Rihanna's 'Man Down' Video: Experts Weigh In On Controversy
By Gil Kaufman

Like any good piece of art, Rihanna's controversial "Man Down" video has elicited a wide variety of opinions, running the gamut from condemnation for its bloodshed to praise for its attempt to grapple with the complex issue of violence against women. "It strikes me first and foremost that she is working out personal issues through her art," said Terry O'Neill, national president of the National Organization for Women, who lauded the singer's talent and stressed that she did not find the video exploitive at all.

A number of groups slammed the clip after its premiere, taking issue with the opening scene, in which a hidden Rihanna is shown shooting an unarmed man in the back of the head in the middle of a crowded train station. Viewers later learn that the act was in retaliation for a previous sexual assault. "'Man Down' is an inexcusable, shock-only, shoot-and-kill theme song," said Industry Ears co-founder Paul Porter, a former programming director at BET, where the video debuted earlier this week and remains in rotation.

But O'Neill said that like Rihanna's collaboration with Eminem on the "Love the Way You Lie" video — which also tackled issues of domestic abuse — "Man Down" is another example of Rihanna "trying to grapple with the multifaceted nature of violence against women as an artist. Obviously violence is not the way to solve anything and both videos depict violence. In one, it's a man who feels justified in committing violence against a woman and in the other a woman who feels instantly very remorseful in her killing." For O'Neill, "Man Down" does not cross the line into portraying violence in an effort to titillate.

"One of the main messages it leaves you with is violence breeds more violence and everyone can see that and also detect some problems with that," said Stephanie Nilva, Executive Director of Day One, New York's leading teen relationship abuse-focused organization. "I respect the fact that Rihanna is trying to draw attention to these issues, but I don't think viewers are necessarily getting healthy messages from it."

Another concern for Nilva, given the implied sexual abuse in the clip, is the underlying impression that young women who dress a certain way or go dancing in clubs are naive or should feel at risk. That too, she said, sends a muddled message about sexual assault. "What it doesn't do is open up a discussion about how men's violence is frequently about controlling women and not about violence they've experienced at that person's hands," she said.

After posting a defense of the clip, Rihanna got plenty of support from her fans on Twitter, where the comments included such sentiments as "it's really ironic how women r always exploited n videos ... we watch women be raped & murdered. Now a woman flips the coin & look!"

Another fan wrote, "You opened the eyes of all women living under a dark cloud that needed a voice. 'Man Down' is the voice. I love you." Others called it "inspiring" and praised Rihanna for tackling the issue of sexual abuse, writing, "'Man Down' video portrays REAL situations that can happen to ANYONE! Do yoo thing ri!" Rihanna also pleaded with her fans to stop making threats against members of the PTC [Parents Television Council], writing, "We love it, they don't ... that is all, and the world keeps turning."

Given the message of empowerment some of Rihanna's fans appear to have taken from the video, Nilva noted that one of the messages Day One imparts to young people is that violence is never appropriate. "I wouldn't say that perpetrating violence against someone is a form of empowerment, just like you wouldn't say a man raping a woman is a form of empowerment," she said. "It's a complicated message to get young people to absorb that — what it means to be an empowered person — and it would be nice to see more images of strength that are not about exercising violence or power over other people."

As a survivor of relationship violence at the hands of her ex, Chris Brown, Nilva said the singer is clearly under the microscope when it comes to this topic. But given that people are likely to pay more attention to what she has to say about it because of her fame and the notoriety surrounding Brown's 2009 assault, Nilva said it would be preferable to see a more positive message from Rihanna on the topic.

O'Neill said she's confident that Rihanna's fans will understand the message of the clip because any woman who has experienced violence from a partner or acquaintance knows that among the emotions you feel in addition to anger and rage are humiliation and fear and a desire for revenge.

"Many women who have experienced violence, of course, have those feelings and this video seems to be a fictional portrayal of those feelings and is not intended to be instructional," O'Neill said, calling it a kind of catharsis for viewers. "The other aspect that is part of the message is the fact that if you act on your desire to kill this rapist, you will then throw yourself down the rabbit hole of remorse and criminal accountability and be sent to prison. There are repercussions and the video clearly says that."