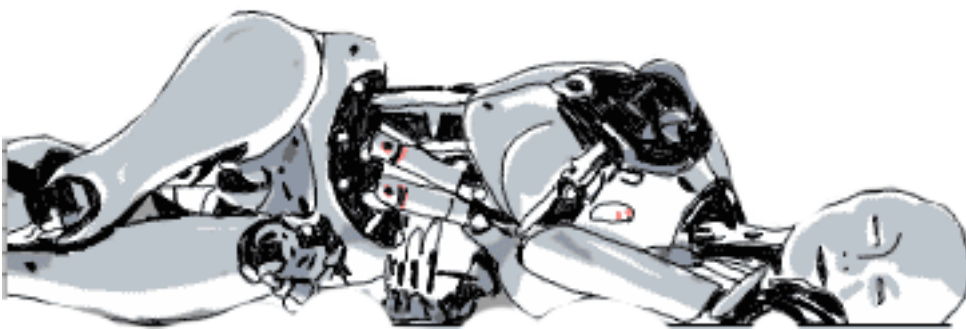




**Discuss Björk's Music Video  
'All is Full of Love ' in relation to  
Sexuality and Postmodernity**

'Sexuality, on the other hand, functions as an equally desired and feared subversion of identities and is therefore an intrinsically metaphoric concept in comparison with the symbolic strategies of gender ascription. All the more critical are therefore the continual commodifications affecting sexuality throughout its history... commodifications that also form one of the most frequent goals of critics of the concept of "postmodernity" and "postmodern" culture.'

(Rainer Emig, *Alien Sex Fiends: Sexuality as Postmodern Metaphor*,  
Extract from paper's abstract, CATH Congress 2002, The University of Leeds)



I have chosen the music video (MV) 'All is Full of Love' of Icelandic Singer Björk to be the cultural text of my study. There are two reasons for this: first, this MV has an explicit and abstract content associated with female sexuality and homosexuality; second, the artist and director are both at the forefront of visual arts with their complex imaginations for the compilation and manipulation of all different visual genres into items of popular culture and therefore fit well into the features of postmodernity.

By using the theories of Hélène Cixious, Judith Butler and Susan Bordo, I will be doing an investigation into the fictional representations of sexuality in the MV. I will also be demonstrating the ways in which the MV is linked with postmodernity by looking at the arguments of Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson.

## **Background and Synopsis of the MV**

The song 'All is Full of Love' is written by Björk, produced by Howie B and released in June 1999 in Björk's 'Homogenic' album. Its MV director is Chris Cunningham. Upon first listening to the song, Cunningham has this reaction: 'When I first heard the track I wrote down the words; "sexual", "milk", "white porcelain", "surgery"... "It's a combination of several fetishes: industrial robotics, female anatomy, and fluorescent light in that order...'<sup>1</sup> His immediate association with sex was vindicated when Björk arrived at his London office with a book of Chinese Kama Sutra prints as her only guiding reference.

As a result, we have an erotic story of two white robots in a simplistic laboratory kind of environment. 'The video is an elegant, moving description of two Björk robots enraptured. As they are pieced and wired into existence, they sing to each other and fall in love. The video reaches its harmonious climax as the robots join in embrace, still being detailed by the robotic machines beside them.'<sup>2</sup>

## **A brief definition of SEXUALITY**

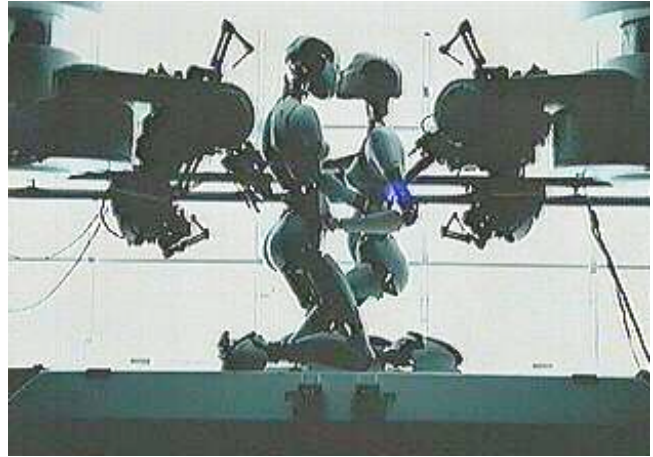
It is a major theme in contemporary reflections on identity, informed especially by psychoanalysis, feminism, and queer theory. This term is related to but distinct from 'sex' (used to refer both to the physical distinction between men and women and sexual intercourse) and 'gender' (the social and cultural distinctions between men and women).<sup>3</sup>

## **Female Sexual Identity and Gender**

Cunningham has created a paradox in terms of the robots' sexual identity and gender. Robots are machines and supposedly lifeless objects as such are not influenced by the hierarchy of gender.



However Cunningham has given his robots a sexual identity, they both have female bodies and in the MV they 'make love' by the way of connecting to each other's machinery in a tenderly humanly manner.



Cunningham's suggestion of the robot couple's sexual identity can be seen as a contradiction to Butler's argument. Here gender is not a social or cultural construction, but determined by biology, by the mechanism within our bodies (inside the robots' bodies using mechanism as a metaphor for genes). The robots are born lesbian, they are attracted by one another in a very natural manner.

Cunningham suggests subtly the gender difference between the two identical robots by giving one of them a more passive character and the other one a more active character. The active robot takes the initiative to approach the passive, kisses and caresses her.

Imagine if one day the biological features of our sexes are hidden and we can no longer tell if someone is man or woman by looking at him/ her, even we still remain man and woman inside, can we tell the difference between male and female from observing their behaviour?



If we refer to Cixious' binary opposition between male and female, probably we could easily tell that the active one takes the 'male' lead in the homosexual relationship. As what comes top of her list of binaries is

'Activity/ Passivity'<sup>4</sup>, although I doubt if her binary opposition a reliable representation of sexual identity and gender, I think it is true to say women are close to nature and is often found on the emotional and sensitive side ('Sun/ Moon', 'Culture/ Nature'<sup>5</sup>). We can take a look at Björk's note on her inspiration: 'That song's from a moment when I'd had a pretty rough winter and then it was a spring morning and I walked outside and the birds were singing: Spring is here! I wrote the song and recorded in half a day. It just clicked - you know: you're being too stubborn, don't be so silly,

there is love everywhere. The feeling, the emotion of the song was like completely melting and loving everything and feeling like everything loved you, after a long time of not having that.<sup>6</sup>

### **Female Sexuality as Masquerade and Object**

'All is Full of Love' can be seen as a play-acting, an acting-out of the psychoanalytic notion of femininity as masquerade and object that is as a representation of male desire. The MV in some ways is quite similar with Madonna's 'Open Your Heart' MV<sup>7</sup>. Like what Bordo has observed, the director places the viewer in the position of the voyeur by presenting Björk's body as object, indeed Cunningham has transformed Björk's body into real mechanic object as robot. The way he shoots, from a third-person point of view also leads us to the notion of voyeurism. Our capacity to look, and to see ourselves through the eyes of others, is at the core of our psychological formation. Bordo agrees with Ann Kaplan that the way men view women in the filmic world is only one species of objectifying gaze, there is also the viewers' gaze which may be encouraged by the director to be either more or less objectifying.<sup>8</sup> Through the objectification of the subject we see, our personal desires are fulfilled as we have projected our lack to the perfect body portrayed onscreen.

Butler's description of gender as performative is to suggest that gender is constituted by performative acts which come to form a gender identity. The using of sexed robots and the showing of their fabrication process is a signification of gender as a construction for the purpose of performance. 'Gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior "self", whether that "self" is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an "act", broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority'<sup>9</sup> Butler uses performative to suggest that this coherency is false because the performative function is never stable.

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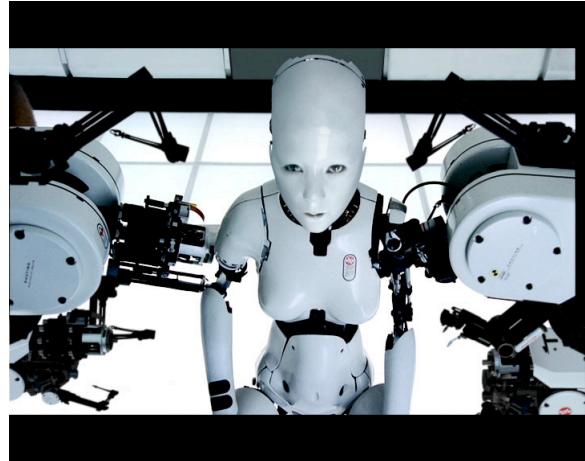
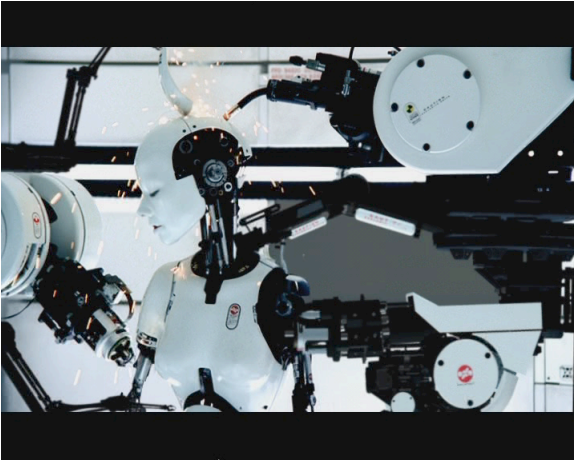
## **A brief definition of POSTMODERNITY**

This term refers to a set of perceived social, technological, political, economical, cultural and artistic conditions, which are distinctly different from the conditions of modernity and closely related to Postmodernism. Postmodernism is a discourse, an intellectual movement to discuss the above conditions.

## **Dissolution of Metanarratives and Changes of Social Norms**

Lyotard defines a discourse as modern when it appeals to one or another of the metanarratives like science or religion for its legitimacy. The introduction of postmodernity, then signals a crisis in narratives' legitimising function. Symptoms of our loss of mastery are apparent in our everyday cultural activity, with no exception in the visual arts.

Postmodern thinking with its challenging of universality and its stress on the local and particular is reflected in 'All is Full of Love' where there is no evidence of a central narrative and no backup of grand theory for the story plot. The MV may actually be regarded as a pure visual experience, a showcase of surfaces, images and signifiers. It is a disruption to the conventional distinction between television and video art, a merge that is assisted by post-production technologies<sup>10</sup>. It is an expression of the hyper-reality that arouses our reflexivity by using simulacra to blur the boundary between real and unreal as we are amazed at the cyborgian mixing of organic and inorganic, human and machine and electronic.<sup>11</sup> The robots are built with fragments, they are so artificial but their emotions are extraordinarily human, all these contradictions help to create meaning in this piece of art.



In modernity, the idea of 'family' is very much emphasised, family is the central unit of social order with nuclear family as the model for the middle-class, and the society is supported by heterosexual norms. On the contrary, in postmodernity, we have alternatives to family units, alternatives to middle-class marriage model, multiple identities for couplings, and exposure of repressed homosexual and homosocial realities in cultures.<sup>12</sup> The parentless lesbian robot couple is an exact representation of all the above postmodern features. They do not have roots and like Bordo describes, the robot bodies are metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and for the finitude of human perception and knowledge.

### **Playground without the burden of History**

Postmodern historians and philosophers question the representation of history and cultural identities. 'The disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve... The information function of the media would thus be to help us to forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms of our historical amnesia'<sup>13</sup>. Postmodernist theorists question the origin of presence, is it a continuation from history (modernity)? Or can it be a complete new start from the present? One of MV's features is the effacement of distinction between the past, present and future, the collapse of separated traditions and genres and the creation of unstable subject positions that fall outside the usual categories.<sup>14</sup>

Just like the technology of cloning and duplicating, what we perceive in postmodernity is always copy, or copy of a copy. The disunity between layers of representations and the reality somehow create a playground for some of us (like the artists) to be creative. Directors can pick and mix different genres and forms in their films, like Cunningham is using CG to put science fiction with erotic/ romance into his mixed-media MV.



The red logo of the laboratory is a pastiche, a sign of citation of other text and of hybridisation – the Japanese animation and manga.

Cunningham writes in his director's notes: ' Against black we hear the faint sound of electricity gently surging. All around us, banks of fluorescent lights, behind Plexiglas flicker to life at random,

illuminating an elegant, pristine white environment. It has a Japanese feel to it, a simplicity in its design. As we track forwards we are dwarfed on either side by two enormous medical/industrial robots. In unison they sweep around towards a workspace littered with eggshell-white plastic parts. As we get closer the parts become more visible and reveal an organic nature, their shapes resemble humanoid forms. From above we see clearly a female form in a fatal position completely abstracted and disassembled.'<sup>15</sup> In terms of aesthetics, the sense of groundlessness and decentralisation of control over narratives, social norms and history, as well as the notion of multiple and intersecting discourses and disciplines, in my opinion, are important elements that allow artists to work in today postmodern world as they are always free to cross over different boundaries and at the same time can maintain their individual space.

### **When Sexuality meets Postmodernity...**

The notion of Difference in Postmodernity is highlighted by Sexuality and the elements of feminism within. To illustrate this point in a historical context, I have picked a lengthy quote from the

Contemporary Canadian cultural theorist and literary critic Linda Hutcheon: ‘...there were certain important social movements in the 1960s (and before) that made the postmodern possible: the women's movement [...] and, in North America, the civil rights movement. *Suddenly gender and racial differences were on the table for discussion. Once that happened, "difference" became the focus of much thinking* - from newer issues of sexual choice and postcolonial history to more familiar ones such as religion and class. I think feminisms (in the plural) were important for articulating early on the variety of political positions possible within the umbrella term of gender - from liberal humanist to cultural materialist. Feminist discussions "complex-ified" questions of identity and difference almost from the start, and raised those upsetting (but, of course, productive) issues of social and cultural marginality’.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the appearance of the robots being identical, both using faces reminiscent of Björk’s visage and the same female body, can be seen as an implication or reaction to what postmodernist theorists concern – how to insist upon multiple discourses, dialogues, simultaneity and interaction in order to continue to react against global sameness and single identity? This concern, as Hutcheon has suggested, is triggered by social movements of all kinds.

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Sexuality and Postmodernity are not easy to analyse, I wanted to put many things in this essay but realised that I got confused myself with all the different theories. My discussion of ‘All is Full of Love’ is an attempt to look at the representation of sexuality and postmodernity in such a postmodern form of art – music video, and I have tried to expand my observation to a critical analytic level.

Postmodernity is a mode of being that allow infinite creativity, to me it is basically a free space for us to do what we want, however the disorientation and lack of central control within postmodernity may pose social and moral problems (like the journalists’ ethics). Nevertheless every new conception and theory has helped to add to the diversity in postmodernity and we should really keep an eye on what happening around us.

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1 Dazed and Confused (issue 55, USA, 1999)  
2 *Björk All is Full of Love*, retrieved on 23/04/2004, from  
3 <http://www.director-file.com/cunningham/521.html>  
4 Peter Brooker, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory*, (UK: Hodder Arnold Publication, 1999)  
5 Hélène Cixous, *Sorties (1975)*, from Rivkin Julie, Ryan Michael (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology*  
6 (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998), p.578  
7 *Ibid.*  
8 Björk, retrieved on 26/04/2004, from <http://unit.bjork.com/specials/gh/SUB-01/>  
9 Susan Bordo, *Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture (1993)* from Rivkin Julie, Ryan  
10 Michael (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998).  
11 *Ibid.* p.1113  
12 Judith Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist*  
13 *Theory* from *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen (ed.),  
14 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), p.279  
15 Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.205  
16 Martin Irvine, 2003, retrieved on 02/05/2004 from,  
<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/pomo.html>  
*Ibid.*  
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