MUSIC VIDEO:
INDUSTRIAL PRODUCT,
CULTURAL FORM
BY DAVE LAING

‘Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?’ was the response of Hollywood producer Harry Warner to the news that sound had been successfully added to moving pictures. ‘Who the hell wants to see a record?’ has been the response of many audiophiles to the advent of music video in the past few years. Behind this attitude is a notion of the purity of a single-sense experience (hearing unalloyed by sight) which recalls the hostility shown to the sound film by many eminent critics and theorists of the silent cinema.

In the case of music, Alan Durant has pointed out how recent is the idea of it as purely an auditory experience: ‘Other than in the twentieth century on radio and disc, music has been most widely experienced in forms of relationship with a pleasure of seeing, and so radio and records were quite fundamental innovations as regards listening....’ Historically, music video can be understood not so much as an innovation but as a return to the main tradition of musical experience.

Whether or not music video, like talking pictures, will brush aside the protests of its critics is not the concern of this article. Nevertheless, two points which indicate the likelihood of its longevity can be made here. The first is that even popular recorded music has never had a pristine existence as pure sound. A visual component has always been in evidence, however faintly. The iconography of the star image, imagined or before the listener on the album sleeve, was one source. Another was the visual connotations of certain musical signifiers, such as pizzicato strings suggesting rain or tears. Like the sound effects or the live music that invariably accompanied silent films, these aspects to some degree prefigured the union of recorded sound and vision.

Secondly, music video has appeared at a time when fundamental changes are being worked through at both the economic and technological levels in the sphere of recorded music. Further, music video can be seen to embody in its evolution the sometimes contradictory responses of the various interests in the music industry to those changes. This article is intended to locate music video as a putative cultural form within the development of both audio and video production, and to describe its present economic position as part of the audio-visual industries as a whole.

The novelty of music video means that few statistics on the size of the field are available. One estimate is that in 1984, the total outlay on music video production in the United Kingdom came to £12 million.2 This was spent on perhaps 800 or so short productions, each forming the visiontrack to a single song or musical piece. Estimates of domestic production in other European countries tended to reflect the international balance of forces in the popular music field. The French and German output was somewhere over 100 each, the Netherlands produced 35 and Norway and Spain only a handful.

An estimated 1500 to 2000 music videos were produced in the United States in 1984, and that country now has several national and over a dozen local cable television channels exclusively devoted to music video running 24 hours a day. The first of these to be established, MTV (Music Television) is a joint venture between American Express and Warner Communications. Its most

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1 Alan Durant, Conditions of Music, London, Macmillan 1984, p 89.
2 Music Week, October 6, 1984, p 14.
recent figures, covering the first nine months of 1984, saw an increase in advertising revenue of 200% compared to the same period of 1983. That income was 49.6 million dollars, with a reported profit for MTV of 14 million dollars.

In Britain, there are now some 300 'long-form' music videotapes available to buy or rent. These are programmes with running times of anything above the average audio album length of 40 minutes. They account for some 5% of the available catalogue of prerecorded videocassettes. Of the 300, over half are simply films of live concerts and only about 18% can be said to be 'original' long-form videos. The remainder consist of compilations of the short one-song music videos or re-releases of television shows.

Opinion on the industrial and commercial future of music video is divided. While one US forecast predicted that it would account for 25% of the cassettes bought or rented for home viewing within a few years, others have pointed to the low sales figures for 'long-form' programmes so far. For, while Making Michael Jackson's Thriller has now sold over 750,000 copies worldwide, most music videos are in the 30,000 or below bracket.

The more pessimistic predictions, however, tend to reflect the confused manner in which music video has been developed until now, rather than any inherent limitations of the form. For music video, even more than the audio recording industry's current state-of-the-art playback technology, the compact disc, represents a new phase of development for sound recording as a cultural form.

To justify that claim, it is necessary to recapitulate the history of sound recording. As a cultural industry, it took shape in the closing years of the nineteenth century, on the model of so many industries of that period. Often called 'mass production', this—as Raymond Williams has argued—should more precisely be termed 'multiple serial production'. Like the book and newspaper industries of the period, the record industry was engaged in the manufacture and the marketing of large numbers of identical commodities for sale to individuals for domestic consumption. In this perspective, the compact disc (despite its undoubted technical improvements) represents the latest stage in the sound recording industry's attempt to maintain itself as primarily a 'multiple serial production' manufacturing industry.

The term 'primarily' is used here because since the '20s sound recordings have been disseminated and consumed in other ways than as retail commodities. Various new uses of recorded music have appeared alongside and even in direct competition with the simple cash-nexus of buying and selling black discs.

The first of these, in the 1920s, was radio broadcasting. The wireless medium found in recorded music an ideal source of programme material. And with the arrival of the Depression at the end of the decade, sales of radio sets were maintained while sales of discs dropped—dramatically in the USA and considerably in Europe. Partly as a result, composers, record companies and performers fought to establish the right of payment for the broadcasting and other public performances of recordings. The results were uneven: in some countries, only composers gained an income from broadcasting, while in others that income was shared with one or both of the other copyright owners.

Income from broadcasting has become an important part of music industry economics: in 1983, United Kingdom payments from radio and TV for the right to use recorded music totalled over £7 million. There is, however, another new use of music which is arguably more important than broadcasting, from which the copyright owners in most countries obtain no income at all. This is home taping, or private copying.

The technology which enables such copying to take place was first of all used in the production of studio recordings. The development of magnetic tape both enhanced the quality and fidelity of recorded sound and allowed for the detailed editing of recordings. Previously, all sound recordings had been made in uninterruptable takes, so that the best overall take would be chosen for release. Now, elements from different performances could be edited together on tape.

When cassette tapes replaced reel-to-reel formats and cassette recorders and players were marketed as consumer goods in the 1960s, this new medium of home entertainment allowed consumers to acquire copies of sound recordings without going through (and paying at) retail outlets. Records could now be copied directly and quickly onto tape without serious loss of quality.

In the UK, home taping is in breach of copyright law, although that law is clearly
unenforceable. After campaigning against private copying ('Home Taping Is Killing Music'), music industry organisations have now adopted the position that, like broadcasting, home taping must be accepted as another established use of copyright material. Therefore, they argue that it should also be paid for, through a royalty levied on recording hardware and on blank cassette tapes.

But such has been the rate of innovation in what might be called domestic entertainment modes that no sooner had the sound recording industry arrived at a strategy towards audio taping, then a new mode appeared to threaten the position of recorded music within popular consumer culture.

That position had in any case not been central since the '50s and the arrival of television. TV had directly displaced radio as a cultural form, and partially displaced the record player. The latter, however, still retained two advantages, one negative and one positive. Negatively, it was not inevitably a 'family' medium. Television had been established in both the United States and Europe as a cultural medium aimed at a single, monolithic audience, whose common denominator was that mythic unit, the 'family'. With the bulk of its programming geared to address and to position viewers as unified families, it was almost guaranteed to antagonise many adolescents whose impulse was to stress the differences between themselves and their parents.

The record player was the medium through which such listeners could slip out of a family role, and, in the '50s, into rock and roll. It seemed to provide the listener with a control not available to the television viewer. That listener could determine the programming instead of being subject to the scheduling of broadcasting organisations.

From this perspective, the swift growth in the numbers of videocassette recorders in Europe (and now the United States) can be seen to be due to something more than its technological novelty or the sophistication of advertising campaigns. The additional element lies in the VCR's combining of elements previously found in either television or in the record or audio-cassette player. Linked to TV by its use of the small screen and of the audio-visual mode, the VCR nevertheless is 'like' the cassette recorder in its ability to offer choice and control. It can tape pre-recorded or broadcast material and play it back as well as play commercially marketed recorded material distributed through retail networks. From the point of view of the evolution of domestic entertainment, then, home video has both reiterated and gone beyond key elements of pre-existing systems.

As video cassette recorders were sold and rented in greater numbers and sales of blank tapes took off, the income of the music industry dropped. Obviously this was not the only cause of that decline in the late '70s: the acceleration in home audio taping and the general economic depression played their part. But there was a significant resemblance to the events of the first great Depression. In the late '20s, radio thrived at the expense of records because it was a medium that did not require the frequent outlay of fairly large amounts of cash. The position of video as it developed as a domestic entertainment medium—its basis in rental and in broadcasting (through so-called time-shifting) and the absurdly low charge for film rental—was similar.

One reason for the coming of music video, then, was perhaps a defensive move by the sound recording industry, to get in on this new competitor for consumer attention. But there is another basis for the rendezvous of recorded music with film and video. For at least three decades, the dominant mode of popular music has been the studio recording, however it has been disseminated or distributed. The hegemony of the recording has been achieved at the expense of the live performance to the extent that audiences for rock music frequently attend concerts expecting to hear the sound of the artists' recordings reproduced in a live setting. Reciprocally, concert tours are often organised to coincide with the release of albums, as much as advertisements for recordings as events in their own right.

As reviewers have been quick to recognise, there is at an aesthetic level something paradoxical or self-defeating in this attempt to recreate a recorded sound in a live context, rather like Borges' tale of Pierre Menard, who devoted his life to (re-) writing Don Quixote in exactly the same words as Cervantes'. Such rock aesthetes of course are perhaps too captivated by the notions of 'live' and 'spontaneous', whereas the ticket-buying fans attend mainly to savour the performance-image of the musicians. Nevertheless, when this amalgam of studio
sound and live performance is transferred to television, the mismatch is very evident, notably in the practice of 'lip-synching'.

This is the form of miming carried out by artists on hit parade programmes like the BBC's Top Of The Pops, where artists 'perform' their recordings. At best, this practice gives scope for transgressive behaviour when musicians refuse to conform and fail to lip-synch or 'play' their instruments in the right places.

To import terms from other cultural forms, what results is a clash between the naturalistic visuals (the image of the live performance) and the constructed character of studio-produced sound. As if in recognition of this, the televisual practice developed of matching sound recordings with equally constructed visuals. Many of these visual tracks (like those of the Beatles' singles) featured the artists concerned—though not only (or at all) as live performers—but others attached quite other visual material. The BBC 2 rock programme, The Old Grey Whistle Test, began to add extracts from cartoon or silent comedy films to album tracks. These were among the original forms of music video.

Put like that, the arrival of music video can be seen as a kind of necessary evolution of cultural forms, as, with hindsight, some historians have made the arrival of the talkies in the cinema to have been. In the case of music video, the story is of discovery of a fully appropriate visual mode to complement an existing and varied aural one.

The real history of music video, however, does not have the simplicity of such a scenario. The most important fact of that history is that all involved in music video—performers, directors, record companies, broadcasters—could not for a long while see it as in any sense autonomous. Music videos were instead seen as (and called) promotional videos, as pictures to sell records. This had three important consequences: first, the visuals were inevitably subordinated to the soundtrack, which they were there to sell; second, music video as a medium for marketing immediately inherited an aesthetic and a set of techniques from the pre-existing and highly developed form of television commercials; finally, the promotional status of the videos meant that they were initially provided free to broadcasters by the record companies, so that performers, composers and producers were unable to gain income from them as they did from the broadcasting of sound recordings.

All these consequences are interlinked, and for music video to develop its potential as a cultural form in its own right, all will have to be overcome or superseded. Here, however, I will deal only with the third, the economic issue.

The first point at which money changed hands for music video followed the arrival of a new medium for its transmission—a specialist music channel on cable television in the USA. MTV (Music Television) was a joint venture of Warner Communications and American Express, set up in 1981. Currently it supplies a 24 hour service to cable operators whose combined subscriber lists amount to over ten million. In December 1984, MTV saw off the challenge from CMC (Cable Music Channel), a project of Ted Turner, pioneer of 24 hour cable news channels in America. CMC folded after only a few weeks.

The new technologies of satellite and cable broadcasting have opened up the possibility of similar specialised programming for sports, movies and news. As if to emphasise how much this undermines the traditional family orientation of network television, there is even in America a cable service devoted to 'programmes the whole family can watch together': the Disney Channel. For music, MTV and similar projects have enabled broadcast TV to emulate both sound recordings and music video in escaping from the monolithic positioning of a single global audience.

But there was one precedent for MTV within broadcasting itself: the all-music radio stations which had flourished in the period following the eclipse of generic radio programming by family-orientated television. From radio, MTV borrowed the playlist concept, by which music videos are classified into six groups, a process which determines how many times they are programmed each week. MTV also has its V-Js, following radio's disc-jockeys.

The use of the radio model had a vital economic consequence. In the USA radio stations using records pay only the composers' organisations for the right to programme them. Performers and producers receive nothing. This effectively fixed the economic relation between music video producers and television stations. The videos were free programming, for which the producers were to expect only increased sound recording sales as recompense.

In order to develop as a cultural form, any practice needs to have a certain economic
autonomy. While it remains dependent or parasitic on something else, it remains limited, doomed to a one-dimensional existence. The clearest example in the audio-visual field is the advertising film. Equally important is the fact that the prominence given to the promotional role in music video effectively prevents performers, composers and video directors from deriving income from music video commensurate with the success of the work. The record company as music video producer can argue that this is a promotional tool, as much as a magazine advertisement for which no contributor receives royalties.

Nevertheless, the sheer cost of making music videos meant that even the producers’ commitment to the promotional role was less than wholehearted. As had happened previously with radio, it was clear that music video was a popular source of programming which enabled the TV channels to attract advertising and make profits.

MTV itself eventually started to make payments to record companies, though not on a pay-for-use basis. Instead the formula was that of an ‘exclusivity pact’. Under this, the record companies continued to supply music videos free of charge, but in return for a fee from MTV, they guaranteed that channel the exclusive use of certain films for periods of up to 30 days.

Other music channels, however, have adopted payment for use systems. The shortlived CMC operated in this way, as do Music Box and the Sky Channel in Europe. These are two UK-based programmers, owned respectively by a consortium including Thorn-EMI and Virgin, and by Rupert Murdoch. Using satellite transmissions, they supply programmes to cable systems in at least nine European countries.

The economic ‘autonomy’ of music video has also been advanced by the growing release of pre-recorded cassettes for sale or rental of collections of video singles by various artists or by individual groups, as well as a few video releases based on whole albums. The most ambitious to date is Barry Gibb’s Now, Voyager, produced by PolyGram Music Video (PMV) with a budget of over a million dollars.

Insofar as music video develops an economic autonomy comparable with that of recorded music or video as such, the current division of income from music video will undoubtedly change. At present, record companies tend to retain a monopoly of copyright, with the other participants—video production companies, musicians, actors, composers—getting either a fee or nothing at all. Already, in some countries, the composers have negotiated a royalty rate for music video, while the Musicians Union in the UK has a session fee agreement with the record industry and the US Screen Actors Guild has announced its intention of seeking improved rates for music video work. But the most crucial future role may well be that of the video director, whose current relationship to his or her product is equivalent to that of the advertising film director. There may soon be a shift towards a status similar to that of a record producer, a number of whom receive royalties on album sales.

The final issue to consider in this survey of the music video field is the role of independent production within it. Is there a space for independents in a sphere apparently dominated by the needs and priorities of market-orientated major record companies?

Although it may seem heretical to suggest it, music video seems to be an example of a situation where initiatives taken by major institutions in a cultural industry have the effect of opening up a space for independent activity. The compact disc is another instance where research expenditure by Japanese and European multinationals has produced a technology which is increasingly used by small record companies, particularly those specialising in classical music.

In the case of music video, the majors have established a demand from broadcasters and from consumers which independent musicians and film-makers can take advantage of. In addition, music video should be seen as a component of any independent activity in the cable broadcasting field. In fact, the role of such video work was discussed in some depth in the report on the future of local media commissioned by the Greater London Council and Sheffield City Council in 1983.

Perhaps the main problem to be faced by independent music video producers in gaining access to broadcast television will be the familiar one of ‘professional’ production values, the lack of which has often been used as a reason to bar

3 Cable: Report on GLC/Sheffield City Council Hearings, July 1983.
independent work from the screen in the past. Here, though, video can learn from music. For much of the punk rock movement was about the rejection of professionalism and over-elaborate and highly-expensive production methods. In its turn, music video may have its punk revolution.

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