

The Pop Promo

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Spring 1993 Issue of KINEMA

LOVE, MUSIC, COMPROMISE: THE POP PROMO

Whether it is called innocence or ignorance, a certain unreconciled naivety is the basis for survival in this culture. A naivety which leads to repeated ingenuous expectations of reappraisal, innovation and renewal. What are the forces that can engender change, the possibility of play and freedom to experiment in the face of Power, in the grip of Industry? The machinery of pop video production exemplifies the strange dynamic of culture and commerce, an unsteady relation between compromise and artistic realisation generated when business encounters creative desire. A micro climate shifting between uneven and unpredictable weather patterns...

Unfinished Business

From the perspective of the rich, variegated histories of the many previous experiments with image and music in film one might have expected that the development of music video in the late Seventies would open a unique terrain for diverse visual exploration to reach wider publics. Released from the strict demands of narrative linearity, the free combination of image with music should have offered the possibility of extensive creativity. But, in the end, the expansion of new outlets (satellite, video, and terrestrial broadcasting) seems to have consolidated an area of production by gradually closing down the range of imaginative possibilities available within it. Although ludic experimentation with the non-narrative audio-visual has historically taken place in precarious spaces at the edge of the cinema, promos offer potential for its conjectural arrangement in a more public domain.

Of the several histories of visually-based experiment in cinema which connect with this, the most extreme is abstract film itself. Non-figurative work from the Thirties including Moholy-Nagy, Eggeling, Ruttmann, Richter and, later, Norman McLaren and Len Lye started in a silent phase (in relation to modern painting) but soon film-makers began exploring the relation of shape, movement and colour to musical and subsequent "non-musical" sound. Perhaps this first phase reached its widest public exposure in Disney's softened version of Oskar Fischinger's inspired work in the "Tocatta and Fugue" section of *Fantasia* (Fischinger himself was removed from collaboration on the finished film).

Seventy years later the thin vein of abstractionism is still being mined by a few film-makers: for example John Tappenden and Malcolm Le Grice and, in video, George Barber and Mineo Aayamaguchi. Most of this work is virtually confined to galleries and colleges but some edges into public view via title sequences, advertisements and rare promos. The earliest traditions of play with image and music in advertising date from Fischinger's Muratti cigarette commercials in the Thirties. Stakker's fast, semi-abstract electronic pieces, like *Humanoid*, make incursions into the contemporary pop video. In quite another space, the occasional encounter with a large-scale firework display reminds one of the vast potential for public pleasure in non-figurative visual patterns...

There are other experimental traditions rich in the imaginative and associative play of image and music such as the films of Maya Deren and Pat O'Neill, the light shows of Scott Bartlett and Mark Boyle, and the work of film-makers as different as David Larcher and Chris Newby in England... Meanwhile Kenneth Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandos* and *Scorpio Rising* can be said to closely prefigure much of the genre. In British terms those that have evolved from the Seventies -- the Structural Materialist, followed by the New Romantic groupings, can be related to different generations and changing categories of experimental production.

There is an often posed opposition between different traditions of British avant garde work, signified by terms like "austerity" and "fullness";⁽¹⁾ but Structural Minimalist film-making, even at its most purist, was not devoid of pleasure, colour, music... These broad tendencies of work, often flowing through the London Film-makers Co-op and London Video Access, remained peripheral to mainstream film culture in the past but still retain the potential to reach larger audiences with original visual configurations in combination with popular music. Music, itself overlapping with sexuality in its proximity to pleasure, has experienced

the same processes of interception, harnessing and control by the fierce forces that traverse an economy of marketed desire.

The Image in the Market Place

MTV started in the United States in 1981 and MTV Europe from Amsterdam in 1987. In five years the European station has grown and now connects up, through satellite and cable, with 40 million households, an estimated 100 million viewers.

Much of the initial experimentation of the early years has been reduced and now tends to be confined to the edges of the schedule. A brief encounter with any random hour of MTV or Super Channel would remind anyone how relentlessly formulaic and repetitive most promos have quickly become -- the nascent genre has quickly atrophied into an aesthetic of anaesthesia. Daytime programmes recycle a very limited play list and relegate a slightly more adventurous range of promos, including those produced by small independent labels, to late night programmes such as *120 Minutes*.

Ironically, even the most anodyne promos often reach for the image rhetoric of the avant garde: for example, their use of Super 8, the mix of black and white and colour, the appearance of grain, or step-printed images. Short-term fashions pass through MTV's output as one promo influences others, a generic series of figurations and expressions mimicking each other, recycled with minimal variation. This is part of promos' extraordinary amoeba-like ability to ingest and reproduce other styles -- a parasitic relationship with a range of other cultural forms.

Most promos are post-produced on video for television transmission but they generally retain an aspiration to cinema, and all that it means, signified by a black border at the top and bottom of the frame -- a wider screen format connoting the idea of cinema. This disingenuously reflects the continued potency (narrative style, visual strength) that television seeks from cinema.

The problems for film makers working with pop music are also exacerbated by the constraints that follow from constructing an image track to work with pre-existent sound. It is a crucial formal parameter and changes the audio-visual power relation -- giving image to sound rather than sound to image. Prokofiev's historical collaboration with Eisenstein on *Alexander Nevsky* remains a distant memory but, despite their exaggerated claims and schematic representation of the sequences that they achieved, the sense remains that the collaboration between image and music was reciprocal and interactive. Eisenstein's brave and idiosyncratic diagrams proposed a whole new world of film music that sadly never had any significant effect on other production.⁽²⁾

This is a long way away from clumsy mime performed in front of a land- or city-scape some time after the musical event. The carefully torn jeans of city bands posing in country settings are as awkward and as specious as the accretion of decorative sepia images of rural Latin America by Tanita Tickaram (from Basingstoke) in *Twist in my Sobriety*.

A standardised visual vocabulary is the predictable result of a specific set of conditions of production. The industrial constraints within which promos work are indicated by a code phrase much used in the music and promo industry: "MTV friendly" -- stylish and showable but not too controversial. Successful promos have to be more broadly "tv friendly" to take their place in a variety of pop television formats within different national television frameworks.

The push to formula also reflects the real constraints of time and money -- the current budget range of most promos is from 10 to 40,000 and production is often governed by contractual stipulations relating to the use and shot size of images of the band or lead singer.⁽³⁾ Promos are frequently the main weapon deployed in the fabrication or repair of an image -- a blatant, sad example is the KLF (Kopyright Liberation Front) attempt to rejuvenate the decaying image of Tammy Wynette, the "first lady of Country music," by injecting some expropriated Rap in *Justified and Ancient*.

Performance, narrative and documentary are the three main visual components assembled in promos and the balance of these elements is often the site of a struggle about the image of the star. The pressure to centre everything on performance recalls the old cinematographer's adage to "shoot the money" (focus on the star) in any sequence. The record company wishes to manage and market a calculated image and some

promo contracts actually stipulate that the whole performance of the band or singer should be shot, twice, before any "arty stuff." The band is presented as a whole, but within the group an implicit hierarchy of players generally exists, this too is reflected in promos' visual structure. The considerable pressure for the visibility of the band from record company marketing managers and video commissioners is echoed by the bands themselves wanting to "see ourselves more" -- becoming more performance oriented as they become more established.

The construction of the condition of fame (*sic transit gloria mundi*) has a subsequent effect on the personality structure and functioning of the individual, displacing the "star" from the social and cultural context that made his or her original creative interaction with reality possible. Their lived experience suddenly becomes far removed from the quotidian experience of those who listen to their music. Ironically they become known as a "personality," worthy of ancillary media attention, at exactly the moment at which their extant personality structure has imploded.

A strange, paradoxical phenomena is Madonna's wry video made for MTV's 1991 anniversary. In it she, sophisticated, punning, self-destructive, addresses MTV, the site and support of her success, as an errant lover trapped in a dependent and symbiotic relationship: "I wanted to talk about us. I remember when we first met -- you didn't know who you were yet... when will you understand I'm a person not a thing? ... She's a freak... I'm a man and a woman. I'm your nightmare... I am big -- it's the videos that got smaller..." A powerful vulnerability caught in the hall of mirrors.⁽⁴⁾

Rather more typical, however, is a "theatrical" promo like the elaborately narrativised costume drama (with John Malkovitch) of Annie Lennox's *Walking on Broken Glass*, centring the star in the diffuse aura of Mozart. These mini-narratives parallel a tendency in recent advertisements to tell trivial little tales with high production values. The compulsive attraction of narrative distraction gives us a world, a persuasion based on causality and linearity that may or may not correspond to the weirdness of being human (to borrow a phrase from Iris Murdoch).⁽⁵⁾

Transmissions

Individual promos must be seen as part of the flow of transmission in which each three minute experience is glued together to induce a mood of listless passivity and distraction.⁽⁶⁾ Any theoretical illusions that fragmentary forms would inevitably produce an active and distanced viewer (in the Brechtian sense) were rapidly dispelled in the encounter with late twentieth century American television.

Apparently the average viewer tunes into MTV Europe for 16 - 18 minutes a day; this figure is quite high when compared with MTV viewing patterns in the US. We should also be aware of the context of most viewing -- MTV is deliberately used as a distraction, moving wallpaper inattentively watched while having a party, getting dressed in a hotel, working, making love...

There is a repeated image devaluation in this constant flow -- even the most potent representations, such as a nuclear explosion or a prisoner being put to death by electric chair, are thrown away promiscuously; thus AC/DC's *Heat Seeker* makes frivolous play with Cruise missiles and other aggressively disturbing imagery.⁽⁷⁾ Less dramatically, many promos incorporate social documentary elements in superficial reference to lived realities: the homeless in *The Other Side of Summer* by Elvis Costello or the Pathé archive film of immigrants arriving in Britain in the Fifties in UB 40's culturally colonial *Kingston Town*. The banality of these images all too vividly illustrates that signs are never fixed and are very easily depoliticised and emptied of meaning.

MTV's self-definition is extended by the consistent use of "art video" directors and animators in its own self-promotional clips. Apart from these inventive proclamations of corporate identity other, rather more surprising, things take place in the interstices of its signal. A genre of stings, described by the company as "pro-social campaigns," raises green issues, and an extraordinary series with the slogan "Books feed your head" has recently been made with the aim of encouraging reading. Something of this extrapolation of promo style towards forms of social engagement can be seen in Jon Klein and Mark Pellington's series of high energy, frenetic sampling half hour programmes *Buzz*, made for MTV and Channel Four in 1990. However, these remarkable and brave elements happen on a small-scale at the edge and quickly become part of the powerful flow of promo transmission.

On the other hand there are too many examples of the manipulation and realignment of sexuality: the first

cut of *Run from Love*, made by Steve Maclean for Jimmy Somerville, was considered "too gay" -- there were not enough girls at the singer's feet and too many boys could be seen dancing together. The director made minor modifications and it now exists in two versions: the official "MTV friendly" one and a second "raunchy version." *Read My Lips*, trying to deal with AIDS, was also considered "too gay" and was withdrawn from the *Red, Hot and Blue* show on MTV in America. In these, as in other examples, executives and managers project and impose an anachronistic middle aged homophobia on a younger audience.

After all the promo is exactly that: a promotion in the hands of the music business. It is aimed at a specific target: the 15 to 24 age group. The development of the business as a whole has historically been fuelled by the increased spending power of the young; from the Sixties young people have been caught in the circularity of a market that creates, reflects and therefore re-creates the desires of its consumers. The economy of consumption in popular culture is complex and dialectical. But naturally (read ideologically) the market presents itself as "responding to the free choice of the consumer," effacing and disavowing its own proactive role in the spiral of repetition and renewal central to pleasure production. In Guy Debord's formulation "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images."⁽⁸⁾

Evasive Actions

Occasionally one encounters the unexpectedly witty or ambitious amongst the dross: early silent films and newsreels are used to sustain a primeval feminism in Annie Lennox and Aretha Franklin's *Sisters (Are Doing It For Themselves)*, *Raumschiff Edelweiss* is a broad and amusing yodelling play on *Star Trek* and Genesis' *Jesus He Knows Me* exactly and sharply parodies television evangelism, the higher production budget for a big group leading, in this case, to effective satirical/political work...

Indie labels and less well-known bands tend to gravitate towards smaller, more inventive production companies which often counter the predominance of performance in most promos. An independently produced piece like *Are We Still Married?*, made for His Name is Alive by the Brothers Quay, exemplifies this in its entirely self-contained diegesis and its brilliant and strange black and white animation; exceptionally, there is no shot of the band in sight.

One can point to rather short lists of those that have been able to evade the pervasive constrictions and make significant work in this truncated terrain. John Maybury, Isaac Julien, Derek Jarman and David Larcher are some of the better known British independent film and video makers who have produced in this field (although the promo director is never labelled on the piece itself).

Derek Jarman's relation with the musical avant garde in pop is evident in the exquisite and aggressive *T.G. Psychic Rally in Heaven*, made with Throbbing Gristle (part of whom later became Psychic TV). His innovative image manipulation and refusal of rhythmical cutting is displayed in *The Queen is Dead* for the Smiths. The languid polysexual tenderness (recalling Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*) in the earlier *Witches Song* is part of a loose grouping of early promos made around Marianne Faithful's record *Broken English*. In *Emperor's New Clothes* John Maybury combines many different textures and flashes images of a candle circle and horses in the mist; but these are then relegated to a subliminal edge as the piece centres on grainy, black and white shots of Sinead O Connor's limpid face.⁽⁹⁾

Significantly these are film-makers whose main focus of work and achievement has been elsewhere. However this clutch of small-scale exceptions, the work of a very few creators trying to achieve significant form, has to be seen in the context of the dismal overall ratio of innovation to repetition.

Be Realistic -- Demand the Impossible

It is necessary to expect more from a culture which always takes its audience for granted. Practitioners and critics must develop a sharper combination of naivety and cunning, innocence and strategy. Careful discriminations and adequately complex analyses are needed to enter and navigate this deceptive terrain; originality, complexity and longevity may be the relevant starting points.

In both popular and analytical discourses the pop video tends to be met with either uncritical celebration or wholesale rejection. There are not many attempts to delineate or discriminate within the field.⁽¹⁰⁾ The problem of navigation here is exemplified by the familiar Adorno-esque distinction validating authentic/artistic expression and dismissing standardised, serial production.⁽¹¹⁾ This approach may be appropriate to a treatment of art videos as discrete art-like texts but makes less sense of the contextual and commercial use of

promos on television. The crucial term in the shift from an assessment of particular videos as art objects to larger-scale industrialised machinery is a conception of their audience and their reception.

Individual promos may be conceived and intended as part of the self-sufficient, insulated "artistic" context of their makers' other productions, but the conditions of their fabrication and reception take them somewhere else -- they become commodities. This article itself fluctuates between the hypothetical aesthetics and meaning of individual pieces, wrenched out of context, and their "normal" industrial functioning. It seeks to formulate an analysis which might link the formal properties of the filmic text to its social conditions of production and consumption. This is an uncertain relation for theories of the avant garde as much as for those of popular culture...

The promo is often celebrated by invoking the loose auspices of post-modernism, part of the readjustment of critical practices under this heading. But in this, as in other contexts, we should be more sceptical about po-mo and its self-proclaimed paradigm change. The artistic Modernism it wishes to transcend is itself made up of complex and dialectical counter moves: from Expressionism to Constructivism, Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism, and indeed Pop Art (which significantly prefigures po-mo in terms of much of its art practice). There are problems with the conflation of Modernism with an entirely rational/scientific approach, simply in order to dismiss both. This is a question of the extent to which it is possible for po-mo to play outside of Modernism, itself a diverse and hybrid term which may eventually be seen actually to include much of the contemporary epoch. This undercuts the present attempts to construct po-mo as an entirely new *weltanschauung* (albeit one which denies the possibility of unitary "meta-narratives").

Recent distracting debates about "posh" and "pop" are possible only in England with its myriad and debilitating intricacies of class division. "High" and "low" are social not aesthetic terms and cultural pleasure is to be found from the most popular to the most esoteric manifestations... The field of promo production is relevant and fascinating precisely in terms of the balance of types of work, the possibilities and problems of achieving different forms of aesthetic pleasure and political effect there.

The Unresolved Seventh

"Some people say that this music is simple, sentimental, unchallenging stuff that appeals to the largest number of viewers -- that's why we play it." A defiant MTV self-advert in between the promos is an indication of the self-confidence and power behind its representational regime and suggests both the invulnerability of the young and the intransigence of ageing marketing executives selling it back to them.

"Endless images / countless memories / forever"⁽¹²⁾

Notes

1. Cf Isaac Julien, "Queer Questions," *Sight and Sound*, September 1992.
2. Chris Garratt and Rod Stoneman, "Filmmusic," *Arnolfini Review*, January 1982.
3. Some indication of the production process is given, in comic strip form, in the catalogue of the *Irn-Bru Pop Video Exhibition*, Museum of the Moving Image (London, 1992).
4. Perhaps unsurprising for a musician who constantly reinvents her own image - recently, in advance of the publication of *Sex*, positioning her body as a generic parody of Sixties soft core in *Vanity Fair* (October 1992), recalling the work of Cindy Sherman.
5. Cf *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 1992.
6. "Distraction ... involves two or more objects and levels of attention and the copresence of two or more different, even contradictory, metapsychological effects." Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: the Freeway, the Mall, and Television." *Logics of Television*, (BFI/Indiana University Press, 1990).
7. In contrast, Derek Jarman uses newsreel of marching troops, nuclear war and militaristic imagery more consciously and carefully to build a forceful montage against war, death and fascism in *Broken English*, with

Marianne Faithful's plangent voice dismissing all "your old wars, cold wars..."

8. Thesis 4, *Society of the Spectacle* (Black and Red, Detroit 1970). The Situationist critique, produced twenty years before the realisation of an information based post-industrial society, is belatedly coming into focus with recent publications and exhibitions in Paris, London and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

9. "The images move so quickly that the brain doesn't learn to focus" - as Sinead O' Connor put it in a general denunciation of MTV in the magazine *Spin*, October 1992.

10. Cf "The Death of the Video Clip" by John Ellis in *What a Wonderful World*, ed. Poulter Hofstede, (1990); and "A Post-Modern Play of the Signifier? Advertising, Pastiche and Schizophrenia in Music Television" by E. Ann Kaplan in *Television in Transition*, ed. Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson, (BFI 1986).

11. Cf Simon Frith's seminal *Sound Effects. Youth, leisure, and the politics of rock'n'roll*, (1983).

12. Captions on MTV 1991 Anniversary tape.

Author Information

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