). These signs are thoroughly relative (Deely 35) in that they always point to something or someone else. One should bear in mind that the same sign may function in diametrically opposed manners depending on the sign's particular social location. As an applied theory, semiotics elucidates the ambiguous function of cultural commodities or signs (e.g., Madonna and the style and imagery associated with her) in a complicated fungible system of ever-changing meanings.[55]

Research within cultural criticism is complicated by many of its proponents' reliance on obtuse if not cryptic neologisms such as "postmodernism".[56] Calling postmodernism "*the* academic buzzword of our time", Tetzlaff remarks that "in search of scholarly 'hipness', a vast number of people have appropriated the term and attached it to vastly different objects and theoretical projects" (Tetzlaff 32), from contemporary society to architecture to philosophy to art to advertising. To complicate matters further, Frederic Jameson, perhaps its most prolific North American proponent, admits that postmodern theory amounts to "the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing

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[55] For an excellent example of a semiotic analysis of a popular text, see Nathanson's recent book, *Over the Rainbow*

[56] Other examples are "texts" and "readings". Although these terms have been in circulation for centuries, they have taken on alternative meanings within the postmodern lexicon.

as an 'age', or *zeitgeist* or 'system' or 'current situation' any longer" (Jameson xi).

A succinct definition of "postmodernism"[57] within the limited scope of the present project is thus impossible, yet its ubiquity within this discipline makes it inconceivable to avoid. Fortunately, since I employ the term within relatively narrowly defined parameters -- media criticism and gender politics -- a reasonably well-defined meaning will emerge. This should skirt some of the semantic obfuscation normally associated with its use.

As I alluded above, there are many different traditions within cultural criticism, but each of them makes use of the insights, data, and terminology from other, even very different branches of this tradition. Thus one hears talk of texts, postmodernism, semiotic codes, deconstruction, post-structuralism, hegemony, exploitation, style, and class from virtually all of those one reads within this diverse discipline.[58]

To clarify what has become a rather complicated tradition of criticism, I analyze the selected secular responses to Madonna in terms of two ideal types. I should reiterate that ideal types are artificial means by which to assemble diverse responses according to certain similarities. The texts I consider might be divided according to quite different criteria. I have, however, chosen a means of delineation which I think adequately reflects real differences within and between the two groups of texts. In his article "Divide and

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[57] The movement which, for the sake of simplicity, I am calling "postmodernism" is often referred to as "post-structuralism" or "deconstructionism".

[58] See Cynthia M. Lont's introduction to cultural criticism (Lont 1-34) in which she writes of its main sub-traditions that they are "like...separate simultaneous conversations, one adjacent to the other. No matter which conversation one participates in, snatches of the other are heard and are of interest" (Lont 5).

Conquer: Popular Culture and Social Control in Late Capitalism", David Tetzlaff proposes two categories of left cultural criticism[59] which are quite efficacious for understanding the differences between the responses I have selected. For lack of more elegant nomenclature, I shall call these categories simply ideal types A and B. The historical and ideological profile of both types will be discussed before they are applied to the texts.

Ideal Type A: Parody

Type A is one of the bi-products of the trajectory of leftist thought. Karl Marx's theories were sustained and somewhat updated by the so-called Frankfurt School, one of whose leading proponents was Theodor Adorno, a German critic whose writings have inspired many type A theorists. In line with Marx's suggestion that social institutions determine human consciousness, Adorno introduced the world to the concept -- perhaps even the ideal type -- of the "culture industry" as a way of conceiving of the totalizing, quasi-fascistic nature of mass culture (Arato and Gebhardt 220). The reader will recall that Adorno posited a highly centralized culture industry manipulating the various media of cultural production to govern individual consciousness. He contended that the masses have been duped by "the swindle" of an industry intent on protecting the vested interests of its affluent owners (Adorno 89).

If Adorno's culture industry theory revises Marx for an application to mid-twentieth-century social reality, then other cultural critics have done the same thing to

[59] Every substantial analysis of Madonna I have found bears all the characteristic features of leftist analysis. Therefore, I shall not consider "right" theories of the media.

Adorno for our so-called post-industrial era. For critics such as J.M. Bernstein have found that Adorno's vision of the masses -- they are "dupes of mass deception" -- does not allow popular culture to function in a liberating fashion (Bernstein 18). In addition, John Fiske comments that "scholars on the left...have far too long emphasized ideological and hegemonic practices as the key to understanding popular culture" (Fiske 183)

Semiotics, as I have mentioned, is concerned with systems of signs. Since the majority of semioticians have been influenced by the leftist critique of society, they tend to focus on the way signs perpetuate alienation and inequality in society. However, among these and other scholars of the left, an innovative approach to these signs and sign-systems has emerged which, while still situated within a decidedly leftist semiotic framework, opposes the pessimism which characterizes "the culture industry approach"

Jane Brown and Laurie Schulze write that popular culture "texts",

> previously characterized as vehicles for dominant ideologies . have been reconceived as potential sites for resistance of dominant ideology ... [W]hile popular media do contain discourses of domination such as capitalism and patriarchy, they also by definition are relevant to a large and diverse audience -- many of whom are socially powerless and subordinate .. A popular text, therefore, is ideologically messy -- a semiotic terrain that opens itself to cultural struggle over meaning. (Brown and Schulze 89)

John Fiske adds that "popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant" (Fiske 2).[60] Therefore, dominant modes of discourse such as capitalism and patriarchy prevail, but not without quite unintentionally allowing their victims an

[60] Fiske calls this "semiotic resistance...the power of people to resist the colonization of their consciousness by the forces of social power" (Fiske 178).

opportunity to resist. Of this apparent contradiction, Fiske contends that "our culture is a commodity culture and it is fruitless to argue against it on the basis that...what is profitable for some cannot be cultural for others" (Fiske 4).

Although the focus on the possibility of cultural resistance amends Adorno's monolithic pessimism about commodities and consumption, in one fundamental way type A still adheres to the culture industry thesis. For this revised approach still understands social power as operating "through unification, centring, the repression of contradiction". Tetzlaff observes that despite their differences, Adorno and Fiske still essentially "agree that subjective and discursive unification is the path to social domination, and that this is the aim, if not the effect, of mass-produced culture" (Tetzlaff 10).[61]

The main difference between ideal type A and its culture industry heritage is that in type A marginalized members of society are empowered with an ability, in fact, a predisposition to resist their own oppression. The villain -- the totalizing, capitalistic culture industry -- remains the same, but the victims have better defensive weapons.

The last and crucial characteristic of type A is the role it gives to "parody" in popular culture. Although the word itself is not always used, the conceptual importance of parody is obvious in type A texts (Lewis 55-147; Pratt 25-41; Young 173-188). In the lexicon of type A, parody becomes a central technical term used to denote the method employed by subordinated groups and individuals to critique, or as Fiske puts it, "interrogate" (Fiske 105) the hegemonic practices of the dominant ideology. Parody, in

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[61] Jim Collins calls type A frameworks "centre-based metaphors for culture" (Collins 16).

this context, is the intentional and subversive use of a familiar semiotic context against its inherently totalizing ideological agenda.

Having outlined the general contours of ideal type A, I shall now consider how it is used to interpret Madonna. More precisely, I shall examine the work of professors Lisa Lewis, John Fiske and Camille Paglia. Fiske, Paglia and Lewis's approaches share many common interpretive elements, even though (especially in Paglia's case) their conclusions may be dissimilar.

Lewis's analysis of Madonna comes in the context of a critical evaluation of MTV entitled *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* Lewis explores the way MTV (the 24 hour American Music Television station)[62] has revolutionized the way popular -- especially youth -- culture and its derivative systems of meaning are produced, circulated and consumed. After MTV began broadcasting in 1981, the previously disparate industries of television and popular music merged, changing these media and popular culture irrevocably.

Lewis asserts that through "gendered" narratives of youth rebellion and independence, most music videos prepare youths for occupying strictly patriarchal social "spaces". That youths learn about appropriate behaviour from videos is not in itself necessarily problematic. However, Lewis laments the fact that the videos are by and large addressed to young men, with women present typically as passive maternal figures or sex objects. In short, Lewis's MTV research demonstrates that, as she puts it, "the 'M' stands for male" (Lewis 38). However, this was all to change, or at least be challenged in the

[62] In Canada, its equivalent is Much Music and Musique Plus.

mid-1980's, because,

> while the...privileged male audience interpretation had achieved a level of naturalization, their internal contradictions began to be laid bare by the practices of MTV. With female musicians and female audiences united as agents of cultural struggle, change became possible. (Lewis 72)

Exerting an unprecedented control over their music and publicity (McClary 149-53), female musicians such as Madonna have established an entirely new genre called "female address video" aimed primarily at young women (Lewis 116). This new generation of music videos is "designed to speak to and resonate with female cultural experiences of adolescence and gender" (Lewis 109). In semiotic terms, these videos contain both "access signs" which invert patriarchal norms by depicting female invasions of established male territories, and "discovery signs" which celebrate uniquely female modes of social experience (Lewis 110).

Lewis writes that Madonna's "resignification of the standard of female representation was a fundamental upset to the standard's ability...to thwart...female subjectivity" (Lewis 106). For Lewis, "it is [Madonna's] ability to represent gender experience symbolically in the characters she creates that provides points of identification for a female audience" (Lewis 105). Madonna, she argues, manipulates these signs to her and her mainly female fans' advantage.[63] It is through her representation of empowered female characters that Madonna popularizes "female-adolescent subjectivity" (Lewis 146)

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[63] While Madonna's self-love is condemned by many men as egocentricity, Fiske argues that it is not problematic for her female fans. In fact, "it is the root of her appeal", since it suggests her triumph over advertisers who construct "the girl's body and therefore her sexuality as a series of problems -- ... lifeless hair, fatty thighs" (Fiske 102).

and in so doing gives young women "points of identification", or social "signs" they can appropriate which allow them a sense of autonomy during an arduous stage in their lives.

John Fiske features an interpretation of Madonna in his *Reading the Popular*, a text which explores the often liberating function of popular culture. This text is essentially an extended discussion of his thesis regarding semiotic resistance to domination. Since I have already explored his thesis at some length, I shall proceed immediately to his analysis of Madonna.

Although Fiske concurs with Lewis that "Madonna denies or mocks a masculine reading of patriarchy's conventions for representing women" (Fiske 99), he cautions that Madonna is not a model for young women. Rather, he argues, she is a "site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate" (Fiske 97), in other words, a battle ground over social meaning. Since many of her young female fans experience some degree of subordination and powerlessness, Madonna's parodies of conventional representations of women are effective devices "for interrogating the dominant ideology" (Fiske 105).

Of her propensity to build much of her work around the opposing categories of virgin and whore, Fiske contends that by blurring the division between these categories she is not simply criticizing the function of this polarity in patriarchy, but is in fact questioning "the validity of these binary oppositions as a way of conceptualizing woman" (Fiske 103).

Unlike Lewis, Fiske comments on the prominence of Catholic iconography and symbols in Madonna's work. Her use of this imagery, he insists,

> is neither religious nor sacrilegious. She intends to free it from this ideological opposition and to enjoy it, use it, for the meanings it has for *her*, not for those of the dominant ideology and its simplistic binary thinking. (Fiske 103)

Of the fact that this imagery has a long history within the specific semiotic context of traditional Roman Catholicism, Fiske reiterates his contention:

> She makes her own meanings out of the symbolic systems available to her, and in using their signifiers [crucifixes, iconography] and rejecting or mocking *their* signifieds [the Catholic tradition, patriarchy], she is demonstrating *her* ability to make *her own* meanings (Fiske 106, emphasis in original)

Interestingly enough, instead of creating some new semiotic centre for these signs, the very act of tearing them from their original context becomes the *summum bonum* in the struggle for social power and personal identity (Fiske 107). The exaltation of the freedom to make meanings as a parodic protest against (and with the semiotic codes of) the dominant culture, is the hallmark of this ideal type.

Camille Paglia advances quite a different interpretation of Madonna. One could argue that her analysis of Madonna diverges so considerably from Fiske's and Lewis's that the general introduction I have provided to this type does not concern Paglia's approach. Paglia has recently gained herself quite a reputation as an anti-feminist feminist (Paglia 56), a despoiler of the new dogmas associated with political correctness, postmodernism and feminism. This reputation reflects her vociferous denunciations of many of the analytical conventions so common to cultural criticism.[4] For example, I am certain she would insist that the language (esp. semiotics) and influences (esp. Lacan and

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[4] See any of the essays in Paglia's 1992 book for an indication of the contempt she has for many cultural critics.

Foucault) apparent in Lewis and Fiske's writings render their interpretations spurious. However, although Paglia is not as fully indicative of type A as Fiske, there are compelling reasons for including her in type A.

In what became a seminal and extremely provocative contribution to "Madonna Studies", Paglia declared Madonna "the future of feminism" (Paglia 5) because she so publicly exposes and parodies "the puritanism and suffocating ideology of American feminism". In contrast to modern feminism, Madonna has "taught young women to be fully female and sexual while still exercising control over their lives. She shows girls how to be attractive, sensual, energetic, ambitious, aggressive, and funny -- all at the same time" (Paglia 4).

To place her commentary in its proper hermeneutical context, one should note that Paglia is a Freudian Catholic (Paglia 66) whose sweeping intellectual agenda is rooted firmly in the belief that the social constructionism endorsed by feminism and academic humanism has underestimated the profound influence of the feral, erotic, Dionysian urges so central to human nature. According to Paglia, Madonna's genius is that she foregrounds and in fact venerates many of the darkly erotic elements of human sexuality that feminism has abrogated. Paglia thus argues for what she considers an enlightened re-evaluation of the less refined aspects of sexuality present in art and popular culture.

Paglia also reveres her own (and Madonna's) Italian and Catholic backgrounds for their "lush sensuality" (Paglia 13). She contends that by resurrecting "the buried paganism" of Roman Catholicism, Madonna has "rejoined and healed the split halves of women: Mary, the Blessed Virgin and holy mother, and Mary Magdalene, the harlot"

(Paglia 11).[65]

Although Paglia would probably resent being included in the same group as critics whose agenda maintains so many elements of semiotics and feminism, her response nevertheless fits in ideal type A because it focuses on Madonna's use of satire (Paglia 12), parody (Paglia 6) and comedy (Paglia 9), all of which are common features of this ideal type. As well, contrary to type B's "deconstruction" of the coherent self and society, Paglia employs traditional notions of history and personality.[66]

Madonna emerges as an extraordinary example of true feminism in her daring combination of Apollonian and Dionysian influences (Paglia 12). In effect, Madonna represents a powerful challenge to the feminist status quo which, Paglia maintains, has robbed women of their natural sensuality, thus obscuring the (classically obvious) fact that women are the dominant sex (Paglia 66). Paglia writes that "Madonna's most enduring cultural contribution may be that she has introduced ravishing visual beauty and a lush Mediterranean sensuality into parched, pinched, word-drunk Anglo-Saxon feminism" (Paglia 13).

As for the sociological implications of type A, Fiske maintains that "Madonna

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[65] Although there are many differences, this is a noticeable similarity between Paglia and Andrew Greeley's perspectives on Madonna. They both posit Madonna as something of a prophetess who heals women's "split halves" and relies on inherently Catholic values. As well, they both base many of their interpretations on so-called modernist assumptions about the intrinsic mind-body duality of human nature. Although I must forego a serious comparison and critique of their position(s), this similarity was too conspicuous not to address.

[66] Paglia writes: "Many of my assumptions are quaintly pre-modernist. I believe that history has shape, order, and meaning.... Behind the shifting face of personality is a hard nugget of self" (Paglia 102-3)

offers her fans access to semiotic and social power.... [This] may empower the fan's sense of self and thus affect her behaviour in social situations" (Fiske 113) This illustrates well the connections these critics make between Madonna's work, her fans, and the social institutions in which they are both located. In this model, institutional change comes about by altering the "micropolitics of everyday life" (Fiske 132) through subversive parodies of hegemonic semiotic codes (Fiske and Lewis) or brazen assaults on feminist conventions (Paglia).

Ideal Type B: Pastiche

Although it is also part of the evolution of leftist thought, type B diverges considerably from some of type A's most fundamental presuppositions. For type B is explicitly associated with the short history of "postmodernism" In contrast to the essentially modernist hermeneutical tendencies of type A, E Ann Kaplan asserts that postmodernism loves what modernism hates; namely commercialized mass culture (Kaplan 46). In fact, Frederic Jameson writes that "any sophisticated theory of the postmodern ought to bear something of the same relationship to Horkheimer and Adorno's old 'Culture Industry' concept as MTV or fractal ads bear to fifties television series" (Jameson X). Depending, of course, on whom one reads on this matter, one gets the impression that type B is either an insidious mutation or the highest form of the leftist critique of capitalist society.[67]

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[67] See Daniel Harris's essay on the failure of the postmodern critique as evidenced by what he calls "Madonna S udies", or Camille Paglia's ubiquitous critiques of postmodern theory ("one of the fattest pieces of rotten French cheese swallowed whole by American academics" (Paglia 180))., See Sean Cubitt or Frederic Jameson's

Whereas Jameson sees the origins of postmodern culture implicit in the evolution of capitalism -- it is the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson 1-55) -- according to postmodern theory, for him the problem with conventional cultural criticism is its unnuanced economistic vision of the human subject and his/her social milieu. Thus, instead of focusing mainly on a direct critique of global capitalism, postmodernists tend to concentrate on a "deconstruction" of conventional centre-based notions of the self and society. Careful analysis, they insist, reveals the arbitrary, illusory nature of both self and society, to which distinct centres and intentions are falsely attributed.

Jameson asserts that "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, [has emerged as] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (Jameson 9). But the most significant -- and contentious -- claim of postmodern theorists is their assertion that postmodernity signals "the end of the b urgeois ego, or monad...[the end] of style, the sense of the unique and personal. [It] may also mean...a liberation from every...feeling" (Jameson 15). Consequently, in postmodernity "the dominant mode of cultural production has fallen into a depthless, blank pastiche of the surfaces of previous forms" (Tetzlaff 11).

Although Baudrillard does not play so freely with the term "postmodernism" (Tetzlaff 12), he describes our culture as one in which the media has defined a fundamentally non-responsive role for the cultural consumer (Baudrillard 111) amid the myriad of surfaces presented to us by the mass media. We happily accept this role, gorging ourselves on mass produced and uncontextualized images and narrat'ves, argues

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endorsements of postmodernism.

Baudrillard. Tetzlaff comments that according to Baudrillard, "fascination with the code of transmission (signifiers) replaces the construction of sense, stripping the communication of any message (signified) the code might have carried" (Tetzlaff 12)

E. Ann Kaplan writes that in postmodernity, we suffer from a "disappearance of history" and live in a schizophrenic state of being "fixated on the detached signifier, isolated in a present from which there is no escape" (Kaplan 45) In other words, our culture's preoccupation with the surfaces of things and people has severed the familiar signs (e.g., signifiers such as the Catholic imagery used by Madonna) which order our social existence from their unique social histories (e.g., signifieds such as the Catholic tradition). Postmodern culture thus tends to mitigate against texts and lives which have long-term semiotic consistency, and therefore meaning [68] Thus, type B theorists posit that the raw cultural materials out of which one might forge a coherent and sometimes rebellious life for oneself in type A are, for all practical purposes, completely fragmented by the semiotic disarray which now characterizes North American culture The hermeneutical approach adopted by type B theorists seeks to expose the superficialization of human experience and the complicated and overlapping "texts" and traditions which now comprise everything from personalities to works of art to North American society

Type B shares with type A at least some rudimentary belief in the culture industry's capitalist agenda. However, in type B this industry is reformulated in a fundamentally non-centralized way such that the industry's goal is not the homogenization

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[68] The notion that long-term semiotic consistency equals meaning reflects my modernist presuppositions against which one might mount a credible argument.

of human consciousness and society, but rather its fragmentation. Tetzlaff writes that in type B the media and capitalist culture generally "exhibit the exact opposite sort of tendencies from those usually attributed to them: the deconstruction of sense and cultural collectivity rather than the molding of them to a unified dominant model" (Tetzlaff 14). Moreover, contrary to traditional cultural criticism, proponents of type B posit that the perseverance of capitalist hegemony in North America can be explained more effectively with reference to semiotic fragmentation.[69]

The concept of "pastiche" occupies the same crucial -- and also not always stated -- position in this type as "parody" did in type A. Type B advocates assert that pastiche, the eclectic use of often totally dissimilar sources to create a text -- a personality, star persona, music video, etc. -- is the most characteristic *modus operandi* of popular culture in postmodernity. Pastiche creates texts which are essentially contrived, impermanent, soluble. Moreover, unlike parody, pastiche is not inherently critical. Kaplan writes that pastiche signifies "a new lack of orienting boundaries, a tendency to incorporate rather than to 'quote' texts" (Kaplan 145; Cf. Jameson 18). To establish the parodic nature of a text, type A requires the construction of context through "quoting" familiar texts (e.g., Catholic imagery), whereas type B's "incorporation" requires no deliberate act of contextualization.

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[69] Tetzlaff writes, "Thus it is to capital's interest to keep its subject population as fragmented as possible. . [It] is also to capital's interest if disinterest in the nature of social relations is fostered and if the workings of the social system remain as obscure as possible. To the extent that a cultural system can yield these results and still provide motivations for production and consumption, it serves the maintenance of capitalist control" (Tetzlaff 29).

Perhaps the best way to understand postmodern cultural criticism is by its application to Madonna. I shall examine E. Ann Kaplan's interpretation, with some minor augmentation from Susan McClary's research.

Kaplan asserts that MTV, the main medium of Madonna's work/image, is the quintessential example of the postmodern medium since it fragments texts and traditions (both signifieds and signifiers), and operates on the basis of pastiche.[70] In Kaplan's analysis, Madonna emerges as *the* "postmodern feminist heroine in her odd combination of seductiveness and a gutsy sort of independence" (Kaplan 117). Unlike classical (and modern) Hollywood images of women who normally yearn for little else than to be absorbed by their leading man, or men in general, Madonna's success is due in part to her "articulating and parading the desire to be desired in an unabashed, aggressive, gutsy manner" (Kaplan 126).

Reminiscent of ideal type A, Kaplan maintains that Madonna's popularity is largely the result of the way she plays with conventional signifiers. However, the distinctiveness of type B (and pastiche) may be elucidated through a consideration of analyses which address Madonna's contested "Material Girl" video

While type A proponents focus on the comical and parodic way the video ends -- with Madonna, playing Marilyn Monroe, rejecting the convention of men seducing women with wealth (Pagel 19; Fiske 115-132) -- type B proponents focus instead on the

[70] This is an extension of Baudrillard's theory that its unbounded frame of reference and multi-simulated images of other images make television *the* postmodern medium. For Kaplan, MTV is high speed television, where the unique communications problematic of television is laid bare (Kaplan 44).

video's combination of "texts". For example, Kaplan tends to focus on the way the video combines, or as she puts it, pastiches contradictory discourses, from copying Monroe's "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" performance while changing the song's lyrics, to juxtaposing Monroe's victim-of-the-culture-industry reputation with Madonna's apparent domination thereof, from obscuring which character represents the "real" Madonna, to clouding the line between the avaricious character she plays on-stage (Monroe) and the unselfish character she plays off-stage (Madonna?), to name but a few examples.

Postmodern theorists argue that this bespeaks a "pastiche" style in that, contrary to modernist film-making practice which privileges one form (or set) of discourse(s) over another (e g , romance over materialism), the contradictory discourses of "Material Girl" "exist on a horizontal axis, neither subordinated to the other" (Kaplan 124). Typical of postmodern theorists, Kaplan declares Madonna the champion of the postmodern agenda for her equalization of previously hierarchical discourses. Formerly entrenched dominant discourses have not been obliterated; but the hegemonic playing field of popular culture has, so to speak, been levelled.

Kaplan also notes that Madonna is neither particularly female nor male-identified; but rather, that she seems primarily out for herself.[71] Beyond challenging traditional gender boundaries, musicologist Susan McClary argues that in keeping with postmodernity, Madonna's work

> repeatedly deconstructs the traditional notions of the unified subject with finite ego boundaries Her pieces explore...ways of constituting identities that refuse stability,

[71] Shelagh Young writes that "the problem for feminists was that [Madonna] transgressed both the category of the feminine and of the feminist" (Young 183).

> that remain fluid, that resist definition.... [She declines] to deliver the security of a clear, unambiguous message of an 'authentic' self. (McClary 150)

There is a certain freedom in this dissolution of the conventional ego. Social conventions -- normally in the service of the dominant ideology -- which have historically determined the ego boundaries of individuals have been targeted for "deconstruction" since the inauguration of the postmodern movement. It is no wonder, therefore, that Madonna's pastiche style has appealed to postmodern theorists like Kaplan and McClary.

Jameson points out that "every position on postmodernism in culture -- whether apologia or stigmatization -- is also...and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (Jameson 3). A brief inquiry into the ethical imperatives entailed by Kaplan and McClary's perspective (which one expects to find in an interpretation of "the postmodern feminist heroine") is therefore in order.

However, the celebration of Madonna's ambiguous, androgenous and possibly anarchic identity to which postmodern feminists are prone may betray the superficiality of their intellectual milieu. Even Kaplan comments that while Madonna "pastes the traditional virgin onto the traditional whore", by "not questioning the polarity's very terms, she runs the risk of keeping it intact" (Kaplan 133). As well, Kaplan writes that while "Material Girl" does foreground the artificiality of previously hierarchically arranged discourses, "it does not appear to critique or in any way comment upon them" (Kaplan 120).[72]

[72] This seems to reveal what Adorno called "an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political" (Adorno in Arato 301).

While she is enthusiastically interpreted by postmodern critics as postmodernity personified, Madonna may ironically embody the North American cultural shallowness against which their leftist sympathies compel them to fight. For there is a certain pessimism in texts about postmodernism, a fear that, as Kaplan puts it, "the new postmodern universe, with its celebration of the look, the surfaces, textures, the self-as-commodity, threatens to reduce everything to the image/representation/simulacrum" (Kaplan 151). According to its own theorists (Kaplan and Jameson), there is a faint but tempting summons to nihilism in postmodernity, which may explain why, ironically, Madonna and the postmodern universe she supposedly exemplifies are appealing and anathema[73] to many cultural critics.

Conclusion

The two ideal types I have proposed are not totally dissimilar. Their class analysis of popular culture and a shared sense that social groups, social meaning(s) and individual identities are structured through the consumption of public commodities or signs constitute their main similarities. As is by now apparent, their major discrepancy involves the way in which each one characterizes the essence of popular culture. Secular critics are divided between one perspective (type B) which is concerned with what popular culture does to us, and the other perspective (type A) which focuses on what we can do with

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[73] Jameson writes: 'Meanwhile, for political groups which seek actively to intervene in history and to modify its otherwise passive momentum...there cannot but be much that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project" (Jameson 46).

popular culture. As well, in type A culture is still depicted as a relatively well -- if not always explicitly -- organized industry which endeavours to homogenize discursive practices and communities while type B proposes a more diffuse and fragmented model of cultural hegemony. Through an examination of several analyses of Madonna from both viewpoints, we have seen that while they still have many things in common, in practice they yield different results.

For example, in type A cultural critics such as John Fiske and Lisa Lewis consider Madonna a sign which may be used by young women (and homosexuals[74]) to resist subordination. Through a process of "guerrilla warfare" (Fiske 14), her fans are "aligning themselves with a source of power" (Fiske 101) in a world where they are often powerless. Or, according to Camille Paglia, Madonna's parodies inspire young women to explore an aspect of their femininity against which modern feminism supposedly mitigates. Madonna thumbs her nose at patriarchy, but also at what Paglia judges to be an increasingly puritanical and disembodied feminism.

Fiske's "desire to see mass culture texts and their decodings as expressions of contradiction, ambivalence, and...discontent" (Collins 19) signals his departure from the elitist tendencies of the Frankfurt School. However, all three proponents of type A remain loyal to critical theory's "notion of culture as a cohesive, centred master system" (Collins 20). Whether or not centre-based models of social control adequately explain popular culture is the subject of an enduring debate between proponents of types A and B. David

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[74] See Halasa on Madonna's efforts to reach the homosexual audience. Also see Shewey's Madonna interview in *The Advocate*.

Tetzlaff comments that contemporary popular culture simply makes less sense in the context of the "ideological, unifying culture" (Tetzlaff 14) presupposed by type A. Tetzlaff argues that social control is more clearly conceived as operating through semiotic fragmentation.

After all, type A requires that individuals possess certain decoding skills so they can, in the case of Madonna's fans, recognize they are victims of patriarchal hegemony and mount a counter attack. However, these skills are notoriously difficult to control, and since a certain amount of dissention might be built into the dominant system (Tetzlaff 30), Fiskean resistance may have little serious effect on the dominant ideology.

However, type B's form of social control does not presuppose or foster any even remotely critical hermeneutical skills on the part of the individual. Rather, it requires only "*déja lu*", the ability to recognize some discrete element of another popular text within the text one is "reading" (Tetzlaff 15). The required cultural literacy is reduced to the bare minimum of superficial recognition. Such recognition titillates the cultural "reader", pleasantly overwhelming her/him with the sheer weight of texts s/he is asked to read. To corroborate their thesis, postmodern critics argue that "the evidence of superficiality and detachment" in popular culture is strong enough to invalidate type A (Tetzlaff 29).

The notion that Madonna embodies Fiskean cultural resistance is also questioned by Sean Cubitt, who writes that he is sceptical

> as to whether incorporation [into the culture industry's totalizing agenda] is really being reversed [resisted] here: or whether, in fact, the opposite is still not at least equally the case -- that through commodification of Madonna as image, [fans] are being imbricated into the social reproduction of femininity under the alibi of Madonna's apparent control over her representations. (Cubitt 60)

While it does acknowledge some of what one might call Madonna's "semiotic backtalk", type B places her unorthodox manipulation of conventional semiotic codes (e.g., Catholic imagery, gender stereotypes) within a decidedly postmodern context. While she emerges as the "postmodern feminist heroine" by refusing to swallow whole the semiotic codes of patriarchy and Catholicism, she is a heroine whose hermeneutical tantrums nonetheless embody the threat that postmodern poses to other -- perhaps *all* other -- common semiotic structures. While the critics I have chosen to represent type B present a bleak evaluation of post-industrial society, Jameson insists that postmodernism could inspire a "new radical cultural politics" which, because of its equalization of previous hierarchies, "would endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (Jameson 50).

However, this equalization of previously hierarchical discourses is hardly without its problems. Charles Taylor contends that it is dangerous to eliminate the "horizons of significance" against which one makes one's decisions (Taylor 39). For decisions to have meaning in society, one requires a certain horizon of shared values to discern the difference between competing values. In its attempt to obliterate conventional hierarchical forms of moral and aesthetic valuation -- usually because many of these are thoroughly patriarchal and authoritarian -- postmodernism and its aesthetic manifestation pastiche, profoundly (though ironically) trivialize the very process of discernment which cultural criticism seeks to encourage. For without a "rhetoric of difference" (Taylor 37), distinctions between even quite opposite moral, philosophical or artistic alternatives become obscure.

Moreover, Daniel Miller contends that postmodernism is "destined to end in nihilism and elitism" (Miller 10) because it "almost always move[s] from an attack on contemporary material culture as trivial or inauthentic to an implied (though rarely explicit) denigration of the mass of the population whose culture this is" (Miller 16). Such attempts to criticize mass capitalist culture from this angle too often result in a "critique of mass industrial culture *per se*, which has had the effect of stifling any...advocacy of a potential popular alternative ..within . industrial culture" (Miller 176).

Postmodernism seeks to give a voice to those whose views have never been adequately expressed: women, the poor, homosexuals and minorities. Although there is much that is laudable in this programmatic deconstruction of oppressive moral traditions, one cannot help but wonder if the postmodern project does not go too far in its abdication of moral horizons, if in fact the voice it gives the oppressed is not woefully feeble. One finds oneself asking whether pastiche is a sufficiently potent, that is to say, critical, tool for cultural criticism.[75]

Secular cultural critics have had a lot to say about Madonna, a woman who has become somewhat emblematic of popular culture over the past eight years. Her prominent position within popular culture has meant that she has also become something of an honourary ambassador for both secular approaches to popular culture I have outlined. That she has been so enthusiastically endorsed *and* denounced by proponents of *both*

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[75] The so-called "alternative media" represented, for example, by popular labour-oriented periodicals, folk music, punk rock, and the CBC radio and television services illustrate that the opposition to mainstream popular culture is expressed in many other (and perhaps better) ways than I am able to discuss here.

approaches illustrates the tremendous ambiguity of her work and the secular responses to it. Brown and Schulze write that

> Madonna provokes multiple and contradictory meanings. [She] can be taken 'straight', as conforming to patriarchy's positioning of women, or as resisting that subordination. She can be taken as pure commodity ('sex sells'), or as an independent auteur evading the culture industry's commodification of female sexuality. (Brown and Schulze 90)

Now that I have explored and categorized the various Catholic and secular approaches to Madonna, and have critically examined their religious, philosophical and sociological foundations, in the next chapter I will make some concluding comparative remarks and address very briefly the relevance of entirely secular (or Catholic) responses to religiously ambiguous popular culture phenomena.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

I chose Madonna to represent a particular trend in popular culture: the prevalence of explicitly sexual imagery. That she so often mixes sexual and Roman Catholic imagery makes her an excellent case study for a comparison of the secular and Catholic responses to the prominence of sexual imagery in popular culture. Reluctant to augment "Madonna Studies", I have focused not on her or her work, but on the responses thereto. After organizing these responses into the general categories of Catholic and secular, I then broke these categories down into various ideal types, exploring their ethical and ideological implications. In so doing, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the distinctive features of the secular and Catholic responses to this aspect of popular culture.

So far the insights demonstrated and paradigms employed by the social sciences with respect to popular culture have not had a significant impact on religious, especially Catholic, scholarship. In fact, religious scholars seem reluctant to address popular culture at all.[76] As well, social scientists have generally avoided analyzing the meagre number of religious responses to popular culture.[77] These concluding remarks may shed some

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[76] The exceptions to this are Greeley, Warren and Talvacchia.

[77] Unfortunately, reflection on the possible reasons religious and secular critics have avoided each other on this issue is well beyond the scope of this thesis.

light on issues which concern both disciplines and which betray the inadequacy of much that has been written about religiously provocative elements of popular culture such as Madonna.

Within the two general categories of Catholic and secular, we have explored the distinctions between the various ideal types. In the process, we have considered the diversity also manifested by trends *within* each ideal type. We have seen that the various ideal types within the larger Catholic and secular categories reflect to a very large degree the internal tensions and diversity these categories sustain. Now I shall attempt to make some tenable generalizations about the two main categories of analysis. For without some conception of a body of responses which can be fairly called "Catholic" or "secular" rather than "conservative" or "postmodern", the comparative dimension of this thesis would be severely compromised. Only after such a review can I properly address whether or not the largely uni-disciplinary social scientific and Catholic approaches to Madonna are effective for analyzing religiously and ideologically ambiguous socio-religious phenomena.

The Catholic and Secular Responses

One can differentiate between the Catholic and secular bodies of response in terms of the aspects of Madonna's work with which they are most concerned, the subtext(s) to which the critics are most sensitive.

Despite the significant differences between the various Catholic responses, they converge on a few major points. The first and most obvious similarity is that the terms

of reference used by Catholic critics belong to the discipline of Catholic moral theology (i.e., not secular moral philosophy). Accordingly, most of these commentaries have appeared in contexts wherein the majority of the readers are presumed to be Catholics who have some familiarity with the Catholic ethical tradition. Secondly, the Catholic critics bring their often diametrically opposed interpretations of the Catholic ethical imperative to bear on Madonna's social significance primarily through evaluations of her *moral* influence on or depiction of modern society. Consequently, while both Greeley and the Italian clerics use terminology from the same moral tradition, their interpretations of these words and categories are radically different. Finally, almost all of the Catholic commentators address the explicitly religious elements of Madonna's work: her use of crucifixes, prayer, rosary beads, stigmata, saints, church choirs and other traditional Catholic symbols and rituals. They are clearly addressing Madonna as a person about whom Catholics should be especially concerned.

The secular responses can be assessed according to a similar subtextual analysis. By and large, the secular critics I have selected are concerned with the balance of power in modern society.[78] Consequently, their analyses of Madonna focus on the hegemonic or anti-hegemonic manoeuvres implicitly or explicitly represented in her work. Therefore, they examine Madonna's work almost solely in terms of its *ideological* implications. According to the way I divide secular cultural criticism, proponents of both ideal types A and B contend that she represents their own understanding of the way cultural

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[78] Paglia's response is somewhat exceptional in that her focus is the misinterpretation of Madonna and the excesses of modern feminist interpretation. However, these foci still pertain to the hegemony of cultural and hermeneutical conventions.

hegemony is either resisted (through semiotic "guerilla warfare") or maintained (through the fragmentation of semiotic codes). Their respective visions of the leftist agenda lead them to quite distinct interpretations of Madonna; but they share a common ideological frame of reference and an interest in her work's gender-political implications. Finally, apart from Fiske's somewhat cursory and reductive consideration, secular critics are not very interested in the explicitly Catholic imagery evident in her texts.[79]

Comparison and Conclusion

That Catholic and secular critics are sensitive to vastly different dimensions of Madonna's work (and popular culture in general) should come as no surprise. Clearly, Catholic and secular critics operate with unique sets of priorities and presuppositions. My goal in this thesis was not to illustrate this rather obvious fact. Rather, I submit that the comparative approach I have employed has demonstrated the fundamental inadequacy of cultural criticism of religiously ambiguous popular phenomena which relies *exclusively* on either secular or Catholic perspectives. For a certain hermeneutical insularity is the main weakness of the secular and Catholic approaches I have considered.

By ignoring or underrating the explicitly Catholic features of Madonna's work, secular critics overlook a substantial part of her cultural significance. After all, the popularity of her work is at least partially attributable to habits of thought or, to use a

[79] Fiske does not attend to the independent cultural power of Catholic symbols. For him, Madonna's use of Catholicism is just another example of her parodic praxis.

semiotic term, codes of signification derived from traditional Catholicism.[80] Moreover, the polarity of traditional Catholicism and overt eroticism is not merely one instance of polarization, as Fiske implies, but one of the elemental polarities in our culture from which many others have sprung. So deeply entrenched is this binary opposition that the sexual mores of most North Americans are conditioned by either an institutional (i.e., a Protestant) or personal reaction against, or a nostalgic yearning for so-called "traditional sexual morality".[81] The semiotic terrain of popular culture still evidences significant Catholic features, regardless of the historical transformations and scholarly indifference explicitly Catholic "signs" have sustained.

As secularization makes its presence felt throughout the academy, the religious subtext of social phenomena may be neglected, but probably never effaced altogether. The Catholic signs, symbols and rituals may, as Nathanson suggests, simply go underground for a period, only to reappear in popular culture.[82] For as Madonna's Catholic critics attest, the long and influential semiotic, iconographical and ethical history of Catholicism resurfaces with astonishing regularity in popular culture. That most secular critics do not concern themselves with the millions of Madonna's fans whose attraction to Madonna almost certainly has something to do with the enduring influence of Catholic signs and semiotic systems represents a serious deficiency in their analyses. One cannot help but

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[80] See Nathanson (179) for an excellent discussion of this sort of relationship.

[81] "Traditional morality" normally connotes romanticized visions of pre-modern society in which, not coincidentally, Roman Catholicism exerted considerably more influence over social and moral institutions (e.g., "family values") than it does today.

[82] Nathanson's text elaborately illustrates this process.

wonder how much more nuanced their scholarship would be if they took the cultural persistence and transformation of religious imagery or signs more seriously

Concerning Madonna's Catholic critics, except for Talvacchia, they have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with her moral and/or strictly Catholic significance. Madonna has been described as an "infidel and a blasphemer" (Lepore in Alcazar 141) as well as a Catholic feminist (Greeley 1988, 160) celebrating "the sacramentality [*sic*] of human eroticism" (168). Moreover, her work has been characterized by Catholic critics as everything from a "peep show for a culture of voyeurs" (Cash 6) to "vulgarity without limits" (Levi in Alcazar 141) to a violation of "good taste and decency" (*L'Osservatore Romano* 6) to an ambiguous critique of patriarchal society (Talvacchia)

Since questions of so-called public morality preoccupy most of the Catholic critics we have surveyed, they tend to neglect the prevalent ideological dimension of popular culture. While moral evaluations of popular culture may explore or elucidate the problematic micropolitical dimensions of a text or individual, they are quite insufficient for situating such a phenomenon in a culture's political economy.[83] Because they approach culture from opposite sides of an inherently apologetic debate which seeks either to condemn or commend modern society, advocates of both the conservative-condemnatory and liberal-affirmative ideal types tend to produce analyses in which Madonna, her fans, and the culture they bespeak become caricatures of decadence or

[83] For contemporary secular moral philosophers, "moral issues" may include economic and ideological elements as well as the standard ethical and/or religious elements (Cf. Stout). However, most of the Catholic moral theologians I have surveyed restrict themselves either to deontological or more traditionally "moral" problems. This tendency effectively obscures the larger and inherent ideological dimension of moral issues

excellence. For example, among conservative-condemnatory Catholic critics (and they are by far the majority) the morality-of-Madonna issue categorically excludes any possibility of ambiguity, any likelihood that her popularity might signify something other than the superficiality of her fans, the domination of the media, or the moral decay of western civilization.[84]

It would appear that Madonna's social significance may not be clearly discerned until one has explored the economic, sociological ideological *and* moral implications of her texts.[85] For North American popular culture is a profoundly global entity whose signs and media are ubiquitous and whose influence on North American cultural institutions cannot be fully appreciated by the two main Catholic approaches. Catholic moral analyses barely scratch the surface of popular culture (and the cultural commodities associated therewith) and moreover run the risk of further alienating contemporary youths who are increasingly "tuned into" a burgeoning international (though originally North American) popular culture.

There are at least two ways to respond to the demonstrated shortcomings of the Catholic and secular approaches to popular culture. The first response stems from the liberal sociological tradition and entails a celebration of the hermeneutical diversity embodied in the two categories. This approach maintains that the multiplicity of static hermeneutical positions and presuppositions guarantees that each response will reveal a

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[84] This concentration also tends to ignore the global and non-Catholic (in fact, non-Christian) audience Madonna has attracted.

[85] It seems to me that this assertion holds true for any popular culture phenomenon.

different dimension of the text under consideration. Therefore, public discourse is enriched by a moral pluralism in which the cultural "reader" has the complete freedom and responsibility to discern which of a panoply of perspectives she or he will accept or reject.

A second way to deal with the apparent lack of communication and/or understanding between the secular and Catholic perspectives is to argue that in practice this diversity tends to mitigate against authentic inter-disciplinary discussion. Contrary to the above approach which fortifies the walls built between (and within) the secular and religious worlds, this approach seeks to foster constructive dialogue between religious and secular scholars. Here diversity is appreciated, but subordinated to discussion.

This approach asserts that the occasional myopia characteristic of the Catholic and secular perspectives on popular culture is not, despite the evidence, a necessary by-product of cultural criticism. In fact, there is good reason to suspect that the stay-in-your-own-neighbourhood method of cultural criticism is simply obsolete. For the cultural climate in which this discipline finds itself is now very difficult to understand by using conventional uni-disciplinary approaches which have traditionally overlooked important cultural nuances. Consequently, conventional hermeneutical (i.e., traditional religious or secular) paradigms which do not seriously take different methodologies and insights into consideration are becoming increasingly anachronistic.

Commenting on the secular approaches to Madonna, Sean Cubitt writes that "the analysis either of style as surface without depth [type B], or of marketing motives as the core of the music business [type A], is inadequate to the understanding of meaning

production" in her videos (Cubitt 54). Cubitt alludes here to the trend towards what I described in the second chapter as a "radical-critical" approach to cultural criticism. Such a movement is critical in that it proposes that popular culture functions in both liberating and oppressive manners. Furthermore, it is radical in that it critiques the role of capitalism in western culture. Endorsing this promising movement in cultural criticism, David Tetzlaff writes that

> we are not going to start the revolution by getting people to listen to Schoenberg. Nor do we need newer, better, more progressive pop texts....I think we have plenty of models of popular practice with critical potential. The problem is to pry that potential out from the greater system of capitalist pop culture that subverts it with nauseating regularity (Tetzlaff 32)[86]

Kathleen Talvacchia's response represents an exception to the moralistic disposition prevailing among contemporary Catholic critics. For her analysis of Madonna is openly Catholic yet truly radical-critical. It evidences her grasp on the Catholic, moral and ideological issues implicitly and explicitly involved in Madonna's texts. Talvacchia's allowance for ambiguity does not, however, dull her lucid discernment of the problematic features of Madonna's work. Of all the responses I have read, Talvacchia's represents the most effective and balanced way to approach popular culture from within a religious framework but with disciplined reference to and utilization of social scientific perspectives.

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[86] Concerning the influential strain of feminist cultural criticism, Shelagh Young writes, "If feminism is to remain a radical or subversive political force women cannot afford to simply emulate either the Old Left's dismissive disdain for mass culture or the New Left's apparently indiscriminate endorsement of anything that appears to be popular" (Young 178)

Jeffrey Stout argues that in mainstream culture previously sacrosanct boundaries (and relations) between individuals, communities, values, ideas, etc., are becoming more and more arbitrary. Consequently, he argues that both religious and secular cultural critics will increasingly and necessarily participate in what he calls "moral bricolage", the eclectic stitching together of various strands of our "complicated social and conceptual inheritance" (Stout 292) to form a cohesive ethical vision. Secular critics continually emphasize Madonna's blurring of traditional gender positions, her use of pastiche or parody to incorporate or juxtapose previous texts in her work. Although she is obviously not a cultural critic herself (or at least not a very articulate one), the ambiguity that Madonna promotes may in fact represent an example of moral bricolage.[87] As far as popular culture is concerned, any process of critical moral bricolage is obstructed by the fact that two of the main branches of cultural criticism -- the Catholic and the secular -- retain the walls which separate them. With a few exceptions, the preceding analysis of the debate surrounding Madonna reveals that at least for now, Catholic and secular critics are content to speak their own languages to their own people.

[87] It is quite unclear whether she *intends* to engage in "moral bricolage". But whether or not Madonna is simply a blank screen on which academics and theologians project their visions of the excellence or decadence of modern culture, at the very least, she champions a "more ambiguous sort of model" of womanhood than those normally available in popular culture (Pratt 38).

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