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## MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: REVERSING THE CODES OF DOMINANT CULTURE IN MADONNA'S VIDEOCLIP *DON'T TELL ME*<sup>1</sup>

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Like many of Madonna's earlier works, her album *Music* became a world hit when it was released in 2001. After so many years of chameleonic transformations, she again startled the public with a new image; as can be appreciated in the song and clip *Don't Tell Me*, Madonna has begun mixing tecno music with country aesthetics.<sup>2</sup>

In an article on Madonna published just after the release of *Music* it has been argued that she is turning more conservative with age, both in her artistic career and private life; she has even been nicknamed *Material Mom*, instead of *Material Girl* (Rodríguez, 2001: 3). *Don't Tell Me* could be taken as an example of this new 'moderate' image. It is apparently a love song addressed to an implicit male lover, but this is simply a conventional model that can commercially serve to maximize the appeal of the song. Even so, Madonna's songs should not be taken too literally. On the contrary, ambiguity has always been a major element in her prolific hits. With this in mind, a straightforward reading of the chorus lines as a love song is problematized by the rather enigmatic ending: "But please don't tell me to stop". Madonna herself declared that what attracted her about the song was its rebellious aspect in spite of its romantic content (in Sischy, 2001: 34).

Madonna's new image as a rebel cowgirl may acquire more relevance if the cultural and political context of the United States at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is taken into account.<sup>3</sup> The release of this album coincided with the election of

George Bush as the new Republican president of the United States. In the eyes of many, this heralded a return to the traditional values of the country represented by the mythical white and male cowboy hero —an image that the Texan president seemed to embody. In this sense, it could be said that the implicit rebelliousness of *Don't Tell Me* heralds what in 2003 will be a more overt attack against Bush's conservative policy in the polemical —and censored— clip "American Life".<sup>4</sup>

I propose to analyse the musical soundtrack and the actual narrative of the music video *Don't Tell Me* in terms of identity, mainly with reference to gender, but also with reference to the racial implications that the word 'identity' has in the American context. To this purpose I will base my study on cinematic theories of Westerns that highlight the civilizing influence of the mythical white male hero. This convention of the Western as a genre is precisely what is deconstructed in this video with postmodern devices such as fragmentation, paradox and the metafictional 'frame within the frame'.

In many of her former clips, Madonna paid attention to marginal groups, bringing them to the centre. I will try to demonstrate that in this video she has taken the mythical figure of the cowboy as a cultural manifestation of the dominant group and relegated it to the status of 'the other'. Using Dyer's and Mulvey's theories respectively, it can be argued that she not only 'colours' whiteness but actually turns men into fetishes, thus reversing the values traditionally associated with the binary division: dominated and dominating. As a counterpart, she proposes a world of freedom in which boundaries between fantasy and reality no longer exist, i.e. the protagonism of the cowgirl and the relevance of Black and Hispanic cowboy dancers that move in and out of a studio frame.

The freedom advocated in this clip is based on the concept of the fluidity of identities so often dramatized by Madonna in her numerous chameleonic transformations. Basing her analysis on the anti-essentialist view of gender identity, Mónica Calvo states:

Madonna sets out to expose how women *become* different versions of what patriarchal ideology defines as 'femininity'. She does so in a way that reveals that this is just a process of construction of one's *image*, not an inherent feature of women caused by our biological differences from men (Calvo, 2000: 85; italics in original).

Therefore, in Madonna's music videos, "[w]oman, who has always been the object of male discourse, now becomes the subject of her own text, written in her feminine, ever-expanding, chaotic 'language'" (Calvo, 2000: 85). In this sense, Madonna can be said to embody Stuart Hall's definition of the postmodern subject, especially in her characteristic playfulness with unfixed identities: "the 'postmodern subject' [which] is conceptualized as having 'no fixed, essential or

permanent identity' but rather as assuming 'different identities at different times'" (in Hill, 1998: 97).

Thus, as Mark Watts affirms, "changing her image is Madonna's image" (1996: 103). Thomas K. Nakayama and Lisa Peñaloza also relate Madonna with postmodern identity: "Her success at constantly shifting her media images makes her the ultimate postmodern video star" (1993:39). These critics also note that by means of her constant transformations, what Madonna is doing is to foreground the fact that identity is nothing but a social construction. Most of her videos, as is the case of *Don't Tell Me*, portray this idea in relation to both gender and race.

This attitude has the political implication of destabilizing traditionally unquestionable mores that divide individuals into 'normal' and 'other' and bringing to the centre what has for so long been considered to be the 'margins'. It is worth mentioning here Madonna's answer when asked about the meaning of the excess of symbols present in one of her videos: "My idea is to take these iconographic symbols [...] and say, here's another way of looking at it" (in Watts, 1996: 101).

The new image that Madonna offers in the clip *Don't Tell Me* is that of the far west, with images, rhythms and dances related to country music. The clip could be divided into two parts separated by a middle scene. In this sequence the music stops and Madonna sings a cappella kneeling alone on the sand with the sensual movements that characterize her. The structure of the video is interesting because different meanings are developed in every sequence. In the first part, *Don't Tell Me* deploys the aesthetics and cinematic conventions of old Westerns. Afterwards, the fast pace of the narrative is stopped when the music almost disappears. At this point, a low angle camera shot of Madonna shows her in an attitude that clearly recalls those cowboy heroes of earlier films invariably characterized as powerful and in control. This scene, the spectator will soon find out, is no more than a preamble dramatizing the 'limiting' frame of a dominant culture which Madonna then proposes to reverse, deconstruct and turn upside down in order to show its artificiality.<sup>5</sup>

After having briefly presented the structure of the video, the different parts of the clip will now be analysed in more detail. To begin with, the main melody of *Don't Tell Me* includes a guitar sequence that evokes country music. Yet it is true that this traditional folk style is mixed in with electronic techno and pop music. Secondly, the clip incorporates an important display of Western iconology such as horses, hats, jeans, boots, checked shirts and, above all, the landscape. The desert with hills in the background recalls the so-called 'frontier'. Jean-Pierre Frimbois describes this environment as the wilderness whites wanted to conquer:

Tous ces intrépides pionniers, tous ces mormons, cow-boys, aventuriers de toutes races, éleveurs de moutons ou chercheurs d'or n'avaient qu'une seule idée en tête: repousser vers l'Ouest les frontières de leur grand pays (in Bouineau, 1989: 5-6).

As K. Folsom explains, the idea of the frontier is a relevant symbol for the construction of the American myth.:

The presence of the Western frontier was thought to be the most visible symbol of that intangible but very real difference that was early felt to set America off from its European progenitors. The presumed uniqueness of the American spirit, whatever in fact this may have been, was interpreted from the beginning as in large measure a function of the inescapable presence of a fact both moral and geographical with which European civilization was not confronted —the American frontier [...]. For the frontier might be subjugated, as in part it was; it might be assimilated, as in part was also the case; it might be dominated, subdued, incorporated, or exploited; but in no case could it be ignored or left alone (Folsom, 1979: 1).

In other words, this wild frontier was often portrayed as “a virgin world suspended out of time and history, awaiting the inevitable illusion of civilization” (Morgen in Folsom, 1979: 58-9).

Together with the symbolic importance traditionally ascribed to the wilderness goes the idealization of the cowboy figure.<sup>6</sup> Even though one could suppose that the real cowboy must have been a boring character, relentlessly working with cattle, literature and cinema have converted this figure into a myth that “provides a framework for an expression of common ideas of morality and behaviour” that explains “the obvious divergence between the real West and the idealized version, the standardization of plot and characters, and the ridiculous incongruities of cowboys with automobiles and airplanes” (Davis in Folsom, 1979: 20). Chuck Berg analyses the role of the first Westerns at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which seems to be repeated a hundred years later:

Undergirding these varied cultural phenomena that reflected the public's abiding fascination with all things Western, was a largely tacit but nonetheless firmly rooted ideology. Promulgated in the decades preceding the American Civil War, the notion of Manifest Destiny suggested that U.S. expansion to the Pacific was not only inevitable but also divinely sanctioned [...]. For Americans entering a new century with a sense of growing responsibility as an emerging world power by dint of its victory in the Spanish-American War [...], the burgeoning discourse on the American West provided an ideal site for elaborating on the ideological implications of Manifest Destiny. In what many historians have now labelled ‘The American Century’, the American motion picture, especially the western, became a key in the mythologizing process that helped rationalize central aspects of American domestic and foreign policy. Westerns were also important in helping define the very nature of the American character (2000: 212-3).

With this in mind, it could be said that in the clip *Don't Tell Me*, Madonna is deliberately presenting the idyllic past of the West as a proud reminder of white,

male, American roots. However, there are a number of devices throughout the video that highlight the artificiality of those myths, created, to a large extent, by literature and cinema. In this way, Madonna is not “creating a ‘real’ past but only a simulation of the past based upon pre-existing representations and styles” (Hill, 1998: 101). Thus, Madonna shows that the image people have in mind of the ‘authentic’ roots of Western America is nothing but a cultural construction. The use of the music video aesthetics foregrounds the artificiality of these films. As E. Ann Kaplan puts it:

Videos are edited in ways which differ from the classic conventions of the Hollywood film and thus disrupt our expectations of how a film should look. Furthermore, videos ‘play off’ earlier genres of film, such as the spy film, the western or the horror film, as well as earlier familiar and popular movies (1999: 175).

In this video-clip, the first element of disruption in the song is that of the sharp cuts that constantly interrupt the harmonious melody of the music. This device is also present in the editing of the clip, freezing the image for a few instants, thus fragmenting its continuity in order to provoke a distancing effect in the viewer.<sup>7</sup> When the spectator watches this broken continuity or suture, s/he abandons the illusion that the images on screen are real events, but just an artistic production fabricated out of stills.<sup>8</sup>

The same could be said of another outstanding feature of the clip: the constant use of frames within frames. The first image that is shown is that of a woman walking down a road in the middle of the typical Western desert; she is dressed in the Western fashion with a cowboy hat that hides her face then turned out to be Madonna's when she starts singing. In the next scene, through camera reframing, the spectator is made aware of the fact that Madonna is singing in a studio and that the landscape is not real but is just a screen behind her. From this moment, although the camera again shows the initial position, the spectator now knows that everything is fake.

The same mechanism is used to show the cowboys in the following sequence. They are not set in the actual desert but in a poster that stands on the road like a cigarette advertisement. This detail again underlines the cultural construction of the cowboy myth, an idealization which has nothing to do with real historical facts. Moreover, it could be argued that a further function of this framing effect is that of objectifying the male figures, in this case, the cowboys who, as will be explained afterwards in more detail, become the object of the look of both the cowgirl and the audience. From this perspective and taking into account how women have traditionally been portrayed in Westerns, it appears that Madonna's purpose is to reverse long-standing generic codes.

As in so many other genres in literature and cinema, the female figure in classical Westerns has generally been portrayed as a passive point of reference for the male hero. Like princesses in folk tales, they are "somebody to rescue, somebody to protect. In her presence, the cowboy shows that, in his own way, he is a cultural ideal" (Davis in Folsom, 1979: 22). According to Davis, women's role, especially the white Western woman, is to show the tender side of this otherwise rough and solitary character in order to make of him a perfect figure:

A cowboy's tenderness is usually revealed through his kindness to horses, and in this sense, the Eastern belle's role is that of a glorified horse [...]. The cowboy ideal is an adorable figure and the heroine is the vehicle of adoration. Female characters enable the author to make observations about cowboys which would be impossible with an all-male cast (1979: 22).

In this clip Madonna is reversing those traditional roles in order to highlight the fact that these rigid codes are not something natural but simply a cultural invention. In the first image, the typical opening scene of most Westerns, Madonna finds herself in the middle of the wilderness. The difference is that in traditional films the most conspicuous character is a cowboy hero and not a woman.

The scene that follows is also very telling. For the first time in the clip Madonna looks straight into the camera provoking an eye-match with the viewer as a female subject, relegating the male cowboy to the position of the object. The importance of this scene, then, derives from the fact that the spectator is given the point of view of a woman, that is, of 'the Other', according to patriarchal dominant culture.<sup>9</sup>

According to Laura Mulvey, the 'look' has a special importance in cinema because it takes the perspective of a particular subject, which is usually male.<sup>10</sup> After analysing the mechanisms and codes in classical cinema, Mulvey concludes that "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (1989: 16) and consequently that "in a world of sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (1989: 19). Since the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, "he projects his look onto that of his like, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (1989: 20). In this sense, Madonna reverses these traditional codes by means of an active female protagonist superimposed on beautiful male objects spectators can enjoy watching.<sup>11</sup>

That is why Madonna's gaze has always been relevant—and more so in this video, where the objects of the imposed gaze are *cowboys*.

Madonna's self-possessed gaze is directed straight into the camera, as if aroused by and desiring her spectators—us, her voyeurs. This is not the way the script usually

reads. Who is the object of whose gaze? Her gaze undermines the spectator's access to illusions of control and mastery developed by the apparatus of classic cinema. Her posture seems to position spectators as masters, while her gaze does the opposite (Morton, 1993: 230).

Underlining this assertion is the fact that while Madonna moves and walks at normal speed, the first cowboy that appears on screen moves more slowly. Thus, the important thing here is not what he is actually doing but for the spectator to enjoy his physique, appearance and movements. Again, with reference to Mulvey's theories, it is relevant to mention how: "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of the action in moments of erotic contemplation" (1989: 19). While Madonna exemplifies this concept, she simultaneously reverses it because it is clearly *she* who is walking, singing and looking—in other words, it is she who takes the active role. For their part, the cowboys are continuously frozen on the screen, as mere elements of spectacle in the narrative.

The fact that the cowboys are not only shown inside frames, but actually as images of a poster reinforces this idea of objectification. The interesting part comes when the cowboys appear, one by one, on the screen following Madonna's steps in secondary position, thus proving that she—the woman—is the one in control. As in her other videos (e.g. *Material Girl*, *Like a Virgin*, *Express Yourself*) Madonna is here demonstrating her ability to play a doll-like figure who, by means of her allure, has the power to convert men into puppets. This fact is highlighted by the cowboys' exaggerated movements, at times almost reminiscent of puppets in a fair. Their objectification is also reinforced by their enclosure within the frames of the poster that is contrasted with Madonna's freedom outside of it, whether standing, singing and dancing in front of them or walking along the road. Roseann M. Mandziuk explains this connection between power and sex:

Throughout her history as a pop icon, Madonna's texts insistently equate pleasure with power, sexuality with control. Her assertion that personal freedom and sexuality are intrinsically linked provides an important clue to the terms of the larger debate over political articulation in contemporary feminist theory.<sup>12</sup> Madonna is a fitting representation of feminism's theoretical struggle to come to terms with the intersection of cultural images and political practices (Mandziuk, 1993: 168).

With all these devices, it can be said that Madonna adds yet another metaphorical dimension to Mulvey's three gazes (actor, camera, spectator): the multiple frames in the clip serve to show up the manipulation that the power of the gaze exerts on the objects of the look.

Another interesting point of analysis in this scene is the fact that the cowboys belong to different races present in America's melting pot (Black, Hispanic and White, the later being no more conspicuous than the others). As Cathy Schwichtenberg affirms, Madonna's music videos have always been addressed to all kind of spectators:

Madonna has become a mainstream artist who addresses African Americans, Hispanics, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, feminists and others who represent minority or subordinate positions in relation to the dominant cultural and political powers that be (1993: 2).

It could be said that, in the present video, Madonna is objectifying men belonging to different races because patriarchy works over all these cultural groups. Besides, from the perspective of race, we could say that Madonna is bringing to the centre those people who have always been in the margins, equating their position to that occupied by the dominant culture. Chuck Berg states that the classical Western is a white construction in which other races —mainly embodied by the Native Americans— were seen as “an obstacle to overcome —through annihilation, subjugation or ‘civilization’— by whites presumably blessed by the divine aura inherent in the nation-building rationale of Manifest Destiny” (2000: 214). Thus, although most Western films point to Anglo-Americans as the centre of U.S. essence and culture, Madonna's clip tries to show that Blacks and Hispanics equally form part of it. That is why they are dressed as cowboys and dance to the rhythm of country music. In this way, the notion of white as the ‘invisible norm’ that dominates the ‘others’ is destabilized since, according to Richard Dyer, white is normally presented in an unmarked position (Dyer, 1993: 142).

Finally, there is a last element in the clip that also serves to destabilize the traditional ideology of the Western. It is the road that appears in the middle of the picture every time Madonna is walking alone, disrupting the harmony of the landscape. As mentioned before, in Westerns many long shots are designed to showing the natural wilderness cowboys are confronted with, thus emphasizing how difficult it was for whites to bring civilization there.

Bringing civilization to wilderness is, therefore, presented as a positive concept in old Westerns. Since the Enlightenment, it was believed that “societies would progress forward by means of a general, secular and unilinear process of social development”, thus, Europe was viewed as “far advanced, and consequently, as playing a central role in this evolution because of the high standard of civilization already reached in these nations” (Cornut-Gentile, 1995: 7). Later on, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution:

provided a scientific justification of growth and development that had, once entangled with the capitalist enterprise, become equated with the ‘good’ of civilization [...]. The conviction that the condition of modern (Western) history was the best that could be, and that Western civilization was fast reaching the pinnacle of human achievement, had evident political connotations, for it confirmed the technological triumph of Culture over nature [...]. It also established a rationale for colonialism (1995: 8).

Even though this is the ideology that lies behind old Westerns, there is paradox in the legendary Western scout, whose descendant is the cowboy. He tames the savage wilderness for civilization yet he is represented as escaping from it and seeking the true values of nature:

The ideal cowboy fights for justice, risks his life to make the dismal little cowtown safe for law-abiding, respectable citizens, but in so doing, he destroys the very environment which made him a heroic figure. This paradox is common with all ideals, and the cowboy legend is certainly the embodiment of a social ideal (Davis in Folsom, 1979: 17).

Nevertheless, it is especially in the 90s that the ‘goodness’ of white civilization is clearly problematized in movies like Kevin Costner's *Dancing with Wolves*, which was a “pro-Indian story, though still told from a white man's point of view” (Cooks, 1999: 154). In *Don't Tell Me*, the road, the electricity poles and the truck that overtakes Madonna at the beginning of the clip show that civilization has already been brought to this Western desert. At first, these elements could therefore have a positive meaning. They symbolize the development, power and greatness of this nation: a wide network of roads connect every single town of the States, electricity reaches everybody there and those gigantic trucks hurtling across the country prove the wealth and power of American corporations.

However, this image also reflects the dark side of civilization. For instance, the truck very evidently produces a black cloud of smoke that pollutes the landscape. The prominence given to polluting elements brings to mind the ecological problems that are dramatically affecting the planet; contamination and massive road building being the cause of destruction of many ecosystems, not to mention the health problems that people living near electricity pylons may suffer. From this perspective, the truck scene has a further meaning, especially, after President Bush's polemical refusal to sign the Kyoto agreement designed to protect ecology worldwide.

From the very first scene, nature and civilization —or culture— are shown to collide, thus forcing onto the spectator a very different reality from that of inherited myths. This clash between nature and culture is also reinforced by the lyrics of the song, which express desires that cannot be realized but that can at least be

formulated in language: "Don't tell me to stop / Tell the rain not to drop / Tell the wind not to blow / Cause you said so". In this way, the song brings together two contrasting elements: language —the basis of civilization and culture— and nature (wind, rain, sun). In her song, she is expressing impossible wishes that escape human control (e.g. "Tell the sun not to shine"). Besides, while she is singing, the images in the video show that her commands are not obeyed; for example, when she says "Tell the wind not to blow", the truck overtakes her, and her hat blows away as a result of the air produced precisely by the movement of the vehicle.

Thus, language as an artifice of culture is shown to be no proof of control or power over nature. This same idea is repeated in the chorus lines: "Tell me love isn't true / It's just something that we do / Tell me everything I am not / But please don't tell me to stop". Love is a feeling, but the conventions of romantic love that Madonna makes reference to in this song are mere cultural constructions feminists have denounced as devices to control women's freedom (Showalter, 1988: 186-7). It is interesting to notice that the first time the chorus is sung, Madonna has started to dance the country line ball, a series of steps that are normally danced mechanically by a group of people, thus suggesting a connection between country line steps and romantic love, both artificially constructed cultural practices that are followed by everybody without being questioned.

The last two lines of the chorus are very telling because they also make reference to Madonna's image: she cannot be categorized because she changes constantly. This is the reason why she does not say "tell me who I am" but the opposite, "everything I am not". E. Ann Kaplan relates the different images that characterize Madonna with the Foucaultian mask, representing no stable identity. In this way yet another subversive meaning is added,

Madonna as resisting a patriarchal 'feminine' —as offering alternative female identification (the patriarchal mask can be abandoned and the 'real' woman can step forth) and Madonna as problematizing the bourgeois illusion of 'real' individual gendered selves (there is nothing but masks) (Kaplan, 1993: 150).

The chorus stanza ends with Madonna pleading not to be ordered to stop. This is important especially if lack of movement or inactivity is understood as being tantamount to female objectification, in other words, to the 'control' women have suffered throughout history. As Laura Mulvey explains:

Woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer, not maker of meaning (1989: 15).

Here again, therefore, Madonna turns the situation upside down: *She* is the one who utters the words and projects her fantasies onto the silent images of the *objectified* cowboys.

Taking into account the music, images and lyrics of the first part of the video, the conclusion that can be reached is that Madonna deliberately reverses the traditional codes of dominant patriarchal culture, present in old Westerns. Nonetheless, the relationship between Madonna and the cowboys changes in the second part of the video. She now appears wearing black clothes, following the same country style, but much more in the Madonna-like sexy fashion. It is precisely at that moment that the cowboys join her, wearing the same kind of clothes and dancing outside the patriarchal restrictions of the frame.

Analysing the clip *Vogue*, Mark Watts concludes that Madonna stands as the image the spectator can freely project his/her imagination on:

In good postmodern fashion, she seems to blur the boundaries and bring fantasy closer to reality. Hence, some theorists have argued that Madonna is a post-feminist icon, and women find in Madonna feelings of emancipation and even empowerment. In a culture of plurality, we can all read into Madonna what we all like ('All you need is your own imagination, so use it, that's what it's for' —*Vogue*) to make our own meanings (1996: 106).

That is precisely what she is doing in this scene: she stands in the centre as the point of reference for the cowboys who, outside the frame or without the constrictions of a dominant culture, can liberate their own feelings and imagination. In this sense, it could be said that Madonna is not only offering herself as an example for women but also inviting men to free themselves from the rigid codes of behaviour established by patriarchal conventions by inviting them to jump out of the limiting frame and to follow her steps in her new dance.

After that scene Madonna appears riding a fake horse, which could again be taken as a symbol of the artificial control of patriarchy over nature. This image of Madonna riding the bucking bronco totally in control and following the rhythm of the music is contrasted with that of the cowboy, whose legs do not seem to be strong enough to keep his balance on the horse. Again she walks along the road looking down and then up, with an ironic gaze at the camera. Then, there is an eye match and the spectator sees the elegant cowboy in a long shot being unsaddled by the horse and falling down to the ground. Afterwards, the camera shows the character standing up and looking at the horse, which is offscreen, as if something else was going to happen after the image fades out.

This final scene reinforces the idea that patriarchy is an artifice of culture presented throughout the clip. Firstly, because this beautiful and elegant cowboy is again

objectified by Madonna's active look; patriarchal codes are reversed and questioned as 'unnatural'. Secondly, a further implication of this scene is that patriarchy has no sense anymore because, embodied by the cowboy, it literally falls flat when that man loses control and is thrown by the horse he was trying to tame. In Westerns, cowboys are the ones in power who manage to dominate wild nature, however, in this video, Madonna foregrounds the fictionality of those films. When the cowboy is riding the horse, he is within the frames of a poster because he embodies the idealized mythical figure in the stills of films. However, when this man falls off, these frames disappear. Thus, in real life, he is just presented as a human being, with his own limitations and no longer in control, once his mechanisms for maintaining his dominant position in society have been destabilized.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, this ending also makes reference to the second part of the video where the cowboys join in Madonna's freedom. The fact that all of them dance together with the female singer may mean that there is a possibility of reconciliation between the sexes. This possibility of reconciliation comes when the clip does not end with the cowboy's fall but goes on to show him getting up after having been unsaddled and looking at the horse again. This cowboy, then, has to accept his loss of control over the horse, yet he is not totally defeated; he, a white male who once belonged to the dominant culture, and now has another opportunity to establish a new kind of relationships with nature or 'the other', beyond the boundaries of patriarchy.

To conclude, it can be said that although Madonna has come back with a different image, her criticism of the limits that the dominant culture imposes on groups belonging to the 'Other' is still patent in her artistic production. In *Don't Tell Me* the traditional cinematic codes of the Western are reversed and questioned, while a possibility of reconciliation between all the groups that form part of American society is offered.

## Notes

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2. Even though popular songs and video-clips are not considered to be the exclusive result of the star's own work but that of a team, in the analysis of Madonna's work, critics seem to agree that she is proportionally more in control of her performances than other artists: "The specific kind of power

Madonna exudes is control: control of her performance and how the rehearsal is conducted and control over those who work for her" (Pribram, 1993: 198). Madonna herself confirmed this in an interview with the ABC reporter Forrest Sawyer in the program "Nightline": "I do everything in my own volition. I'm in charge" (in Mandziuk, 1993: 171). Referring to that interview, Caryn James reaches the same conclusion: "For her video images and lyrics, Madonna proves that she's in control" (1990: 38). In *Don't Tell Me* Madonna collaborated in the music, lyrics and making of the music video. For this reason I will refer to her as the person responsible for some points of my analysis, although I am aware of the team-work that lies behind this kind of artistic product. Whether or not she has full control over her production, it is the ideological meanings of the outcome and the coherence of Madonna's artistic career that is the object of my analysis.

3. Madonna's image of female sexual independence has often been associated with Marlene Dietrich, who has been evoked more than once in Madonna's clips, e.g. *Express Yourself*. As Mónica Calvo comments: "Dietrich was venerated by women for her sexual independence, power and androgynous 'masculine' ways. Funnily enough, Madonna is idolized today by her fans for precisely the same 'qualities'" (2000: 86). Dietrich's intertextual evocation could also be present in this music video, as she also played a role in Westerns such as *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939) and *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952).

4. The successful and controversial clip *American Life*, which was released in May 2003, was replaced by a simplified censored version a few weeks later due to its explicit and critical references to the Second Iraq War. The wide display of military iconology, the images of sad Arab children and the final scene of an actor characterized as George Bush were replaced by Madonna singing against a background of constantly changing flags from countries all around the world.

5. Cathy Swichtenberg explains that: "Madonna bares the devices of femininity, thereby by asserting that femininity is a device. Madonna takes simulation to its limits in a deconstructive manoeuvre that plays femininity off against itself — a metafemininity that reduces gender to the overlap of style" (in Calvo, 2000: 85).

6. As Davis explains: "The cowboys in books and movies are far too busy making love and chasing bandits to work at such a dreary task as driving cattle [...]. The fact that the cowboy hero has more important things to do is only in keeping with his tradition and audience. His is only a natural reaction against a civilization which demands increasingly monotonous work, against the approaching adulthood when playtime ends" (in Folsom, 1979: 20).

7. This distancing effect is based on Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, whose aim is to prevent the spectator from getting involved in the narrative, a 'willing suspension of disbelief' that forces the observer to adopt a critical attitude (Chiari, 1969: 116).

8. The concept of suture is crucial in the process of identity construction and its relationship with cinema because, as Rey Chow declares: "as expressed through suture —literally a 'sewing up' of gaps— cinematic identification is an eminently ideological process" (1998: 170). Doing away with that classical invisible suture, Madonna's clip aims to render visible the invisible ideological mechanisms of the Western.

9. As Laclau explains, "Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles —man/woman, etc. What is peculiar of the second term is thus reduced to the function of an accident as opposed to the essentiality of the first" (in Hall, 1997: 5).

10. Even though much writing has derived from Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (new theories have been developed by Mary Anne Doane,

Elizabeth Cowie, Gaylyn Studlar and Barbara Creed among others; see Patricia White, 1998: 119-130), I find Mulvey's theory useful not so much in terms of the *audience's identification* but in terms of the *representations* of the male and female characters in classical Westerns, which I think Madonna tries to undermine.

11. Richard Dyer and Steve Neale argue that it is possible to find male objectification in cinema, however: "the male is objectified, but only in scenes of action, such as boxing. Mainstream cinema cannot afford to acknowledge the possibility that the male spectator might take the male protagonist as an object of his erotic desire" (in Creed, 1998: 85).

12. As Madonna has stated, "the only way to control people is to control their sex lives. As for me, I don't like the idea of being controlled" (in Schwitenberg, 1993: 167).

13. Pam Cook notices that in the 1990s, "there was a concerted effort to counter criticism of the western's ideological shortcomings with a series of politically correct films" (2000:154). Clint Eastwood's film of 1992 *Unforgiven* nostalgically recalls the ideals of the Western though more realistically portrayed. In this sense, this movie can be compared to the last scene of Madonna's clip; however, her criticism in the manipulation of the Western myth goes even further.

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