

'Shiny and new' ? Rereading Madonna's Virgin

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To have one film interpretation of a song is perhaps not so unusual but to have two is rare indeed. Madonna's 1984 hit 'Like a Virgin' [2] belongs to this small category, having featured prominently in both Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* [3] and Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!*. [4] [FN](#)

Reservoir Dogs begins in a diner, at breakfast. Seated around the table are a group of men preparing to undertake the bank robbery around which the film revolves. The film's story unfolds within unusually narrow boundaries of time, place and character; as a result, this opening sequence exhibits a certain urgency in introducing characters. The audience is given a whistle-stop tour of personalities and the developing relationships within the group. The conversation is free-flowing but tense: success depends on absolute trust, which must be rapidly established between strangers over coffee and muffins.

It is into this situation that Tarantino (as script-writer, director and actor) introduces the topic of Madonna and her music. Specifically, Tarantino's character Mr Brown expounds his personal analysis of 'Like a Virgin'. The use of pop cultural reference and analysis to help draw a character is a frequent device of Tarantino's. There is the famous dialogue from *Pulp Fiction*, which introduces John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson's characters, comparing European and American MacDonalds. There is also a less prominent cameo in Rory Kelly's *Sleep with Me*, [5] in which Tarantino plays a party bore who deconstructs *Top Gun* as a subversive tale of homosexual awakening. [6] As a combination of both narrative prominence and analytical depth, however, Mr Brown's 'Like a Virgin' is a particularly marked use of the device in Tarantino's output. Mr Brown sees the song as a sado-masochistic sexual fantasy, revolving around power, pain and pleasure; it is also a particularly misogynistic fantasy, which in the context of the film script serves to paint Mr Brown as the vile and violent man he is. [7] Gratifyingly, he is one of the first gang members to be killed as the robbery goes awry. [FN](#)

Misogyny notwithstanding, how does Mr Brown's analysis stand up to the song itself? It is in fact one of a number of plausible, if extreme, readings, particularly as an analysis focusing on the lyrics rather than the music. If a case still had to be made for the validity of analysing both the lyrical and musical content of pop music in conjunction, here would be further evidence. Because, when examined together with the song's music, the male fantasy aspect of its lyrics becomes part of a larger interrelated complex, whose overall narrative position is rather more ambiguous.

Submitting the song to a brief diagrammatic analysis, as shown in the left-hand half of [Table 1](#), reveals a familiar chorus-verse structure. This is subdivided in order to expose certain features whose significance will become apparent. The song begins with a four-bar intro, built from a quaver bass pattern and chordal 'stabs' (see [Example 1](#)). This composite groove, built around an ambiguous F6 or Dm7 harmony, underpins most of the song – at least, it does when the harmonic centre remains the same. When the harmony shifts – for example to G minor, as it does in the middle of each verse and chorus – the groove alters and is not simply transposed. In other words, this bass figure and these treble stabs are peculiar to the ambiguous F6 or Dm7 harmony I have identified. In fact, they function on the surface as a central point of reference binding the song structure together, much like the tonic key in a classical sonata. Thus, the persistent bass quavers immediately establish the song's danceable rhythms in the introduction and provide for climactic returns with each chorus.

However, the syncopated chord stabs undermine the danceability of the groove and the climactic returns to the chorus never quite offer the resolution one expects. This groove is not as clear-cut

as it may seem. The rhythm is destabilised at the very start, before it has even become established. A 3+5 quaver division of the bar is outlined with the repeated F, notes four and five, but the first chordal stabs displace this rhythm by one quaver, displacing themselves back again in the next bar. Expectations are immediately upset and can never return with the same confidence. What is more revealing about this groove pattern, however, is its harmonic ambiguity, which I have already mentioned. At first, the bass appears solidly in F major. However, the added D in the chords raises the possibility of D minor. What is more, the very first chord lands over a D in the bass, strengthening this possibility. Another expectation has been shaken, and again is never resolved satisfactorily.

The melodic lines of the verse, which consistently cadence on F, suggest that the home key is in fact F major although the added D persists harmonically. A strong chord of D minor does not occur until the end of the verse (the line 'But you made me feel' in the first verse), where it functions in a cycle of fifths as preparation for the climactic perfect cadence back to F for the chorus. This cadence is the most assertive moment in the song [see [Ex. 2](#)]: the groove's rhythmic and harmonic ambiguities have been dispelled by a stock cadential formula in rock-steady crotchets. As Debby Miller wrote when reviewing the 'Like a Virgin' album for *Rolling Stone* in 1985, 'When [Madonna] chirps, "You made me feel/Shiny and new/Like a virgin,"... you know she's after something'. [8] But at the very moment of climactic resolution, the uncertainties return: as I have said, one of the functions of a strong riff is to allow a release of tension at the choruses, as the listener can find their bearings after any deviations of the verse. Here, the groove itself is unsettled and unsettling, so its return is anticlimactic; expectations are thwarted once again as satisfaction is deferred. Adding to our disorientation is the fact that whereas the verse's melodic phrases at least cadenced on the apparent tonic of F, those of the chorus cadence on the suggested alternative of D. The displaced rhythmic stabs of the introduction have also returned. It is worth observing at this point – as Miller does in her *Rolling Stone* review – that the bass line of Madonna's groove is in fact very closely related to that used by the Four Tops in their song 'I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch)', from 1965. [9] In this instance, however, the harmonies are unambiguously in the major, and, characteristically for a Holland-Dozier-Holland production, the beat is in an emphatic four, with the snare on every crotchet, against tambourine backbeats. A further difference is that the bassline riff moves in parallel with local harmonic shifts, and so is a permanent, non-dissonant foundation to the song, and not the unsettling undercurrent of Madonna's record. [FN](#)

Musically, therefore, in spite of the unsettled features of the basic groove and the song's introduction, the verses are generally more confident and certain, the choruses less so. An opposite pattern may be observed in the song's lyrics, as the verses dwell on images of struggle in the wilderness, fear, and injury. These tensions are apparently to be resolved in the chorus – but the music resists such a resolution, and so the whole song becomes invested with doubts and ambiguous dualities: girl/boy, pain/pleasure, fear/erotic fantasy.

At the song's middle-eight section Madonna vocalises, and the song's level of dissonance is increased markedly by the introduction of G major chords, further increasing the emotional ambiguities. The melodic phrases here cadence onto D, enhancing the soft, 'female', plagal feel of the harmonies. A shortened verse brings a return to the chorus once more, and the song ends with a curious fade as Madonna's narrator repeats her assertions of the chorus to the ever-uncertain groove. Even to the very last, the tensions in Madonna's narration are left unresolved; pointedly, these final melodic fragments seem to belong more to D minor than F major.

To return briefly to Mr Brown, the limitations of his lyrics-only analysis should now be clear. In not attending to the music, Mr Brown sees the song as a straightforward male fantasy, played out for him by Madonna's willing narrator. In actual fact, this willingness is not apparent in the music: the song's narrator is haunted by anxieties over the fantasy role she is expected to play. Mr Brown's limitations are not a matter of too much concern, but what is interesting is that such an analysis is made by Tarantino as a way of establishing his character as an interesting but flawed man, a shrewd observer of culture and somewhat subversive. This characterisation is only possible because the original object of discussion is so familiar. Madonna's single is as ubiquitous as the MacDonalds hamburgers referenced in *Pulp Fiction*.

It is precisely this mixture of iconoclasm and internal ambiguity that Luhrmann draws upon in his reworking of 'Like a Virgin' for *Moulin Rouge!*. The sequence involves Zidler, owner and impresario of the Moulin Rouge nightclub, and the Duke, an investor in Zidler's latest production. [10] As part of the return on his investment the Duke demands possession of Satine, a courtesan and dancer at the Moulin Rouge. She, however, is in love with Christian, the writer of the production in which the Duke has invested; because she is with Christian, Satine is late for a supper appointment with the Duke. In this scene Zidler is protecting his financial interests by convincing the Duke that Satine is in fact at confession, in order to feel more 'virginal' for him. The ploy works: the temptation of a virginal courtesan is too much for the Duke to resist and he is seduced by Zidler's vision. [FN](#)

With a few minor alterations the lyrics of 'Like a Virgin' readily lend themselves to such a scene. Most apparent of the lyrical changes is the pronoun shift from Madonna's 'I' to Zidler and the Duke's 'she'. The song is also cast as a duet, with the first two verses and choruses sung by Zidler, and the final one by the Duke, as he is eventually won over. This repositioning of narrative voice requires an exchange of lyrics between the second and third verses. Otherwise, the lyrics are identical and used in their entirety. The effect – as on many similar occasions in Luhrmann's films – is of an extended pun.

Of course, for a pun to work, one needs a familiar object, something immediately recognisable, and a less familiar alternative to which the text is now directed. In this case, the familiar object is Madonna's song; the unfamiliar alternative is the shift of the female voice from a first person narrator to a third person subject of male desire. In order to fully articulate this pun, Luhrmann, and his composer Chris Elliot, [11] have retained and exploited some aspects of the original version recorded by Madonna, and altered others. I have mentioned the lyrical alterations that are made; for the remainder of this paper I wish to discuss their musical counterparts, which are summarised in the right-hand column of [Table 1](#). [FN](#)

Briefly running through the Luhrmann/Elliot version, the following musical changes may be observed. Firstly, there is no musical introduction: Zidler begins speaking the first verse, moving to a recitative-like vocal style, supported by a light underscore. However, the script immediately preceding the actual lyrics anticipates some of the song's lines, so the audience is left in little doubt as to what is coming, lyrically at least. The first occurrence of the cadence from verse to chorus is still lightly scored, and does not have the assertive power of the Madonna equivalent. The chorus itself, though, is where the song takes off: the orchestration is that of the great Hollywood musicals (Luhrmann himself describes this scene as '*Hello Dolly* in hell'), [12] and it is now clear that the disco-based grooves of the original will play no part in this version. [FN](#)

In dispensing with this groove, Elliot also positions the song firmly in F major: the harmonically unsettling D has been removed. The 3+5 quaver rhythm remains, but the displacements of the chorus and introduction have been replaced with more consistent brass patterns. Thus, this chorus is the opposite of Madonna's anticlimactic sidestep: Zidler is revealing all the joyful possibilities Satine will offer the Duke: Madonna's dualities have been reduced to boy, pleasure, fantasy.

The exuberant mood continues throughout Zidler's second verse and chorus, reaching a climax at the middle-eight section as the Duke is whirled round and round on a revolving bed. The middle-eight – which in Madonna's version became a moment of increased dissonance and tension – is here transformed into the triumphant peak of Zidler's sales pitch. Musically, this is further facilitated by the orchestral melodies: whereas Madonna's vocalisations cadenced onto the plagal D, Elliot's orchestral riffs cadence on the perfect G. A passage of feminine uncertainty is transformed into masculine triumph.

At this point in the film, Luhrmann cuts away to Satine lying sick with consumption; comedy is undercut with tragedy. As the action returns to the Duke, and the third verse of 'Like a Virgin', Zidler's lies have succeeded, and the Duke sings with grim determination the words 'She's so fine, and she's mine'. The allure of the male fantasy presented by Zidler has won, and the ever more exuberant orchestration reflects this. Indeed, the verse-chorus cadence, whose confidence was

immediately undercut in Madonna's recording, is here played twice as a crescendo into the final chorus, the grandest yet. The listener is left in little doubt here that the male point of view – traditionally described in emphatic perfect cadences such as this – is in the ascendant.

To draw this victory of male desire to a close, a satisfying resolution is required. The timid fade-out of Madonna's version is replaced by a grotesquely hammed-up coda, with the bearded Zidler dressed as a virginal maid, and the Duke (with appropriately billowing coat tails) as a predatory spectre hovering vampirically over him. A final cadence – more emphatic still – sung in duet ends the song to a volley of popping champagne corks. The male gaze is ultimately satisfied (see [Ex. 3](#)).

What can be seen from this brief exposition is the narrative polysemy that subsists within songs such as 'Like a Virgin', and the boundaries of that polysemy. Musical narrative is of course ambiguous and open to diverse interpretation. Madonna's song, with its continual avoidance of satisfactory resolution, places that ambiguity at the very heart of its narrative. What is revealing is what happens when – for the purposes of a larger narrative project such as a film script – a simplified reading is presented. Mr Brown's 'misreading' of the song contributes to the realisation of a thoroughly unsympathetic character who must be punished later in the film. In order to fully present 'Like a Virgin' as a male fantasy of the sort Mr Brown believes it to be, Luhrmann and Armstrong have fully recomposed the song, resolving all its musical uncertainties and anticlimaxes. In doing so they reveal the layers of male fantasy that exist within Madonna's song, but at the same time highlight the complex frame in which they were hidden.

Footnotes

[1] This is a lightly revised version of a paper first given at the 'Third Biennial Conference on Twentieth-Century Music', University of Nottingham, 27 June 2003. [Back](#)

[2] Released on Sire Records, August 1984, Cat. 29210. [Back](#)

[3] 20th Century Fox, 2001. [Back](#)

[4] Miramax, 1992. [Back](#)

[5] Metro Goldwyn Meyer, 1994. [Back](#)

[6] The text of Tarantino's speech may be found at the Internet Movie Database, <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0111218/quotes>. Both this and the following Tarantino quotation contain offensive language. [Back](#)

[7] The text of this speech may also be found at the Internet Movie Database,

<http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0105236/quotes>. [Back](#)

[8] Debby Miller, *Rolling Stone* no. 439 (1985); the review is also available on line at

<http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/cd/review.asp?aid=55701> [Back](#)

[9] Released on Motown Recording Company, March 1965, Cat.DM-HLV-132313 [Back](#)

[10] This is scene 19 on the commercial DVD release of the film. [Back](#)

[11] Along with Craig Armstrong and Marius De Vries, Elliot is one of three composers to have worked on the film's score. [Back](#)

[12] From the recorded commentary to the commercial DVD. [Back](#)

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