

# 3(D) Review { By Walt Mueller }

## SONG/VIDEO: "Pretty Hurts" Beyonce

### Background/summary:

This video single release from Beyoncé's fifth studio album, *Beyonce*, was released on April 24, 2014 on Time.com to celebrate the singer's cover shoot for *Time* magazine's annual edition on the 100 most influential people in the world. Written by Australian singer/songwriter Sia, the song combines an autobiographical element with a character portrayal in a mix that has Beyoncé telling her own story of struggle in a voice that also represents the shared struggles of girls growing up in today's image-conscious culture.



### DISCOVER: What is the message/worldview?

- The video opens in the dressing room of the "Miss Pretty USA" pageant as contestants prepare and primp for their time on stage. Their preparation is solely physical. They tend to their outsides (hair, teeth, skin, make-up, clothing, etc.) prior to walking on stage for their appearance before a panel of watchful male judges.
- Contestant "Miss 3rd Ward" (played by Beyoncé in a nod to the Houston neighborhood of her childhood) appears onstage for the talent portion of the contest. Flawlessly dressed with her head topped with a set of glittering bunny ears, she passionately sets the mood for the video as she stands at the mic to sing words that diagnose the fallout from our culture's body image obsession: *"Pretty hurts/We shine the light on whatever's worse/Perfection is the disease of a nation. . . Tryin' to fix something/But you can't fix what you can't see/It's my soul that needs the surgery."*
- Parental pressure to pursue this obsession with outward standards - over and above developing one's inward character - is mentioned as she sings, *"Mama said, you're a pretty girl/What's in your head it doesn't matter/Brush your hair, fix your teeth/What you wear is all that matters."*
- The song continues lyrically with a litany of cultural standards of femininity, along with suggestions on how to achieve those standards: *"Blonder hair, flat chest/TV says bigger is better/South beach, sugar free/Vogue says thinner is better."* Visually, viewers see Beyoncé pursue these standards through a variety of measures including ingesting diet pills, working out, coming under the auspices of a mean-spirited pageant coach, standing on a scale, applying make-up, plastic surgery and injections, eating cotton balls for weight loss, and forcing herself to vomit.
- The antidote to the inner ache - rooted in the universal feeling of never measuring up to culture's beauty standards - is oftentimes believed to be being "crowned" and recognized as the most beautiful. Beyoncé sings, *"Just another stage/Pageant the pain away/This time I'm gonna take the crown/Without falling down, down."* She believes, once again, that it will end up better this time.
- But the pursuit is shown to be futile. When asked by the pageant emcee about her greatest aspiration in life, contestant Beyoncé falters as she tries to figure out what it is that she really wants in life. After a moment, she answers, *"To be happy."* As she ponders her answer, the video shows her swallowed up by water and drowning. Visually, the emptiness of her lifetime pursuit is portrayed as she stands amidst a wall full of pageant trophies and ribbons. . . and then she proceeds to smash them, ultimately laying in sadness among their ruins. She sings, *"Ain't no doctor or pill that can take the pain away/The pain's inside/And nobody frees you from your body/It's the soul that needs surgery/Plastic smiles and denial can only take you so far/And you break when the fake façade leaves you in the dark/You left a shattered mirror/And the shards of a beautiful girl."*
- The video comes to a close with Beyoncé finishing second behind an albino girl. . . which serves as a powerful statement in protest against cultural standards. Beyoncé asks, *"Are you happy with yourself?"* Eyes opened and finally realizing the emptiness of her pursuit of pageant perfection, she concludes on a hopeful note as she utters one word. . . *"Yes."*



## DISCERN: How does it stand in light of the biblical message/worldview?



- **"Pretty Hurts"** captures the very clear consequences of what happens when we are pushed (by society, our mothers, peers, etc.) into endeavoring to achieve standards of outward beauty that can never be met, and even if they could, can never fulfill. Life becomes empty, pained, and futile. We have been made **for** God and to **pursue** God. The passionate pursuit of anything else ("pageant away the pain") quickly turns into idolatry and will only result in emptiness (Exodus 20:3-6; Psalm 16:4; Jeremiah 11:12; Galatians 4:8, etc.). In many ways, the pursuit of youth and bodily beauty is **"the unknown god"** (Acts 17:23) that we worship.
- The beauty pageant culture is growing, particularly among the young (**Toddlers and Tiaras**). Director Melina Matsoukas says the video is designed to **"get into the toxic world (pageant culture) and what we really do that is so damaging to ourselves. . . and use it as a microcosm for our society. . . these ideas don't just live in the pageant world. They live in our world."** We can celebrate and affirm this effort to expose this dark corner of our culture.
- Our culture's obsession with outward appearance runs contrary to the aspects of our humanity that should be the object of our focus. Beyonce's bunny ears evoke thoughts of Hugh Hefner's efforts to objectify females through his **Playboy** brand. But like our Maker, we should focus on the heart rather than on the exterior (I Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 31:30; I Peter 3:3-4). Our value is not determined by what we look like, but by how we are viewed by God. Indeed, what we need to correct our erroneous beliefs and obsessions is **"surgery of the soul,"** performed by God as he conforms us to His image and likeness.
- We have become a culture that **"details"** ourselves, our children, and others much like we would detail and shine a car. This reveals the fact that we view and treat human beings – including ourselves – as objects, endeavoring to increase our value and capture the admiration and attention of others through **"washing and waxing"** that which is only skin deep. Our value and worth should lie solely in who we are as human beings made in the image of a God who loves and cares for us (Ephesians 1:4; Psalm 139:14; I John 4:9; Romans 8:38-39).



## DECIDE: What do I do with it?

- Children and teens – the primary listening/viewing audience for this video – are incredibly susceptible to the body image pressure present in today's culture. The pressure is fed by exposure to **thousands of marketing messages a day**. Viewing and talking about **"Pretty Hurts"** not only serves to raise our awareness of just how pervasive this ambient body image pressure is, but also exposes the emptiness that feeds **and** results from caving to its' influence.
- Show the video to mothers to help them see how they may believe these lies regarding themselves, and then pass these same values on to their daughters. Ask them: **"How has this pressure shaped your generation? You? The messages you send to your children through your words, actions, and expectations? Your kids?"** Then, work together to develop strategies to expose and undo these lies by the grace of God through the embrace of biblical truth.
- Use the video as a diagnostic tool with students, both male and female. Ask male students to consider the ways that they view and treat their female peers. Offer correctives to culture's messages to boys and the objectification of females which results. Ask female students to look for ways that **"Pretty Hurts"** may lyrically and visually offer insight into their own values, attitudes, and behaviors. Then discuss the issues that are raised from a biblical perspective. If conversations reveal deep-seated issues related to body image, identity, and physical health, recommend and facilitate professional Christian counseling and medical help. This video can be shown to spark **"surgery of the soul."**
- **"Pretty Hurts"** must be carefully deconstructed and discussed in the context of Beyonce's complete musical catalog. While the song clearly confronts body-image lies of the culture, Beyonce and her music/videos have also consistently contributed to these same pressures. In effect, she contradicts herself. Help parents and students see the lack of integration and contradictory messages sent by Beyonce. The reality is that the victim in **"Pretty Hurts"** is also a propagator of the lies she confronts. Talk about the importance of integrating faith into **all** of life.

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