

## Visual Resistance and Subcultural Identity in t.A.T.u.'S Music Videos: *All the Things She Said and Not Gonna Get Us*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how subcultural resistance is represented in two of t.A.T.u.'s most iconic music videos, *Not Gonna Get Us* and *All the Things She Said*. Using a semiotic approach, the study analyzes visual codes, *mise-en-scène*, and lyrical structures to uncover how these elements express rebellion and emotional urgency within the socio-political context of early 2000s Russia. Visual cues such as fences, surveillance imagery, and enclosed spaces are recontextualized to symbolize control, escape, and resistance. The lyrics act as recurring affirmations of defiance, reinforcing a refusal to conform. The study highlights how movement, spatial dynamics, and contrasting aesthetics construct narratives of struggle against dominant ideologies, particularly around gender and identity. By foregrounding emotional intensity and intimate bonds, the videos create alternative meanings that challenge mainstream interpretations of love. This research reveals how popular media can subvert traditional norms through layered signs, offering space for dissent within familiar cultural formats.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, Russia experienced a resurgence of conservative values, particularly regarding gender identity and expression. In this socio-political climate, pop duo t.A.T.u. gained global attention not only for their music but also for their provocative visual narratives. The music videos for *All the Things She Said* and *Not Gonna Get Us* became sites of cultural controversy, sparking debates around teenage rebellion, gender performativity, and symbolic resistance. While mainstream pop culture often reinforces dominant ideologies, t.A.T.u.'s visual work offered alternative messages that implicitly questioned authority and traditional norms.

This research falls within Media and Culture Studies, which examines how audiovisual texts operate as forms of ideological resistance. The research draws on semiotic theory, specifically the relationship between signs and cultural meanings as discussed by Barthes (1972), as well as Hebdige's (1979) notion of subcultural expression through symbolic forms. Together, these frameworks provide a tool for interpreting how resistance can be encoded in popular visual media.

This study addresses the lack of critical studies on how pop music videos convey identity-based resistance in the post-Soviet context. This study examines how two music videos convey rebellion and subcultural identity through visuals and lyrics. Using qualitative descriptive methods, this analysis combines visual semiotics and lyrical interpretation to explore the interplay of *mise-en-scène*, framing, lighting, and repetition. This study aims to uncover how the videos challenge heteronormative and authoritarian ideologies through visually displayed representations of resistance.

## 2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method that emphasizes the interpretation of visual text and lyrics in music videos as cultural products. The study subjects consist of two official music videos by t.A.T.u., "*All the Things She Said*" (2002) and "*Not Gonna Get Us*" (2003), released in the early 2000s and garnering global attention for their provocative visual narratives and controversial themes. Primary data was collected through in-depth observation of both music videos. Detailed observations were made, examining both the visual elements (*mise-en-scène*, shooting angles, lighting, costumes, and color palette) and the lyrics. A thorough analysis was conducted

minute by minute and second by second, adjusting to the rhythm of the lyrics to ensure synchronization between the visual and audio narratives. Screenshots were taken at key moments to strengthen the visual interpretation. The data analysis technique used Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as the primary framework, specifically the triadic model encompassing the signifier, the signified, and the myth. This approach is useful in analyzing how music videos construct layered meanings, where literal images are interpreted through connotations to produce broader ideological messages.

In addition to Barthes, Dick Hebdige's subcultural theory is used to understand how visual elements and body style serve as means of resistance to dominant norms, particularly in the representation of marginalized identities. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is also used to explain how identity, power, and social meaning are formed and circulated through popular media. As a complement and comparison, this study also utilizes music videos from other Russian pop musicians active in the 2000s as supporting data. The interpretation of the data is strengthened by referring to relevant academic literature in the form of books, journals, and previous media studies to provide theoretical context and increase the credibility of the analysis.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Result

This study found that both music videos, "*All the Things She Said*" and "*Not Gonna Get Us*," represent subcultural resistance to dominant social expectations in Russia in the early 2000s, a period marked by conservative norms and intense cultural surveillance. Through a combination of lyrics and deliberate visual choices such as fences, school uniforms, security camera aesthetics, cool lighting, and restrained physical gestures, each video constructs a layered narrative of emotional rebellion, self-assertion, and a refusal to conform.

These elements function not only as aesthetic choices but also as semiotic signs fraught with ideological tension. The recurring lyrics, "*All the things she said*" and "*They're not gonna get us*," become a kind of emotional mantra reflecting inner distress and resistance. When combined with emotionally powerful visuals, these lyrics reinforce messages of identity assertion and resistance. For example, the scene of Lena and Yulia standing in the rain behind a fence visually reinforces feelings of social exclusion and silent protest. Similarly, the act of driving a truck in a snowstorm in *Not Gonna Get Us* redefines mobility as an act of reclaiming autonomy and resisting institutional control.

In line with Barthes's semiotic model of signifier, signified, and myth, these videos generate meaning that shifts from literal representation to symbolic critique. The fence is no longer a physical barrier, but a metaphor for exclusion and surveillance. The wet body, often exposed under cold light, becomes an indelible symbol of vulnerability and visibility. This recurring visual structure embeds subcultural critique into the fabric of the videos, transforming personal affection into political discourse.

Lena and Yulia are not passive figures; their emotional expressions, gazes, touches, and silences, subvert conventional expectations of female behavior and heteronormative love. Their presence offers a narrative of resistance not through confrontation, but through honest self-expression and affective solidarity. Thus, these videos are not simply popular entertainment but function as subcultural texts that challenge dominant cultural codes and articulate alternative ways of being.

#### 3.2. Discussion

##### 1. All the Things She Said



Figure 1.1. Lena and Yulia look gloomy behind the iron fence and then kiss

The music video for *All the Things She Said* conveys a narrative of resistance to identity norms through a series of visual images that symbolically reveal the tension between personal expression and repressive social pressures. In one of the most intense scenes (figure 1.1), the faces of the main characters are covered by heavy rain, creating an emotionally charged atmosphere. The rain that wets their faces is not only a symbol of sadness or suffering, but also forms a symbolic curtain that separates the inner world of the characters from the judgmental

outside world. Within Barthes's semiotic framework, this element functions as a signifier that points to a deeper level of meaning, namely separation, alienation, and a sense of exclusion by normative social expectations (Barthes, 1972). The symbolic layering of visual elements allows the rain to function not only as weather but also as a sign of socio-emotional alienation.

Furthermore, the presence of the lyrics "*This is not enough*" together with the visuals strengthens the affective dimension of the narrative. This phrase, repeated rhythmically, functions not only as an emotional trigger but also as a symbolic mantra that expresses dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed on their identities. In the context of Barthes' theory of connotation, the repetition produces secondary meanings beyond its literal content that highlight structural dissatisfaction and ideological resistance (Barthes, 1972; Monaco, 2009). Implicitly, this repetitive structure creates a symbolic space of resistance in which the subjects refuse to accept the limitations imposed on their emotional and sexual autonomy.

The visual atmosphere in this video is constructed through low lighting, slow motion, and close-up shots. These techniques reinforce the sense of vulnerability and psychological depth, which is in line with Bellantoni's (2005) observation that cinematic color and rhythm can shape emotional meaning and challenge representational conventions. The camera captures the characters in quiet, introspective moments, inviting the viewer into their emotional world. However, their emotional burdens do not originate from within, but are shaped by external structures of social discipline and normative gender expectations. From a cultural studies perspective, particularly in Hebdige's (1979) subcultural theory, the act of publicly and performatively displaying emotional vulnerability becomes an expression of subcultural resistance. It is a refusal to suppress emotional truth for the sake of social conformity.

Ultimately, this scene does not simply depict two confused individuals. Instead, it actively constructs a discourse of resistance through visual choreography and lyrics. The rain, the fence, the uniforms, and the eye contact are not simply aesthetic choices, but rather charged visual codes that convey the friction between institutional control and the longing for personal authenticity (Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In this way, the video demonstrates how media texts, particularly music videos, can function as cultural products that challenge hegemonic norms and articulate alternative existential spaces.



**Figure 1.2.** Yulia's skirt is highlighted by the camera from below

In another scene (figure 1.2), the camera captures the body of one of the characters from a low angle, showing her steady steps towards a brick wall. This low-angle shot not only dramatizes the scene, but visually constructs a symbolic narrative of resistance. By placing the viewer in a subordinate position, the cinematography creates a power dynamic in which the character appears dominant by emphasizing her active attitude towards the normative order. According to Monaco (2009), this camera angle can function as an ideological tool that reflects or subverts power structures through visual perspective.

The brick wall in this scene is more than just a background element; it represents the rigidity and immobility of the dominant social system. The rough texture and muted, cold colors heighten the sense of oppression, visually echoing a hostile environment where self-expression is strictly regulated. However, the character's assertive forward movement reframes this oppressive structure. The wall becomes not an impenetrable boundary, but a symbolic boundary that can be confronted and potentially overcome. In Barthes' (1972) semiotic terms, the wall acts as a signifier that initially implies control and separation, but through its interaction with the moving body, its meaning is challenged and reinterpreted.

This dynamic interaction between body and space articulates a form of resistance that is enacted through movement. As Flitterman-Lewis (1992) argues, the body in film can function as a contested site where social meaning is negotiated. The contrast between the active movement of the characters and the static presence of the wall illustrates a visual dialogue between freedom and constraint, between individual agency and institutional power. Here, subcultural resistance emerges not through violent rebellion, but through subtle but powerful gestures that refuse to accept the social scripts imposed on identity and behavior (Hebdige, 1979).

In this way, the scene transforms a simple footstep into a powerful semiotic gesture. The footstep is not only literal, but also becomes a visual code that challenges the assumption that social boundaries are natural and

immutable. By continuing to move forward, the character embodies a narrative of resistance and hope, where liberation is realized through movement, space, and framing.



Figure 1.3. A girl sticks out her tongue

One of the most powerful symbols in the Not Gonna Get Us video appears in the scene shown in figure 1.3, where a character stands behind a fence, arms outstretched and screaming. Behind him, there is a crowd of people in black uniforms and holding black umbrellas, standing rigidly in a uniform formation. This visual composition creates a sharp symbolic opposition: the fence is not just a physical element, but becomes an ideological boundary that separates those who submit to the social order from those who refuse to be silenced. In Barthes' (1972) semiotic framework, the fence acts as a signifier that refers to deeper meanings related to segregation, control, and labeling of those considered deviant.

The main character, who is on the opposite side of the crowd, is visually constructed as a subversive figure. His exposed body and explosive emotional expression are forms of resistance to a system that suppresses desire and self-expression. His screams, accompanied by a face full of inner distress, not only reflect personal suffering, but also symbolize the tension between the urge to assert identity and the social forces that seek to silence it. As expressed by Flitterman-Lewis (1992), the body in visual media is not merely an aesthetic object, but rather an area full of social and ideological meaning, where the body becomes a field of conflict between expression and repression.

The crowd of people in black uniforms with uniform umbrellas on the other side of the fence appear as cold and unfeeling entities. The absence of their individual expression, coupled with the dominance of the color black and neat formation, creates a visual representation of a system that demands uniformity and suppresses affection. In the context of representation according to Stuart Hall (1997), these visual elements play a role in constructing meaning about who is considered "normal" and who is placed as "other". The main character, as the only individual who moves, speaks, and expresses feelings, becomes a symbol of an existence that is considered undesirable by the dominant social order.

The fence in this scene not only limits physical space, but also separates the right to voice identity from the obligation to remain silent for the sake of order. Within Hebdige's (1979) framework, the character's actions can be read as an expression of subcultural resistance using the body, emotions, and visual position to challenge hegemonic narratives of identity and order. The body screaming behind the fence serves as a representation of the subjugated individual, yet still daring to challenge the invisible yet felt symbolic power. Thus, this scene not only conveys personal suffering, but forms a visual narrative of resistance to a social system that controls how one presents oneself and establishes emotional closeness.



Figure 1.4. Lena and Yulia leave while being watched by a crowd of people

Figure 1.4 shows the perspective of the crowd observing the main characters from behind a fence. The rows of black umbrellas and the blank facial expressions create a silent yet oppressive atmosphere of judgment. This visual composition creates an emotional distance between the main characters and the crowd, emphasizing the opposition between the controlling society and the individuals who are considered deviant. In Hall's (1997) theory of representation, this camera position and direction of view indicate who holds the power to observe and who is the object.

However, it is precisely from the camera angle that is focused from behind the main characters' bodies that a symbolic reversal occurs: Lena and Yulia choose not to show their faces to the camera. In Barthes' (1972) semiotic analysis, this gesture is a sign of resistance to the dominant narrative. They refuse to be the object of the gaze and reclaim control over their bodies. This movement can also be read as a visual resistance typical of subcultures, as explained by Hebdige (1979).

In terms of visual design, Bellantoni (2005) notes that distance, direction of view, and use of space can strengthen emotional and ideological messages. The choice to position the characters with their backs to the camera, as well as the physical separation by the fence, reinforces the sense of alienation and protection of their identities. Monaco (2009) also emphasizes how the camera not only records, but also shapes the perception of meaning and in this context, the camera is directed to free the subject from the passive gaze of the viewer.

All of these visuals are arranged in sync with the repetitive structure of the lyrics, creating an intense affective experience. Artistic decisions such as cold lighting, slow shots, and the dominance of dark colors help to reinforce the nuances of oppression as well as steadfastness. The school uniforms worn by the characters generally associated with discipline and obedience are transformed in meaning in this context into symbols of resistance. The uniforms become subcultural costumes that actually show rejection of the system they represent. Within the framework of subcultural theory, this action reflects the process of resignification: dominant symbols are twisted and used to convey opposing meanings.

In this way, the video for All the Things She Said not only depicts the emotional experiences of the two characters, but also forms a symbolic space that shows how resistance to norms can be expressed through the visual aesthetics and structure of pop music. Through semiotic reading, elements such as fences, rain, and camera flashes are not only backdrops or dramatic effects, but also rhetorical devices that convey the tension between personal identity and systemic social control. This video establishes its position as a cultural text that shapes discourses about love, freedom, and resistance in the midst of a climate of restrictive conservatism.

## 2. Not Gonna Get Us



Figure 2.1.

Lena and Yulia take photos like prisoners



Figure 2.2.

The visual reading of the Not Gonna Get Us music video becomes increasingly complex as the narrative opens with two black-and-white scenes featuring portraits of prisoners (figures 2.1 and figure 2.2). Lena and Yulia stand in front of a background that resembles a crime scene, complete with an identity board and a height measuring tape. This visual aesthetic resembles a mugshot, a visual style commonly used to mark criminals. However, in this context, the visual does not indicate that they have committed a crime, but rather implies that they are considered deviant simply because their identities differ from the dominant social norm.

The prison setting serves as a literal signifier in this scene, which at the connotative level represents the oppression, judgment, and surveillance of identities deemed "*deviant*". These layers of meaning operate through the processes of denotation and connotation within Barthes' (1972) semiotic framework. The composed, courageous, and self-assured appearance of Lena and Yulia serves as an early emblem of defiance against the representational system that seeks to minimize them. Looking straight at the camera becomes a powerful gesture, which not only conveys courage, but also destroys the position of the camera as a tool of visual domination. In the context of Hall's (1997) theory of representation, this act is a form of reinterpretation of who has the right to see and who has the right to be seen.

Visually, the use of black and white and flat lighting creates a cold and objective documentary impression, which according to Bellantoni (2005) serves to strengthen the nuances of judgment and alienation. Monaco (2009) also explains that the frontal camera angle and eye level with the subject tends to create a feeling of intensity and confrontation and in this context, strengthens the message of resistance.

Furthermore, this visual style merges with subcultural meanings as explained by Hebdige (1979), where seemingly simple expressions such as gaze, clothing, and body position can become symbols of rejection of authority. By not trying to hide, Lena and Yulia show that their own existence is a form of legitimate and conscious defiance. This opening scene is not just a narrative introduction, but a political statement: that their bodies and

identities refuse to submit to a system that regulates, judges, and tries to silence love that does not conform to dominant social expectations.



**Figure 2.3.** Heart shaped car dashboard decoration

Figure 2.3 shows the interior of the truck driven by Lena and Yulia, with one very striking visual detail: a small red heart symbol attached to the metal wall of the truck. Amidst the dominant gray, cold blue, and stiff and cold industrial textures, this heart symbol immediately attracts visual attention. The warm red color creates a strong contrast to the mechanical and soulless atmosphere of the room, bringing emotional warmth amidst a rigid and oppressive system. In the context of their relationship which is considered socially deviant, this symbol becomes a signifier that love is present as a life force that gives direction and meaning amidst limitations.

This symbol of the heart can be seen as a signifier that transcends its literal meaning within the semiotic framework of Barthes (1972). It not only represents feelings of affection, but also contains a connotative meaning as an ideological statement: that love is not only emotionally valid, but also valid as a form of resistance to a limiting value system. Placed in the escape room, the heart symbol can be interpreted as a "third passenger" who symbolically accompanies them on their journey to freedom. In this case, the vehicle driving through the snowy landscape depicts a liminal space between denial and freedom, between a frozen social structure and the possibility of emotional independence.

Monaco (2009) explains that narrow spaces with dim lighting and the dominance of metal in the visuals create a sense of limitation and isolation. However, the presence of a very contrasting red color becomes a disruptive visual element that introduces an emotional dimension into a space that should be sterile. Bellantoni (2005) also emphasizes that the color red in this context functions as an emotional accent that marks the passion, energy, and psychological intensity of the characters.

This heart sign is also a type of symbolic resistance when viewed through the prism of Hebdige's subcultural theory (1979), which rejects mainstream society and reclaims a mechanical, neutral space as a place of protection, acknowledgment, and expression of individuality. In the truck, the love they have not only functions as an emotional escape, but also as a driving force for resistance against the social narrative that defines love in only one accepted form.

Thus, the red heart symbol not only sweetens the visuals, but also becomes the central point of the emotional and political narrative in this video. It shows that love, even that which is considered "illegitimate," has the power to resist, survive, and carve out its own space in a system that denies its existence.



**Figure 2.4.** Lena and Yulia stand on a military truck without a driver

The last image shows Lena and Yulia running together in the middle of a snowy field, with facial expressions that show happiness and relief. The wind blowing their hair and coats, as well as the dynamic camera movement, reinforce the impression of energetic freedom. This scene no longer shows a flight out of fear, but rather a moment of release and euphoria. Within Barthes' (1972) semiotic framework, this visual can be read as a symbolic marker of victory: they have not only managed to escape from pursuit, but have also managed to create their own existential space, free from the authorities that try to control the narrative of their love and identity.

Visual images such as white snow and open space create a sharp contrast to the dark and narrow atmosphere at the beginning of the video. This shift marks a transition from limitation to expansion, from oppression to

freedom. In this context, snow, which is usually synonymous with loneliness and cold, becomes the backdrop for freedom a vast space that no longer judges or limits their existence. Monaco (2009) notes that vast landscapes and bright lighting are often used to create a sense of emotional openness and new possibilities, something that is very much felt in this scene.

This scene confirms that *Not Gonna Get Us* is not just a story of escape, but a visual narrative that consciously re-questions the relationship between identity and power. This video does not follow the classic pattern of a tense criminal escape, but instead reverses that logic into a spiritual and political journey towards subjective freedom. The identity displayed is not shaped by fear or social labeling, but rather the result of a conscious choice to reject the normative boundaries attached to the body, gender, and relationships between individuals.

Free body movements, confident gazes, and expressions full of relief become forms of resistance that are not violent, but symbolically strong. As Hebdige (1979) explains, forms of subcultural resistance often do not appear in direct clashes, but through expressions of style, gestures, and symbols that challenge domination from within. In this context, freedom is not the end of the journey, but a condition that continues to be fought for. This video states that the courage to be different and to love in the midst of social pressure is a legitimate form of struggle that is worthy of celebration.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Through an analysis of the music videos "All the Things She Said" and "Not Gonna Get Us," this study concludes that t.A.T.u. constructs a powerful representation of subcultural resistance. Both videos portray rebellion not through confrontation, but through subtle visual and lyrical strategies: fences, dim lighting, restrained body language, and symbolic open spaces are used to express love, identity, and autonomy that deviate from dominant norms. Lena and Yulia appear not as passive figures, but as active agents carving out affective spaces beyond heteronormative expectations.

Applying Roland Barthes's semiotic theory and Dick Hebdige's subcultural framework, this study reveals how pop music videos function as ideological texts, challenging dominant cultural discourses and proposing alternative meanings through visual disruption. The emotional intensity and aesthetic choices in both videos mark a shift from mainstream Russian pop culture of the early 2000s, offering a representation of marginalized and rare yet politicized intimacy.

Future research could explore how other music videos, particularly in non-Western contexts, use visual language to negotiate identity and power. Music videos like t.A.T.u.'s can also serve as valuable material for media literacy, gender studies, and cultural activism. Ultimately, this study asserts that pop culture, when read semiotically, is not just entertainment, but also a platform for resistance and re-signification.

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