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From blatant to latent protest (and back again): on the politics of theatrical spectacle in Madonna's 'American Life'

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Abstract

This paper explores ambiguities of political resistance and anti-war protest in Madonna's music video, 'American Life'. We begin by tracing the history of the making, promotion and eventual withdrawal of the video in the context of the military build-up and media campaign that preceded the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In these opening sections, we focus in particular on the (perhaps deliberately generated) controversy surrounding the work, and its problematic relationship with contemporary corporate mass media. We then proceed to describe the visual contents of the video, and present three distinct readings of it: first, as a gesture of overt protest against the war; second, as a work that is unaware of the manner in which its signifying textures unwittingly and covertly celebrate the culture it would critique, thus nullifying its overt subversive gesture; and third, as a work that is in fact far more politically resistant than it knows, through an uncanny form of protest that is dependent upon this very complicity.

The *Sound of Music*'s a much trickier film than one might expect. If you look at it closely, ok, it's officially Austrian resistance to Hitler and the Nazis, but if you look really closely, it's really that the Nazis are presented as an abstract cosmopolitan occupying power, and the Austrians are the good small fascists, so the implicit message is almost the opposite of the explicit message. It's [a] much more reactionary film than it might first appear. There's an element of justice in a small mistake in the film, it's supposed to take place in 1938, [but] when they go into Salzburg, they buy some oranges, and if you put the image on freeze the oranges say 'made in Israel'. So that's a nice kind of truth of the film. (emphasis added, Žižek 2002a)

My feelings are, 'Can we just all get out?' Global terror is down the street, around the block. Global terror is in California. There's global terror everywhere, and it's absurd to think you can get it by going to one country and dropping tons of bombs on innocent people. (Madonna 2004)

In the Israeli oranges of Hollywood's Nazi Salzburg, Žižek finds truth. This is a 'nice kind of truth', glimpsed and gone in a spark-fast instant. It is a cipher in the frozen frame, a seme in the seam, a voice in the void. Here, a rupture speaks.

But for the oranges to be true, the film's Salzburg must be false. For the discontinuous, the rupture, the hole to be true, the continuous, the unblemished, the whole (to echo Theodor Adorno) must be false. Žižek sees this too: 'the Austrians are the good small fascists'; 'the implicit message is almost the opposite of the

explicit message'. Blatant resistance is betrayed by latent complicity. But in the fissure, blatant again if one looks closely, there too is an 'element of justice', a 'kind of truth'.

Far from the von Trapps and Salzburg, far from the broken bodies of a newer war, Madonna asks: 'Can we just all get out?' These are the politics of the postmodern aristocrat; this is resistance compromised by the double bind of which Žižek speaks. What constitutes this *just* getting out? How could this wish translate into political reality? Madonna does not ask how the US might just get out without ceding Iraq to civil war and mass slaughter. She does not ask, 'Can we all get out *justly*?' And in her less-than-rhetorical silence on these more-than-rhetorical questions, the ideology she would critique repeats itself unchallenged. Here again, the latent betrays the blatant. But in Madonna's resistance, might 'an element of justice' again appear where the blatant is torn?

This paper will examine Madonna's 2003 single, 'American Life', and the withdrawn music video that was originally intended to accompany this song (Madonna 2003). It is in these works that Madonna offers her most trenchant and public critique of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. But as one might expect from the working-class American icon turned British multi-millionaire, the material girl turned mystic, the author of *Sex* no less than *Mr. Peabody's Apples*, this is a critique fraught with internal contradictions. In this resistance, the latent again betrays the blatant.

We will begin by documenting the history of the video's production, promotion and withdrawal. From the time of its inception through its ghost-like afterlife on the Internet, 'American Life' has existed as both a public spectacle and a secret fetish object; it has been, itself, always both covert and overt, blatant and latent, and its ideological content cannot be considered apart from this split existence. We will then turn to a series of readings of the video and song that will follow the same trajectory as Žižek's reading of the *Sound of Music*: we will pass from the blatant surface, the level on which the work asks to be read as explicit protest; to its latent undercurrents, where this protest is complicated and compromised; and finally to the level of the rupture, the fissure, the tear, the wound. In this last reading, we too will find a moment of truth, but this truth will be far from nice.

Constructing controversy: the pre-history of a music video

First inklings of Madonna's plans for her album, *American Life*, and for the controversial video accompanying the album's title track, appeared in a posting on her website on New Year's Eve, 2002: 'Madonna's next album is scheduled to be released in April, and there is no title as of yet. The video for the first single will be shot in Feb. and will be directed by Jonas Ackerland'.¹ It is difficult to determine precisely when production on *American Life* began and ended, but according to its official publication materials, it was 'recorded over a full year in London and Los Angeles' (12 March 2003). On 14 January 2003, another posting appeared. Madonna, it stated, was 'in the studio with Mirwais [her producer] wrapping up her new album, the [sic] untitled album is not finished and wont [sic] be for a few weeks'.

As officially announced, the video for the title track was filmed in the first week of February 2003. Almost immediately it began to generate controversy. On 9 February, Madonna's website posted the following 'official' description of the projected contents of the video, a description also disseminated by her publicist, Liz

Rosenberg. Importantly, this description was – at the time of its release – provisional; the video would not reach its final form for months to come:

Official reports from Madonna's video shoot in LA last week for the first single from her new CD – both titled AMERICAN LIFE – show the artist's vision in a stunning collaboration with director Jonas Akerland. It expresses a panoramic view of our culture, the fashion world, and looming war through the view of a female super-hero portrayed by Madonna. Starting as a runway show of couture army fatigues by fashion designer Jeremy Scott, the show escalates into a mad frenzy depicting the catastrophic repercussions of war. The song AMERICAN LIFE is a strong courageous statement on the state of America and much of the world. This will be a stirring and extremely controversial piece of work from the artist who created the medium of the 'small film' set to music.

On the same day, however, an article was posted on the popular conservative blog www.TheDrudgeReport.com under the headline 'Material Girl in a Political World: Madonna Plans Video to Protest War, Bush'. Citing unnamed 'sources' and 'insiders', Matt Drudge's (2003) article announced that, 'Madonna is hoping to cause maximum controversy with a video from her forthcoming album'. Drudge described the contents of the 'shock video' thus; '[d]ressed in commando fatigues, Madonna throws grenades as the techno terror beat pounds, claims a source. Limb-less men and women are reportedly shown, with bloody babies. One disturbing clip features Iraqi children'. The article also contained actual quotes from Drudge's unnamed sources, detailing the ideological message of the video and the strategy regarding its production and release:

'She's taking it all the way this time', one source said from Los Angeles over the weekend, 'pushing all of the buttons . . . It is a sweeping political commentary on the modern 'American Dream' and how 'nothing is what is seems'.

'AMERICAN LIFE is about freedom of speech', claims an insider.

'It examines not only war, greed and ego, but it's self-reflective also. Madonna rejects her "Material Girl" image once and for all, and warns of life in a material world'. (Drudge 2003)

Drudge's endeavour to create the very 'maximum controversy' he ascribes to Madonna's ambition is paradoxical, but not surprising. For example, during the war to come, Drudge one-sidedly connected site visitors to articles demonstrating an integrated relationship between music and pro-war sentiment: music used by the US Military to get fired up before a raid, music used to break supporters of Saddam Hussein during interrogation sessions, the snubbing of the Dixie Chicks at a country music show, and so on. Nor is Drudge's paradoxical reference to the music's rhythmic aspect surprising. 'Techno terror beat pounding' does not refer to the rhythm used to fire up troops (to which Drudge would approvingly refer his readers). On the contrary, coupled with the hyper-charged notion of 'terror', this is the rhythm of the anti-war Hollywood set; the left-leaning, non-patriotic descendants of disco culture, whom Drudge surreptitiously ties to terror-ism. Drudge's comments at once attempt to control and contain Madonna's artistry by re-classifying the song as (implicitly feminine) frivolity *and* to fuel controversy by positing the song's danger – its threat to American national security.

Also striking about Drudge's report is the way the tone and wording of these quotes, along with the marketing strategy they outline, are strikingly consistent with Madonna's official statements about the video. In light of this similarity, it seems plausible that Drudge was indeed in contact with sources inside Madonna's organisation; the rhetorical correspondence at least suggests some kind of 'leak' may have

been in play. On the other hand, Drudge's tendentious description of the contents of the video lines up neither with Madonna's website account, nor with the official edited version that was eventually released in the US, nor with the more incendiary version that was briefly released overseas. In fact, it would have been impossible for Drudge to give an entirely accurate account of the contents of the video at the time his article was written, because the video had not yet undergone what would be an extensive process of editing and re-editing (to be described below). Whether Drudge described a version that was planned and never made, made and never released, made and edited, or never made at all is open to question and doubt. Likewise, whether the descriptions given by his 'sources' were deliberately incendiary to help spark the promised controversy, or whether Drudge's report is simply inaccurate and distorted by a scarcely concealed bias cannot be known with certainty.

Nonetheless, the two strains of information regarding the video – the overt and official (press releases, postings on the website, interviews with Madonna and Liz Rosenberg) as well as the covert and unofficial (Drudge's unnamed 'insiders') – were sufficiently streamlined to create the conditions for controversy from the video's very inception. Shortly after Drudge's article was posted, a number of articles about 'American Life' began to appear in news sources around the world. Some explicitly cited Drudge as their source; others offered no source but shared certain errors found in Drudge's article (implying that his work was their primary source). Most articles favoured Drudge's characterisations of the video's contents over those offered by Madonna's camp. For example, on 11 February, *The Ottawa Citizen* ran a report stating, '[a]ccording to the Web site, The Drudge Report, the video for the single, The American Dream [sic], comes with images of Iraqi children and bloody limbs' (Tam 2003). On the same day, *The Toronto Star* wrote, 'The Web site The Drudge Report reported Sunday that the video was "the most shocking anti-war, anti-Bush statement yet to come from the show business industry," complete with images of Iraqi children and bloody limbs' (*The Toronto Star*, 2003a). This report also included a retort from Madonna's publicist: 'Rosenberg said, 'I'm not going to say it's specifically anti-Bush at all'. She added there were no pictures of Iraqi children or bloody images, though the latter could change in post-production'. Also on 11 February, reports appeared in the United Kingdom's *The Times*, *The Scotsman* and *The Independent* which, though different in their details, all described the video with a sentence that is essentially identical in all three articles; a description of Madonna in the video, wearing military fatigues and throwing grenades to an electronic beat, interspersed with shots of fashion models, soldiers and the victims of war, including bloodied babies (*The Times* 2003, p. 14; Chamberlain 2003, p. 11; *The Independent* 2003, p. 13).

None of these reports line up entirely with the contents of the video, which will be described in detail below. In an age of blogging, one might assume that the consistent recurrence of an error stems from reliance on partisan articles posted on influential websites. As inherently unaccountable disseminators of information, these websites may prove to become effective new mechanisms for biased reporting in our times; and in the case of 'American Life' (as in other prominent contemporary news stories) the cart even seems to have outrun the horse, as these blogs become not simply a summary of articles from paper journalism, but a *source* for them as well. Yet Madonna herself did little to allay the ambiguities of the blogosphere. On 13 February, Madonna responded with a statement of her own; a statement framed at odds with reports disseminated in the media, but curiously recapitulating some of their central motifs.

I feel lucky to be an American citizen for many reasons – one of which is the right to express myself freely, especially in my work. I understand that there have been reports about my upcoming video ‘American Life’ in the media – much of which is inaccurate. I am not Anti-Bush. I am not pro-Iraq. I am pro-Peace. I have written a song and created a video which expresses my feelings about our culture and values and the illusions of what many people believe is the American dream – the perfect life. As an artist, I hope that this provokes thought and dialogue. I don’t expect everyone to agree with my point of view. I am grateful to have the freedom to express these feelings and that’s how I honour my country.

Thus, less than one week after it was shot, and over two months before its scheduled release, ‘American Life’ was fully ensconced in its promised controversy.

The double edges of controversy: locating the song’s visual content

It is difficult to assess the accuracy of these differing descriptions of a video that is no single entity. There is, first, the problem that the video around which this controversy circulated, the version that was originally planned and to which all of the above-cited articles refer, was never released in the United States. This leaves us with no single authoritative version validated through repeated international airplay. We cannot even be entirely sure that the version we describe and critique here (a version available on the Internet at www.salon.com and on some file sharing networks at the time of writing) is the one that was planned for programming on MTV. Second, the video underwent extensive editing and revision in post-production – a process most likely influenced by the media interest it had already generated. This reworking produced several intermediate versions of the video, all of which, though they may never surface in public, stake some claim to be legitimate incarnations of ‘American Life’.

The official first version of the video briefly released overseas conforms to the broad outlines of the descriptions above, particularly to the description posted on Madonna’s website. Many of the incendiary details discussed by Matt Drudge and his imitators, however, are absent, and the video contains some strikingly significant details that were entirely passed over in the descriptions it received in the mainstream media. The version we were able to see depicts a fashion show with different figures modelling extravagant designer military fatigues: camouflage khakis, officer’s caps, costume jewellery made of bullets, and the like. As the musical fabric of the song intensifies (the rhythmic octave-leaping synthesizer patterns are run through a flanger-like distortion, etc.), images of fresh-faced Muslim children appear in the context of an escalating frenzy of war imagery. Projected onto massive screens situated behind the runway, and sometimes entirely filling the content of the video (especially in the second half of the song), are images of weapons exploding, missiles launching, fighter planes on the wing, bombs dropping, buildings burning, mushroom clouds blooming, etc. Though nothing identifies the Muslim children as specifically Iraqi, one might be encouraged to assume this national origin given the coincident plans by the United States to invade Iraq.

From the very beginning of the video, depictions of this fashion show alternate with images of Madonna and a troupe of women in an unspecified locker room; all are dressed in differently styled military fatigues, and they appear to be preparing themselves for some sort of event. About two-thirds of the way through the song, in a scene that recalls *Mad Max*, an SUV containing Madonna and these women bursts onto the runway of the show. The high-octane SUV, whose plates read ‘Hell on Wheels’, sports an American flag on its bonnet, and flames shoot from its tailpipe. The

video ends with Madonna lobbing a grenade at a George W. Bush look-alike, who catches it confidently, realises (or knows already) that the grenade is actually a lighter, and uses it to light a cigar. There is indeed one, and only one, severed limb in the video: a prosthetic leg carried by a model on the runway. There are no 'bloodied babies'.

This version of the video, of course, was not the only one considered by Madonna and Ackerlund for official release. The various visual incarnations of the song seem to have run the gamut from simple minimalist head-shots to maximalist theatrical spectacle: At one point in its production, 'American Life' was (in Madonna's words) 'a short film . . . like ten minutes long', complete with 'lots of stops in the music and lots of car chases and conversations with people' (Wiederhorn and Norris 2003). Even after the film was condensed into something resembling the form described above, it went through a series of edits with three different endings: in the first version (arguably the 'original'), the grenade Madonna lobs into the fashion show is live: it explodes. In the first edit, the grenade is a lighter and is caught by a George W. Bush look-alike; the Bush look-alike uses it to light a cigar for a Saddam Hussein look-alike, seated next to him in the audience. In the final edit, Bush uses the grenade to light a cigar for himself.

Promotion and withdrawal as marketing strategy?

On 16 March 2003, George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, jointly threatening that America and Britain were willing to lead an invasion of Iraq without backing from the United Nations, gave the UN twenty-four hours to pass a new resolution authorising war. On 18 March, Bush announced that an invasion would go forward unless Saddam Hussein and his sons left Iraq within forty-eight hours. On 20 March, military operations began. Eleven days later, on the night of 31 March, after 'American Life' had already been broadcast overseas, Madonna withdrew it, cancelling its American release. She issued the following statement (on madonna.com): 'I have decided not to release my new video. It was filmed before the war started and I do not believe it is appropriate to air it at this time. Due to the volatile state of the world and out of sensitivity and respect to the armed forces, who I support and pray for, I do not want to risk offending anyone who might misinterpret the meaning of this video'.

Promotion and distribution of 'American Life', the single and the album, went ahead as planned: hard copies of the single were distributed in the US on 8 April 2003, and released in the rest of the world on 14 April; the album was released in Japan on 18 April, in Europe on 21 April, and in the US on 22 April. Despite wildly divergent critical reviews, many extremely negative, the album sold well and reached number 1 on *The Billboard 200* in early May, outselling number 2 by nearly 100,000 copies (Hilburn 2003). Still, it fell far short of the success of Madonna's previous two albums (*Music* from 2000, and *Ray of Light* from 1998), let alone her massive sales from the 1980s. Presumably as a result of its temporary presence on international television, the original video for 'American Life' is available on the Internet, and Madonna has given live performances based upon its content (this version was a component of Madonna's most recent 'Reinvention Tour', for example). But the video as it was briefly released overseas was never shown on American television. Instead, a second, sanitised version, depicting a uniformed Madonna singing in front of a shifting background of international flags, was released in its place.

The withdrawal of the video of 'American Life' may seem surprising in light of the barrage of promotion through which the public was trained to expect its arrival. But in light of the correspondence among key dates in the production of the video, the media campaign surrounding them, and the events leading to the US invasion of Iraq, it is likely that this decision was to some extent self-aware. Madonna initially announced plans for the single and video on 31 December 2002, almost a full year after George W. Bush famously characterised Iraq as one component of an 'axis of evil' (on 30 January 2002); more than three months after Bush announced in a speech to the UN General Assembly that 'the Security Council resolutions [regarding weapons inspections in Iraq] will be enforced . . . or action will be unavoidable' (on 12 September 2002); and within two weeks of the American government's declaration that Iraq was in 'material breach' of these resolutions – the argument that ultimately provided the basis for the invasion. Thus, though Madonna would say, in a statement designed at least in part to explain her decision to withdraw the video, that 'it was filmed before the war and I do not feel it is appropriate to air at this time' (madonna.com, 31 March 2003), it is clear from even a cursory examination of the political climate surrounding the inception of the song and video that war was looming, if not inevitable, at the earliest stages of production. Under this reading, Madonna's implication that the world had changed, unforeseeably, since the video was produced, may well be *faux-naïveté*. More trenchantly, such a move (at once distancing oneself from the risks of expressing anti-war sentiment and making the withdrawal seem unplanned and unexpected) could plausibly generate controversy and thus attendant publicity.

Indeed, the history of the video was steeped in fetishistic 'buzz'. Not long after the filming of 'American Life' and its initial overt and covert exposure to the press in the first week of February, US Secretary of State Colin Powell made his fifth presentation to the UN detailing evidence (now discredited) supposedly proving Iraq's possession of chemical and biological weapons. Just as Powell made the pivotal case justifying war against Iraq, the media campaign to promote the song and video, largely through a strategy of tantalising leaks, began in earnest. In late February, brief glimpses of the video began to appear on MTV, first on TRL on 21 February, then on MTV's pre-Grammy show on 23 and 24 February (www.madonna.com, 20–21 February). Over the course of early- and mid-March, Madonna made numerous appearances; two short clips from the video were posted for download on Madonna's website; and amazon.com began taking early orders for 'American Life' as both a 'digital single', to be distributed via e-mail on 24 March (a process, though official, that was provocatively referred to as a 'leak'), and in hard copy, to be mailed on 8 April (www.Madonna.com, 6–7, 10–11 March). It was also announced that the video was to receive its world premier on HBO on 23 March and then, perhaps because of the impending invasion, that this premiere would in fact take place on 4 April, on VH-1 (www.Madonna.com, 20, 31 March). Much of the pre-release promotional activity thus seems plausibly in sync with the planned withdrawal as a marketing strategy.

Promotion and withdrawal as cautious compromise?

Madonna is no stranger to deliberately constructed controversy. Her constantly shifting styles and images, no less than her 'daring' sexual politics, for example, were designed, in part at least, as fuel for publicity. Far from simply embodying a fluid and

ambiguous construction of identity, which transcends the constraints of reified and regulated gender norms, Madonna's variable constructions of identity equally reflect the logic of the commodity form. In Pamela Robertson's words, 'Like Barbie, Madonna sells because, like Mattel, she constantly updates the model – Boy Toy Madonna, Material Girl Madonna, Madonna in Drag, S&M Madonna, and so on' (Robertson 1996, p. 123). Likewise, as it was for the video, the song 'American Life' was dogged by marketeering and controversy. For instance, Madonna uploaded onto some file sharing networks decoy MP3s carrying her voice asking, 'What the f*** do you think you're doing?' (*Toronto Star* 2003a). Whenever users tried to download the song, they heard this scolding voiceover instead. This enraged certain fans and a free-range anti-Madonna collaboration was set in motion: Dmusic (<http://boycott.dmusic.com>), for example, held a contest for the best techno, trance or house remix of Madonna's sneering voiceover. One hacker even went so far as to post tracks from 'American Life' for free download from Madonna's own website (*The Toronto Star* 2003b). But however negative this kind of cyber-action may seem on its surface, one might ask: What better publicity than a variety of remixes pre-empting a product in your name? 'American Life', it seems, was caught up in a circle of mutual appropriation with a sector of popular cyber-culture: each used the other for its own ends.

And yet, it would be a mistake to grant Madonna full control of the controversies generated by her marketing strategies. It would be a mistake also to consider Madonna's messages a function of the commercial machinery alone, and thereby completely overlook their subversive ambition either. Indeed, Madonna is no stranger to corporate censorship. Her ongoing battles with Warner, for example, are well documented. More pertinently, in the mid-1980s, the American Family Association (www.afa.net), founded in 1977, threatened to boycott Pepsi for its sponsorship of Madonna's 'Like a Prayer' tour. The pressure placed on the corporate giant by the conservative association was successful: Pepsi withdrew all advertising for the tour and turned down a sponsorship deal. It is quite conceivable that Pepsi's backtracking served as a productive form of negative publicity – the controversy sustaining the anti-establishment, envelope-pushing claims of a star in danger of becoming mainstream – and yet the withdrawal also registers a particular mode of censorship in our time. Controversy of this sort may have proved productive in regard to sexual content in 'Like a Prayer', but it has proved less productive in regard to political content at a later stage in Madonna's career. Censorship and restrictions on artistic expressions are as authoritarian when they are imposed within a highly concentrated market place as when they are imposed directly by the State. This is especially so when the censoring media corporation has close links to the State. Given the circle of mutual assistance between corporations, especially the media giants, and government (via campaign contributions, and the like, which in turn assure corporate leverage over the political process), the distinction between official State policy and corporate interest can become porous. The problem of streamlining these interests is dramatically exacerbated in the context of massive corporate consolidation.

Recent cases of corporate censorship abound. After 11 September 2001, the silencing of musical dissent became widespread. For example, the official Rage Against the Machine message board was closed down by the Secret Service. Other musicians whose views conflicted with official government opinion were pressured to rescind them. Moby apologised for questioning the competence of the CIA and FBI

who existed, in his view, to protect New Yorkers from atrocities like the attacks on the World Trade Centers. Likewise, Kevin Richardson of the Backstreet Boys expressed regret because of a question he asked in a Toronto interview. 'What has our government done to provoke this action that we don't know about?' (quoted in Reiter 2001). Later that year, the Boston Symphony cancelled a performance of choruses from John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* because they allegedly portrayed a Palestinian point of view. Following Stockhausen's ill-considered description of the September 2001 attacks as 'the greatest artwork in the cosmos', the student-run new music group *Ossia* at the Eastman School of Music was required by the school's administration, which feared a controversial backlash, to cancel a performance of Stockhausen's *Stimmung* scheduled for December 2001 in New York City. Arguably, these were isolated decisions about appropriate programming taken at an individual and local level. Considered together, however, these various events point to a gravitational force, instantiated in multiple and diverse forms, that exerts censoring pressure largely in sync with government ideology.

As the consolidated media industry chips away at sites of non-conformist musical activity, dissenting musical expressions within the established monopoly structures are increasingly compromised or maimed outright. Even relatively 'independent' artists, who thrive on being ahead of the fashion curve, are now operating within powerful new constraints. It is in this context that Madonna's withdrawal of the video of 'American Life' should be understood as well. Significantly, Clear Channel Communications was responsible for producing and promoting Madonna's 2004 'Re-Invention' tour, which, according to Madonna's website, was to be accompanied throughout by the media giant's senior touring president, Arthur Fogel. It is not difficult to imagine the amount of leverage the conservative Clear Channel, with its official and personal ties to the Bush administration, could exert from this position.

But the question here is not so much whether the decision to withdraw the video was wilful or enforced. In either case, the act registers the limits of American toleration at a particular historical moment. Even if the withdrawal was Madonna's pre-emptive strike to spark controversy (rather than a manifestation of some degree of self-censorship), it acts as an ideological gauge. In liberal conditions, for example, the marketing strategy – to fetishise a commodity through active withdrawal – would not have nearly the efficacy it can have in today's c/overtly policed media climate. It is in this (negative) sense that the behaviour of cultural commodities discloses the political standards of our times, standards that have qualitatively shifted in recent years. The irony and ambiguity that characterised an era of apolitical postmodernism have given way to no-nonsense right-wing realism. It is as if the traditional political lines between left- and right-wing have morphed into a distinction between what Žižek calls 'the global field of "moderate" post-politics' and 'extreme Rightist repoliticisation' (Žižek 2002b, p. 135). Caught in an endless 'war on terror', the captains of industry march ever more exactly in step with official government policy. Thus, the corporate climate of the early twenty-first century in America is increasingly characterised by a new kind of McCarthyism grounded in 'moral values'. In a time when the American Family Association successfully managed to pressure sixty-six ABC affiliates to refuse to broadcast Steven Spielberg's 'Saving Private Ryan' on Veteran's Day 2004 (on grounds of containing expletives and re-enacting graphic violence), it would be a mistake to read the withdrawal of Madonna's 'American Life' as entirely self-imposed.

'American Life' as protest (or not)?

According to Madonna, the video is meant as a direct critique of war: 'War is a manifestation of everybody', she says. 'We have our personal karma and we have our global karma. So, for me, it's about trying to get a message out that if we want peace and love in our life then we have to make it happen to the world' (Wiederhorn and Norris 2003). The anti-war stance is appended to a critique of what Madonna calls 'our culture and values', particularly 'the illusions of what many people believe is the American dream' (quoted in Wikipedia 2006). Madonna explains:

No matter how many distractions we put up for ourselves, whether it's a fashion show or a reality TV show or a hot contest, what's happening in the world is still going on, and the ugliness and the chaos and the pain and the suffering is immense. So it's a statement about our obsession with the world of illusion. (in Wiederhorn and Norris 2003)

The anti-war stance is evident enough from the visual cues in the video. Most obviously, there is a peace sign in the upper right-hand corner of the screen throughout the song (although this particular feature seems to change depending upon which version one sees – in some versions, it appears in the upper-right corner; some the upper-left; and in at least one, it is not present at all). Following the SUV bursting onto the runway, the melodic intonations of the verse and chorus give way to a Debbie Harry-type rap about the excesses of material well-being: 'I'm drinkin' a soy latté / I got a double shoté / It goes right through my body / And you know I'm satisfied', and so on. But the assertive rap morphs into a questioning one, 'I got a lawyer and a manager / An agent and a chef / Three nannies, an assistant / And a driver and a jet / A trainer and a butler / And a bodyguard or five / A gardener and a stylist / Do you think I'm satisfied?' Then, the bouncy minimalist synth-pop fades, and the music opens into a spacious silence for the crux of the rap. Madonna's delivery is forceful and deliberate, intoned in a *tempo rubato*: 'I'd like to express my extreme point of view / I'm not a Christian and I'm not a Jew / I'm just living out the American dream / And I just realised that nothing is what it seems'. What is the extreme point of view? It is a chaotic carnival of images depicting the catastrophic destruction and horror of warfare.

The video employs a number of devices to demonstrate that certain material comforts listed in the song's lyrics (the lawyer, manager, agent, chef, nannies, etc.) are not quite what they seem. For example, several of the models who appear with Madonna in the opening scenes of the video and then accompany her when she breaks onto the runway of the fashion show are markedly overweight, while others do not conform to MTV's notions of beauty for other reasons – one is 'too' muscular, another somewhat androgynous, etc. By featuring such models in a series of erotically charged dances, the video ostensibly challenges the myth of conventional beauty. Similarly, when the Muslim children appear half-way through the video, their faces wear serene expressions and their demeanours seem sad and peaceful. The video thus ostensibly challenges the myth that barbarism belongs to a G.W. Bush-like collective 'Them', and identifies barbarism, instead, as a necessary outcome of Western power itself. Concomitantly, the video gestures towards the dark underside of domestic American life: the models, when they appear in the bathroom backstage, seem trapped and agonised; one model appears in unattractive underwear; Madonna in angry desperation etches the ambiguous words 'Protect Me' onto the wall of a bathroom stall; a latté is seen spilling across the runway; and so on. The final moments of the video, a swirling sequence of destructive images of war, interspersed with Madonna throwing

the lighter-grenade to Bush, link these isolated events into a statement that ties the ethos of contemporary American bourgeois well-being directly to warfare.

And yet, this video cannot be considered a simple portrayal of grievances in a troubled world. Like the magically transforming grenade that is provocatively lobbed at the end, the video itself is not quite what it seems. The song's lyrics, elaborating aspects of Madonna's own rich and satisfying life, full of material and cultural wealth, are less contradicted than they are sustained by the ecstasy of the camera moving in a fiery terrain of data overload. While the viewer's point of identification may be multiple and ambiguous, the imagery effectively summons the dream sequences of cable news coverage of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq – sequences concocted by dramatic frontline footage of the war neatly interlaced with misinformation. Like a segment of CNN news-montage, the images in the video are constantly revised, repeated, updated, cross-promoted, or shifted to a new camera angle – a close-up of an explosion, jogging troops, an 'embedded' view of the wing of a fighter jet, a side view of a firing tank, a frontal close-up of Madonna, posing as a talking head framed by a huge American flag, etc. Instead of praising the displacements and re-inscriptions too readily as so many sites of resistance, we want to note that the visually impenetrable data stream effectively imitates what it fights. The explicit message of the video is critical of the American war machine that sustains a lifestyle of gluttonous consumption and a ferocious love of money and fame. Yet, the texture of its signifying associations, its *implicit* message, revels in the very phenomena it condemns. The passion for transgression culminates in a theatrical spectacle; the official renunciation of warfare betrays an intimate attachment to it.

The gap between the official message and (what Žižek might call) the 'excessive' or 'obscene' secret message hollows the critical ambitions of the video. This is because an efficient ideological mechanism *requires* two contradictory levels: (i) the official message, and (ii) the sanctioned fantasy of its subversion. This duplicitous psychological mechanism has a lengthy legacy in Hollywood films. For example, as Žižek observes in one of this paper's epigraphs, the resistance to Nazism in *The Sound of Music* is contradicted by the material texture of the film: the delightfully synchronised happiness of the von Trapp family projects an essentially fascist fantasy of idealised behaviour, while the disgruntled Nazis appear as cosmopolitanised foreign Jews that rupture the harmonious social totality (Žižek 2002a). Likewise, the condemnatory exposé of the news media's various manipulations and shenanigans in the recent film adaptation of the musical *Chicago* is contradicted by the textural fascination for wealth and fame offered by the movie's rich and alluring characters; we leave the cinema with a jazzy spring in our step and a secret desire to 'razzle-dazzle' the world along with the worst of them. So it is with 'American Life'. Far from functioning as a critique of American foreign policy, Madonna's video dazzles the viewer with an array of *faux*-transgressive phantasms. The alternatives to consumption-obsessed American life are without substance. The Arab Other in the video appears as an Other deprived of its Otherness: the serenely beautiful blank expressions of children and women, caught in a torrent of explosions and destructive forces, while practices of terror and misogyny no less than conditions of Middle Eastern poverty remain out of sight. Concomitantly, the enviable list of privileges and products – Mini Coopers, jets, managers, chefs and nannies – are experienced in the mesmerising rhyming rhythms of retro-rapping. The political disavowal emerges through action-packed rejoicing.

Just as the SUV bursts onto the runway, the music itself seems to burst out of the song's otherwise predictable structure and into this rap. The gesture of breaking out

seems to penetrate through the labyrinths of illusion to some kind of reality. Yet, instead of encountering the weight and inertia of anything resembling empirical reality, we find another layer of illusion: Madonna as a fireman, spraying water onto the burning fires of war. What remains outside the imaginary horizon of 'American Life' is the possibility of a *collective* political act of bursting out of the vicious cycle of fanatical consumerism, which in turn generates its own excess and is then compelled to annihilate it. How? These bursting scenes count less as a rupture of American life than a rapping rapture of its (wasteful) bounty. The crank-it-up, raging rhinoceros attitude of the SUV, breaking through to the other side of the ramp, exudes a self-satisfied air of conquest – virile, sexy, powerful; the burning flames engulfing Madonna illuminate her face as if in a fiery halo; her soy latté runneth erotically over.

Of course, in spite of the excessively lovely luxury, Madonna still rhetorically asks, 'Do you think I'm satisfied?' The answer: No, she is not. Madonna's American dream is experienced as a *lack*, a figure less of 'too much' and more of 'not enough'. In other words, Madonna's persona wants still more than the abundant offerings of capitalism. Instead of confronting the terrifying hedonism of total material enjoyment face to face, 'American Life' bears witness to a limit. The capitalist paradise generates its own excess, which the video annihilates in an operation that must recapitulate what it resists. Far from shattering or disturbing this operation, the video remains immobilised in its individualistic well-being. The horizon of 'American Life' betrays the unattainable endeavour to have the cake and eat it, an impossible desire for 'capitalism without capitalism'; that is, capitalism without the extremes of unrestrained individualism, exploitation of the people and resources of the Third World, social disintegration, and so on. The song's key metaphors cohere around signs of comfort, consumption and pleasure, while the notion of solidarity beyond self and beyond family remains alien to it. And so, Madonna sings, for all its faults American life remains 'the best thing I've seen'.

Žižek writes, '[o]n today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare?' (Žižek 2002b, pp. 10–11). Žižek's words illuminate the problem of imperialist hedonism: far from endorsing an ascetic impulse, this seeming self-regulation feeds such hedonism (after all, the Greek hedonists threw up to eat more!). Likewise, in Madonna's 'American Life', the transgression is deprived of its substance; (via an Other without an Other) we encounter a case of subversion without subversion.

'American Life' as efficient ideological mechanism (or not)?

And yet, for all the hegemonic efficiency of Madonna's video, it was withdrawn out of apparent 'sensitivity and respect' to the armed forces (in Goldstein 2003). As we argue above, the withdrawal acutely registers the new limits of political expression. Madonna's penchant for controversy without genuine dissent can only be considered subversive in a context of rampant conservatism. Its status as 'the most shocking antiwar, anti-Bush statement yet to come from the show-business industry' (Drudge 2003) demonstrates the ominously repressive reality of our times, when even phantasmatic dissent is considered problematic or even treasonous. Or is the video more subversive than meets the eye?

We have only begun to peel the layers of the hermeneutic onion: on its skin, we found protest; beneath this skin, complicity. But what if we peel again? There is at work in 'American Life' a logic of protest other than that which plays simply on the work's surface; a logic, not simply etiolated by, but *dependent* upon its complicity in what it critiques; *dependent*, that is, upon imitating what it fights and instantiating the ideology it opposes. This logic is not made an illusion by the layers of illusion among which the work shuttles; neither is it made impotent by its portrayal of the making impotent of protest – it is *dependent* upon these. Let us explain.

The moments of rupture we discuss above – the SUV bursting onto the runway; the rap breaking into the musical texture – are not the only points at which the skin of 'American Life' is torn. Rather, rupture is present (paradoxically, as the interjection of absence as silence) already in the opening seconds of the music. The song begins with a strikingly vivid rhythmic statement that curiously blends signals of hesitation with assertion: a jagged ascending vocal statement shot through with minute, halting silences. When this passage reaches its apex (having traversed scale degrees 1–5 in $\#$ minor), silence conspicuously closes around it again. Then, after almost a whole second, the melodic ascent is heard again, in a different rhythm, but still perforated by silence. And then silence again. Thus, in the song's opening gestures, sound ruptures spacious silence and silence engulfs assertive sound; neither sound nor silence gains a firm perceptual foothold. It is as if 'American Life' emerges from (and as) a series of wounds – wounds that music cuts into silence; and wounds that silence, in turn, cuts into music.

The visual material that accompanies these opening musical gestures is similarly constituted through a series of interpenetrating ruptures. Three sets of images – a Madonna persona in a tan military uniform, standing and singing in front of a black background; another Madonna persona, wearing darker camouflage fatigues, dressing herself in the backstage locker room with her atypical dancers; and models, hairdressers, stage-hands, etc., preparing for the fashion show – fade into and out of one another, each cutting into the continuity of the others. And just as this instance of rupture as a formal, visual device is paralleled by the play of sound and silence in the music, it is paralleled also by the narrative content it presents. Later in the video, well after this introduction, the dancers and the camouflage-clad Madonna appear in the fashion show when (and only when) the SUV drives violently onto the runway; in turn, the tan-uniformed Madonna appears in this space only on narrow, slat-like vertical monitors, which resemble cuts in the darkness that surrounds them. Thus, like the scenes in which they are synechdochically introduced at the outset, these three strands of narrative interact only through moments (or processes) of rupture.

The opening motives of interpenetrating rupture and irruption (or, more accurately, the anti-motives, since what we are tracing here are the fault lines along which the work deconstructs itself) metastasise throughout 'American Life', ultimately infecting all of its visual, textual, musical and narrative tissue. Among many other instances, rupture appears in the music with the entrance of the synthesizer and drum machine: they too are shot through with stuttering silences reminiscent of those that tatter the opening vocal lines, while the synthesizer compulsively repeats a motive based on an octave leap, marking out a hollow harmonic space, a harmonic silence. The various sections through which the song passes are radically disjunct – not just the sung and rapped portions, but the verse and chorus as well, which sound strangely dissociated from each other in terms of tempo, sonority, melodic orbit, texture and

instrumentation. As chorus ruptures verse, as the sound of acoustic guitar ruptures that of synthesizers, as rap ruptures sung song, the musical form mirrors the process of awkwardly fissured interpenetration set up in the opening musical-visual gambit. In turn, visual and narrative ruptures appear when the video's slick visual surface is torn by the irruption of grainy news footage of weapons and corpses. And the lyrics, too, speak of irruption – as the interjection of absence and spacing into a social totality ('So I went into a bar / Looking for sympathy / A little company / I tried to find a friend / It's more easily said . . .'); and as individual alienation, a gap between a self and its images of itself ('I tried to be a boy / Tried to be a girl / Tried to be the best / . . . I guess I did it wrong . . .').

Moreover, the significance of this compulsive repetition of interpenetrating rupture and irruption is made clear by the fact that these processes are foregrounded at moments of traditional structural significance: first, the opening gestures, as outlined above; second, the SUV/rap climax of the work, also described above; and third, the song's midpoint, which will figure prominently in our discussion below. Rupture, of course, does not of itself constitute protest, but it is by tracing rupture that the deeper logic of protest in 'American Life' can be located. The questions now become: what, precisely, is being ruptured (even though we thought we knew this already); what work does this rupturing do; what comes out of these ruptures? And what happens when the ruptures (are made to) close?

First, what is being ruptured? To a large extent, we have already answered this question, but in a manner we did not expect: 'American Life' is complicit in what it critiques; it implicitly argues on behalf of the ideology to which it is opposed; it not only imitates what it fights, but actually *is* (or is an instance of) that against which it would protest. Herein lies the answer to our question. As a product of the decadent, febrile image culture it parodies with the conceit of the fashion show, and because it is thus irrevocably ensconced in (or as Derrida might say, woven into the tapestry of) the system it critiques, 'American Life', in tearing gashes into its own textural fabric, also does violence to the system that spawned it and in which it participates. It is like a self-aware piece of skin, grafting itself onto the monstrous media culture it seeks to critique, only to wound this culture by tearing gashes in its own surface. But this is only the first level of its protest: what matters is what lies on the other side of this skin – what shows through the wound.

Second, what work does this rupturing do? Discussing Lacan's reading of Freud, Shoshana Felman writes:

As for the theory of psychoanalysis, its originality, for Lacan, consists in [. . .] Freud's unprecedented discovery of the fact that *the unconscious speaks* [. . .] [that it] is not simply opposed to consciousness but speaks as something other *from within* the speech of consciousness, which it subverts [. . .] The unconscious is thenceforth . . . a division, *Spaltung*, cleft within consciousness itself [. . .] the inherent, irreducible difference between consciousness and itself. (Felman 1987, p. 57)

Thus, the unconscious, the field of both repressed desire and repressed trauma, is for Lacan that which speaks, always and everywhere, in and as the gap between a subject and itself. It is not an elsewhere, something that cannot be spoken, but rather is always spoken, ever-present, though barred from and unavailable to the subject that speaks it. This model of the unconscious uncannily resembles the workings of rupture and disjuncture in 'American Life'. One might say that the myriad of ruptures enacted in the video and music dramatise the process by which the unconscious irrupts into, and speaks itself through, the speech of consciousness.

It is through this process that 'American Life' enacts its most effective resistance. If the mass media image culture that 'American Life' both participates in and critiques is a dominant collective and collectivising discourse in our culture today, then, in terms of the Lacanian model outlined above, this collective discourse also speaks a collective unconscious, or, to use Frederic Jameson's term, a *political* unconscious (Jameson 1982). When 'American Life', as both a component of this collective discourse, and a work that takes this discourse as its subject matter, dramatises an irruption and return of the unconscious, it is this political unconscious that it brings forth. Moreover, because it does so publicly and with reference to the discourse in which it participates, in *dramatising* this irruption, it to some extent *enacts* it as well. This is the nature of 'American Life's' logic of protest: the video dramatises and thus enacts an irruption of the political unconscious into collective conscious discourse, and thus an irruption or return of a political *repressed*. It is effective as an act of resistance and dissent insofar as its incessant display and repetition of rupture demand that we look within the spaces it opens in itself; it is effective insofar as it calls attention both to what has been repressed, and what represses: after the wound has been opened, after we have been made to look within the wound, and even after the repressive mechanism has closed the wound again, we cannot unsee what we have seen, nor can our view of the repressor be unaffected by a glimpse of what has been repressed.

Third, what comes out of these ruptures? We might rephrase this question as, what is the content of this *political repressed*. To answer this question, we will revisit a moment we have already examined above. Roughly half-way through the video, two young Muslim girls appear in the fashion show. They walk onto the runway, pause for a moment, and look out into the audience, where their gaze is met by a wall of cameras and a barrage of flashes. A moment later, they look at each other. Between them, there is a video screen and on this screen is an image of an American soldier in desert camouflage; behind him, an American tank.

This scene is already a clear instance of the manner in which 'American Life' enacts its protest. The girls are granted pride of place on the runway, but it is in the space between them – a space into which we cannot not look, since it is situated in the very centre of the screen – that we are reminded of the hard physical violence from which the fashion show would seek to distract both its audience and the culture it represents, even as it transfigures this violence into spectacle. As if to dramatise Lacan's model of the unconscious, the repressed is not hidden or buried here, but rather on prominent display. Its referents include both the soldier and tank, and the fashion show itself – a petty, self-important event that must, to a large extent, ignore the bloodshed in the world outside itself if it is to function efficiently, but which cannot successfully do so, and thus, in an act of failed repression, takes this very violence as its subject matter.

But the song's most dramatic and haunting moment of rupture occurs immediately after the girls first appear. Once they have paused to look at each other (or do they look at the image of the soldier between them?), an extremely rapid sequence occurs. At first, it looks simply like flashing camera lights, and thus seems almost continuous with the barrage of flashes with which the girls are first met. But, on closer inspection, the scene reveals itself to be an extremely rapid and brief series of images evoking some sort of unidentifiable abjection – a corpse, a wound, meat? One cannot tell; the scene is too brief, and the images shift far too quickly. After this rupture, there is a brief cut to one of the models who will accompany Madonna on

stage in the SUV, and then a return to the girls on the runway, who turn and walk away.

When this sequence is slowed down or paused, the image that irrupts into the scene becomes clear: it is news footage of the head of a dead child. The scene is gruesome. Most of the child's head has been demolished, emptied of brain and bone, leaving only the tattered, hairy skin of his scalp, which falls in loose folds like fabric. The image is eerily bloodless, and is made all the more poignant by the fact that the child's face, though pale and lifeless, is entirely intact, looking almost serene. Though this inserted material lasts for less than a second, the camera angle changes several times; whoever filmed the child circled around the scene to capture it from many angles. In the upper left-hand corner of the screen are the words 'Al Jazeera Exclusive'.

Could this be the 'content' of the political repressed that 'American Life' attempts to call forth and display in the spaces it gouges in its own surface; its optical unconscious (to use Benjamin's term)? Appearing as the two girls look at each other and are photographed, this image issues forth the content of the photographic gaze as a horrific document. Suddenly the girls appear as survivors of a violence that happens overseas, in the elsewhere of empire, outside the safe and sanitised space of the fashion show and the culture that subtends it. They are pleasant to look upon, and thus are paraded as fashionable, beautiful images of the other. Yet the child in the Al Jazeera footage did not survive. His image is traumatising to look upon, and so his presence is repressed. But, as it is with all things repressed, the video seems to say, this image *will* return.

It is noteworthy that this image is taken from Al Jazeera. If there is anything in 'American Life' that demands to be seen as 'not just a dream', it is this image of horrible violence done upon a child. Yet this image remains an *image*. It does not come before us in an unmediated purity. Its striving toward documentary reality notwithstanding, this is footage from a very particular news network, arguably with its own interests and agenda. Based in Qatar, Al Jazeera is a major source of news in the Middle East. It has been accused by important American political figures (including Vice President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, and others) of being inflammatory and misleading in its coverage of Iraq. Bush administration officials even express misgivings about recent attempts to privatise the television station, arguing – against their own ruling commitments to the inherent value of free markets – that 'a privately owned station may be no better' from their point of view (Weisman 2005, p. 1). The Al Jazeera moment in 'American Life' does not, it seems, escape from the video's labyrinths of illusion; what it reaches here is not empirical reality. Rather, if the vast American media culture in which 'American Life' is ensconced is understood as a collective discourse of America and Western Europe, then this interjection of footage from Al Jazeera may be characterised surprisingly literally with a term Lacan used to refer to the unconscious. That is to say, to the MTV culture of the fashion show and showbiz, it appears as the *discourse of the other*. (Of course, this popular reception is complicated by the fact that Al Jazeera has also alienated officials in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and many other countries by criticising their policies.)

Finally, what happens when these ruptures (are made to) close? The image of the dead child appears only briefly; it flashes into and out of the video's optical field in less than a second. But once one has seen the sequence paused or slowed, it becomes difficult to eradicate it from the mind's eye; it *imposes* itself even when the video runs at full speed: having seen it once, one sees it every time. Even the very fabric of the

video seems unable to recover from this moment: immediately after the appearance of the child's corpse, 'American Life's two most prominent gestures of rupture begin (the flashes of violent war footage, and Madonna's explosion onto the runway of the fashion show) as if the video's surface has been disturbed irreparably by the shocking and pathetic image. Once the wound is opened, it cannot be fully closed; it leaves a scar.

If the ruptures that appear throughout 'American Life' dramatise and enact the irruption of a political unconscious – first as the interjection of spacing and irreconcilable self-difference (as in the play of sound and silence, verse and chorus, and so on), and, later, as literal content (in the appearance of the dead child and the violent war footage) – then the closure of these wounds would represent moments of repression; moments at which the censoring (in both the psychological, Freudian sense and the political sense) mechanisms at work in this collective discourse recover their strength, and cover over the space that has been opened. But, as is apparent in the case of the sudden appearance and disappearance of the image of the child, 'American Life' never portrays this mechanism as wholly effective: the wound is never perfectly closed, the forgetting never complete. A scar remains.

This scar, this remainder, is ultimately the mechanism by which 'American Life' is able to make its protest apparent. Through a willed opposition between what it depicts and what it says, between the attempt to forget enacted by the closing of the wound, and the scar that represents the impossibility of complete forgetting, 'American Life' not only enacts a return of repressed material from the political unconscious of contemporary America, but also brings into consciousness the workings of the repressive mechanism, the censor of our waking dream machine, that bars this material from collective public debate. Without the scar, the censoring machinery operates invisibly; with it, a trace remains by which the censorship can be seen as such. Moreover, this process necessarily involves irony, but of a markedly un-postmodern type: not a generalised, diffuse space between what the work means and what it says; but, rather, a harder, more directed, razor-sharp irony. As 'American Life' simultaneously depicts the closing of the wounds it opens in its surface, and tells us that these wounds can never fully heal, *it means exactly the opposite of what it says*.

This irony is the reason the appearance of Madonna and her dancers on the runway of the fashion show has the feel, not of a real moment of unexpected protest, but rather of a planned event, the show's surprise ending. This is the reason Madonna fires a water cannon, instead of a real weapon; this is the reason the grenade becomes a lighter – all of these are not simply futile protest, but a portrayal of protest *made futile*; a tracing of the limits of public discourse and a dramatisation of the *imposition* of these limits. Much of the potentially subversive energy in this scene is diffused before it can be fully released, specifically because the scene is deliberately and self-consciously cast in terms that have already been appropriated by that against which this energy would be directed. Here, the wounds have been closed pre-emptively, before they can fully open. But even this pre-emptive closing leaves a scar – the image of the dead child, which appears before this climactic scene, and against which this scene must be read. It is this scar that makes the work's sharp but peculiar irony apparent; it is through this scar that it enacts its protest.

This depiction of the (failed) closing of wounds, and thus of the symbolic castration of the politically volatile material that emerges from these wounds, is the final moment in 'American Life's logic of protest – a logic uncannily at work not only in the contents of the song and video, but also in both their editing history and the

strategy of marketing and withdrawal outlined above. Just as the traumatising and politically supercharged image of the child's corpse is covered over and expelled from the video as soon as it appears; and just as the equally supercharged grenade provocatively thrown by Madonna at the end of the video is caught and diffused by G.W. Bush (present as a symbol of the power that closes the wounds and censors the dreams), so too were the video's first two, more incendiary endings discarded for the (seemingly) less offensive and more overtly pleasurable final ending. Even more uncannily, the (still) politically charged final edit was released only to be withdrawn; and thus, insofar as 'American Life' appeared and disappeared as a momentary rupture in the fabric of American mass media consciousness, the historical context of its making reflects its dramatic internal content: it was, itself, a rupture and its memory persists as a scar. In both its workings and its history as a work, 'American Life' is a dramatisation of today's dynamics of power and censorship in the context of war.

By cutting its surface with wounds that leave scars, by becoming itself a scar of the sort with which its surface is lined, 'American Life' touches on an open secret, briefly showing us what is seen not to be seen. The silence it carries within itself; the silence it leaves in its wake – these silences speak.

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Endnote

1. Unless otherwise specified, all passages quoted from materials officially released by Madonna and her camp are taken from the 'News Archive' portion of www.Madonna.com. Specific dates for quotations will be given in the text or parenthetically.

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