

# Kanye's "Famous" Video Brings Sleep to the Center Stage

*By Paige Towers • June 28, 2016 at 1:32pm*

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On Friday, love'itorhate'im artist Kanye West debuted the long-awaited video for his single, "Famous," in Los Angeles. It was a music video release that felt more like an art gallery opening: West rattled off some words of gratitude in front of a huge crowd before the video played on a jumbo screen. As with everything Kanye produces, the video immediately sparked controversy. And sleep was at the center.

The "Famous" video, which can only be watched on Tidal,

features lifelike wax figures of ten famous people, including Taylor Swift, Donald Trump, Rihanna and George W. Bush, arranged in a luxurious bed alongside West and Kim Kardashian. As the song plays, the camera slowly pans over their naked, sleeping bodies, exposing all in vulnerable poses. It seems to remind us that at the end of the day, even people as powerful as Trump lie defenseless in sleep. Yet, one can't help feel that they're viewing the aftermath of an orgy, or at least something with overtly sexual undertones. The inclusion of

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Swift, who Kanye references in the song and has fueled a lot of controversy as of late

, makes this even more obvious. But Yeezy says the video is simply a meditation on being in the spotlight.

West's "Famous" video seems to represent a more specific concept: how being a celebrity who's constantly under the lens can place you among strange bedfellows.

“It’s not in support or anti any of [the people in the video]. It’s a comment on fame,” he bluntly stated in an interview with Vanity Fair.

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*A screenshot from Kanye's "Famous" video, via Tidal*

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As he did previously with the video for " " which was inspired by Michelangelo's frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Kanye drew direct inspiration from the fine art world. In this case, the motivation was the painting by American realist painter Vincent Desiderio. (West flew Desiderio in for the screening.) The massive work, which is eight feet high and 20 feet long, features 12 (nonfamous) bodies next to each other in bed — naked and sleeping, their lower torsos entombed in white sheets. With meticulous detail, Desiderio created an eerie glow, as though a spotlight is shining on the intimate scene. It all serves to make onlookers feel like peeping toms, present in the scene, taking it all in from above.

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Power,

“Sleep”

In a 2005

article from the Virginia Quarterly Review,

Desiderio discussed the piece, which was purchased by a museum almost immediately after its showing, at length. In the typical fashion of a fine artist, his responses paint a complicated origin, from religion to slavery to privilege and consciousness.

“There [is] a link somehow between sleep and slavery,” he states. “And specifically privileged, pillowed, cushioned sleep — the culture asleep, enslaved, straining toward the liberation of wakefulness.” So while Desiderio wasn’t specifically remarking on fame, he was commenting how even our beds reflect class and status.

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# fame, he was commenting how even our beds reflect class and status.

“At one level, what you see before you here is just a normal mind relentlessly, maybe even a little obsessively, working on a normal dream, trying to replicate the luxury of deep sleep, deep surrender, pure reverie,” Desiderio also stated. He goes on to explain that he tried to depict the moment in which everyone connects — the moment when we’re dreaming and therefore in our most innocent states — implying that sleep can also be the great equalizer.

The artist seemed to pick up on similar themes after watching the debut of “Famous.” In an interview with

Desiderio commented on West’s video, saying: “ [...] why was every impulse to ridicule these people, some of whom (I won't name names) made my skin crawl, being tempered by a rising sense of empathy? Slumbering gods, they were, but also like babies or small children at the height of vulnerability.”

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Rolling Stone,

While Desiderio’s painting may explore many themes surrounding unconsciousness and wakefulness, West’s response to “Sleep” seems to represent a more specific concept: how being a celebrity who's constantly under the lens can place you among strange bedfellows. And it also shows that, for Kanye, even the act of rest can be cause of controversy.

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