Blank Space

Starting in the 1960s, music became bigger than sounds. The era introduced the concept of a music video - a recorded performance recreated songs and gave visual representations through set scenes. Some were purely recorded playthroughs, but they soon evolved to be more artistic and incorporate scenic elements, personal objects, or suggestive choreography that added to the meanings the song conveyed. It may explore an idea or take a stance on a topical issue. Taylor Swift’s “Blank Space” music video has many scenic elements and lyrical implications about power and her role as a woman. How does Taylor Swift in “Blank Space” use her image to represent the perception of women in modern patriarchy?

The “Blank Space” music video portrays women as over emotional romantics and men as emotionless suits. It shows her as unstable and jealous, as if her life revolved around chasing the affection of the man throughout the video. The man is shown most commonly as apathetic to the given scene or showing more interest in leaving. His lack of care essentially leaves her powerless. This idea is similar to some concepts conveyed in “The Beauty Myth” by Naomi Wolf. Wolf believed that the power of women was most dictated by their apparent beauty (Wolf 11). The woman’s beauty was treated as a form of currency that translated to dictate that woman’s value in society (Wolf 12). While women were controlled by how they were seen, men instead had their value dictated by what they could do, leading to a sort of institutional patriarchal society. So in effect, beauty becomes more a measurement for critique under men’s institutional power (Wolf
13). But women can also gain higher standing of power through material wealth, essentially what they can provide for man. However, material freedom leads to harsher ridicule of feminine image (Wolf 10). Wolf does note that it is not entirely black and white, as women have breached the power structure in more modern times (Wolf 10). Wolf’s concepts are highly conveyed through “Blank Space.” We see Taylor always dressed in luxury clothes, with makeup and hair done to gain the man’s approval. As they spend time together in the video, she eventually carves their names in a tree. It isn’t a mutual event however, as again she does the work of the union. He just benefits with no effort and it appears she is expected to be the one doing the work for him as he apathetically stands around. Lyrically we can confirm her submission. Lines include “find out what you want,” then “be that girl for a month,” telling us she aims to change her identity as a means to satisfy his desires and gain his affection. Through Wolf’s eyes, we see “Blank Space” shows woman is subject to the man’s perception and cannot seem to stand being without a man.

The man holds the power- his perception of woman dictates her value, and she submits to his desires to improve the perception of herself. When Swift in this scenario does not receive the man’s full attention and tries to leave her, she violently breaks down and becomes aggressive towards him. It is easy to begin questioning why the man would still remain around with the new threat of danger. “Pigskin, pain, patriarchy” by Don Sabo offers an answer to that question. Sabo sees society as a competition between men in the pursuit of glory. He believes in the competitive and patriarchal status of the interaction of men, but he looks more at the reasoning behind it. Sabo agrees men suppress women (Sabo 86) and that success means higher placement in male pecking order (Sabo 83). The main idea behind Sabo’s reflection is that men “play for rewards,” meaning they will endure hardships with the intentions of their social benefit for it (Sabo 83). In that vein, men conform to ideals in hopes to get ahead (Sabo 87). Lyrically that idea appears through lines
like “If the high was worth the pain” and “Boys only want love if it's torture,” alluding to her acknowledgment that men intentionally go into situations noting the pain for the benefits of it. The man in the video stays around because of the wealth Swift has and the material she can provide him to elevate his status. As indicated by Sabo, to men, advancement of wealth and status are more important than safety (Sabo 86). Men will endure and comply even to a woman if it means their own hierarchal progression because like with a god, men revere those who can grant status and fortunes in exchange for enduring their demands (Sabo 87). That is where the previous perception now falls apart. Man is no longer all-powerful. Man needs to be granted power and status. With that, the man’s actions are driven by the desire for women’s praise (Sabo 83). This illuminates now that really Swift is the figure in power through “Blank Space.” It becomes very apparent in retrospect. Swift sings “I could show you incredible things” and “New money, suit and tie” which is conforming to the initial impression but it changes with extra lyrics like “I can make the bad guys good for a weekend” and “I can make all the tables turn.” This shows she is aware that he aims to use and gain from her, but she recognizes that his desires leave her in charge. She uses him as a toy, knowing he will comply in the hope of gaining something. We see her controlling all activities through the video. As they ride bikes, she rides the bike ahead. She leads their dances. She makes him walk the dogs as she looks satisfied and he looks longingly ahead. Overall, she is the one in control of what they do, whether he agrees or not. She holds the ultimate power. So now we see “Blank Space” highlights men are vulnerable to their greed for status and women actually hold the power over them.

So what does such a message mean? What does it matter if Swift appears dominant in “Blank Space?” Swift understood that her voice gave the power to control perception of those who view the video. The power of media was covered well through “Teaching sexuality through media”
by Becca Cragin. Cragin makes mention of the nature of media and its intention to control perception of its audience. Cragin explains the context of imagery changes the meaning of what is presented, and the placement and portrayal of people and other elements within media intentionally shape our reactions (Cragin 170). In all media, we are shown each element through the eyes of the author/director, and our impressions will align with their perception accordingly (Cragin 171). There won’t be a perfect consensus, and naturally there will be a dialog over the content, however how people perform an action or a dialog controls the impression we will have of it and in effect will control the perception of the majority (Cragin 173). It is clear that images in media are treated as societal ideals as people follow their ideas and aim to recreate many concepts of the presented concepts (Cragin 178). Contrarily, it can be noted pre-existing experiences and personal interpretations based on values can overwrite intended perception and reception of messages and emotions can overwrite what is presented (Cragin 174-176). Popular topics are often polarizing, so some views cannot be controlled exactly (Cragin 177). It can also be argued that for as much as media controls people’s perceptions, people control the context as much as the context controls the people (Cragin 183). Swift is aware of the effects media has. The line “I can read you like a magazine” shows she knows how something as simple as a magazine can control a strong impression of someone. As she uses the same knife she used to carve their names into the tree to destroy the painting of the man, she shows how easily she can destroy his image, through metaphor. “Ain't it funny, rumors, lie” and “And I know you heard about me” shows she is aware social perception derives from media portrayals. It implies Swift is aware that the media portrayal of her will dictates how he acts and feels towards her. It proves true visually as one of the few things to ever hold his attention in the video is his phone, a prime source to access the media that would define his first impressions of her. **Despite all the beauty and luxurious scenery present in**
the video, it seems that only his phone gets his attention. He clearly cares for appearance based representations of luxury, as the only thing that breaks his apathetic nature is ruining his phone and car. Media paints Swift as a crazy romantic and a rich, out-of-touch woman and she plays up that image to highlight the absurdity of it. She has an oversized mansion to herself. They ride pure white horses and she has a hall of handmade paintings to show her care for fine art, both generally stereotypes of rich culture. “Cause we're young and we're reckless”, “Got a long list of ex-lovers,” and “You look like my next mistake” build more to show that common perception sees her as someone young and careless that seems to treat love as a game. She takes that and plays with that image in an act of rebellion, highlighting the absurdity of the criticisms of her and women of her age, while also then highlighting the flaws of the men who play the “game” alongside her that seemingly are exempt from similar ridicule. By mocking the media perception of herself, Taylor Swift in “Blank Space” shows self-empowerment, and in effect, the power women have over men.

How does Taylor Swift in “Blank Space” use her image to represent the perception of women in modern patriarchy? “Blank Space” shows the power of perception that status creates and shows how success of a woman can capitalize on the vulnerabilities and greed of man. By showing the vulnerability of man and playing with her own image, Swift empowers all to see the flaw and fragility of

“Blank Space.” YouTube. Perf. Taylor Swift. UMG (on Behalf of Big Machine);
www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-ORhEE9VVg
