

2. Underground Ideology and Aesthetic Sensibilities

THE RECONCILIATION OF ROCK AND TV

The Displacement of Rock

In theory, the concept of music television should have been a failure. Traditionally, the relationship between rock and television was rather cool (ie cold), even hostile. Rock 'n' roll TV (rock being synonymous with hip) was a contradiction in terms. This predicament could have seriously affected MTV's credibility and prospects, and to some extent explains the music industry's initial scepticism towards it. Rock's antagonism to the medium was partly due to the low technological quality of sound and vision and partly due to television's inability to address youth beyond a domestic context. In contrast, rock was about rebelling against anything parental. Live music (the guitar, the voice, the drums), as well as the event of the gig itself and an anti-establishment attitude, was central to the authentic experience of being part of the rock community. Rock 'n' rollers shared such currency among their peer group, but not with outsiders and certainly not with the mainstream, which included television. Rock fans were not pop fans – full stop. Pop was another word for disco in the late 1970s (the decade preceding MTV), which crossed over from the gay and black underground into the mainstream. Then, a rock fan would never have confessed to any partiality to disco. A macho hetero guy who admitted to liking disco – the antithesis of cock rock – would have been committing social suicide. Equally, the idea of a gay rock star was inconceivable for mainstream rock fans (even with a band called Queen). Nowadays, it is perfectly acceptable – even desirable – to have eclectic musical tastes; a legacy of the 1990s, and we shall trace how that shift occurred.

Rock's self-conscious elitism, cultivated through the notion of 'authenticity', was still very much engrained among fans and the music industry when MTV began.²⁶ What MTV managed to do on both sides of the Atlantic, albeit under different sets of circumstances, was to adopt elements of the traditional rock credo in order to set it apart from the established TV norms, as well as associate with new subcultures to embrace a fresh ideology that gave the channel its hip kudos. MTV became relevant to fans not just because it responded to demographic shifts in music consumption, but also because it responded to the ideological shift that had occurred throughout the 1980s, which would redefine hip as something separate from rock. Ultimately, MTV Europe would displace the rock ideology.

This is how it goes...

[...]

The Rise of Irony

The late 1980s saw the ascendancy of house music with 1987 being the landmark year of the ‘new [British] summer of love’. I shall use the expression ‘dance cultures’ as a generic term for the subcultural strand of the 1980s that crossed over into the mainstream and subsequently defined the style and communication industries of the 1990s.²⁹ As we are following the co-optation of the subculture rather than its essence, ‘dance cultures’ is an appropriate term. Matthew Collin explains how dance cultures came to be the accepted terminology: ‘What was first called “acid house” and then the “rave scene” in the late ’80s had turned into a multi-million-pound leisure industry known as “dance culture”; a far less mutinous and outlandish phenomenon [than the underground rave parties].’³⁰ Dance cultures is therefore the umbrella term for the various rave subcultures, building on punk’s DIY legacy both as a subcultural phenomenon and a globally co-opted music genre.

Parallel to dance cultures, there was hip hop. As a subculture, hip hop dates back to the late 1970s, like punk. Unlike punk, it did not fully cross over into the mainstream until the late 1980s, arguably because of racism embedded in the music industry and society as a whole. As with house, the landmark year that kickstarted the global conquest of rap music was 1987, with the help of MTV Europe, as I shall shortly discuss. The division between dance cultures and hip hop is not as clear-cut as it may appear. Though I didn’t personally experience the British summer of love in 1987 or any of the underground rave parties of the late 1980s, it is clear from speaking to friends who were there and from reading books that myriad music genres was played at the same rave, including (acid) house, techno, garage, rare grooves and electro (essentially the precursor of what would be called rap). Certainly, with the Hoxton underground parties of the 1990s (pre Cool Britannia), this was the case. This openness to exploration across genres in select underground clubs would be a prerequisite for their future cross-fusion.

One of the most important lessons of punk, which rebelled against both the political establishment and bloated rock-star elitism, was that anyone could have a go. You could make your own music without having to be a great artiste. You could

make your own clothes without being a designer; creativity was flying in the face of haute couture. You could have your own distribution network to sell your stuff and fanzines to promote it, both of which represented giving two fingers to the established channels. This entrepreneurial attitude was embraced wholeheartedly. By the late 1980s, the barriers to entry to the creative industries were even lower than when punk emerged. Technologies in music-making and developments such as desktop publishing further democratised production. The new subcultures rebelled against the establishment, but not necessarily by subverting the dominant culture. Instead, they positioned themselves as an alternative to the mainstream. The two main strategies in maintaining an underground sensibility were a focus on the visual (reinforced with technology) and the use of irony. Adopting an ironic tone (parodying, ridiculing, self-mocking) became the means by which this alternative identity was expressed and asserted against rock's ideology of authenticity.

Specifically in the context of dance cultures, videos were considered the appropriate visual accompaniment to recorded music.³¹ Dance cultures were driven by the belief that the use of animated or computer-generated graphics protected the 'authentic' aura of the artist, who refused to make a personal appearance. The cult of the (superstar) DJ would come later, once the scene had sold out. Originally, dance music was impersonal, an antithesis to the pop or rock star and guitar hero. To make a music video was desirable because its stylistic practices were valued as a means by which music could be televised while preserving autonomy, whereas music shows with live audiences were no longer acceptable. If you had to appear on mainstream television, then there were two basic strategies for preserving an underground sensibility: one was disguise (again, a hood, and sunglasses maybe) and the other was being ironic. Through mocking your own appearance on TV, you were effectively immunising yourself against the show's naffness. This is why cool young people across Europe deserted traditional 'youth' television programmes in favour of those with high video content, of which there were few. This is what Justin from MTV – pretty much on behalf of Generation X – was talking about when quoted earlier.

As for seeing the music video as a partner in the creation and dissemination of rap music, its significance became paramount because rap was frozen out of mainstream television and radio. Its association with poor, black, inner-city youth meant that advertiser-funded services refused to play it. Bear in mind that back in the 1980s, rap was above all perceived as the voice of the young black male. As such,

it represented a vivid, contentious cultural symbol. In this context of alienation, parody was a creative means of expression. The use of parody provided a means of retaliation against the demeaning stereotype that young black men had grown up with. It often defined the self as sexually insatiable but, as *New York Times* writer Jon Pareles observed, ‘...not all rap machismo should be taken entirely at face value. Like other black literary and oral traditions, rap lyrics also involve double-entendre, allegory and parody. Some rap machismo can be a metaphor for pride or political empowerment; it can be a shared joke.’³² Sexual conquest was not the only subject of the satirical rap of this era. Ghetto conditions, drugs and the pain of daily life were also often stressed with humorous candour, especially by Biz Markie, arguably the greatest comedy rapper to date. It gave people a voice in a system that otherwise did not want to know. Here again, MTV became the first ‘virtual’ home of rap, and fans could not get enough of it.

In *Hip: the History*, John Leland rightly says that the 1980s subcultures did not so much oppose mass culture as commandeer its resources by using brand logos to build their own alternative networks. Through manipulating mass culture and its imagery by removing it from its original context and holding it up for ridicule, they could establish their own place in the world. Ironically, it was their rejection of mass culture that pandered to the new wave of entrepreneurs, not least MTV, just as the rebellious idioms of the 1960s counterculture had pandered to the newly anti-conformist Madison Avenue crowd. Leland goes on to argue that the essence of the post-punk DIY cultures was not the product, but their aesthetic sensibilities. Right on! This sums up MTV perfectly, which did not produce anything either. All MTV needed to do was to adopt the subcultural mentality to establish itself as a business at the vanguard. By speaking the language of anti-rockist subcultures, MTV could build its fan-base by positioning itself as a member of the peer group, as one of us, against them – the invisible mainstream (for MTV, the mainstream actually *was* rock). Consequently, MTV’s environment would become the epitome of cool.

The displacement of rock’s ideology of authenticity (which occurred organically among subcultures) spearheaded by MTV Europe happened gradually, not least because rock’s elitism was a potent form of identification. With a nod to tradition, MTV sported a rock *attitude* to set itself against conventional television. Its central imperative was not just to be hip, but to be seen to be hip in constantly new ways – an ideology drawn directly from rock culture. MTV broke a lot of unspoken broadcasting rules by developing a non-cerebral approach to programming that

relied on mood. In the studio, wobbly camera-work, bad lighting and anything else that would not normally be tolerated on television was okay on MTV. To charm its viewers and incite loyalty, MTV introduced ideas such as competitions to meet the stars or have a peep 'behind the scenes', or getting stars to record drop-ins ('Hi! I'm such-and-such and you're watching MTV!'), all of which was groundbreaking at the time and contributed to MTV's wacky image.

In true rock style, MTV VJs were encouraged to cultivate a casual attitude. MTV appeared unscripted. Fluffed lines and mistakes were not edited out. VJ links were recorded as if they were live, which further emphasised the sense of intimacy for the viewer. Ideologically, VJs were not stars (though following MTV's success, some VJs would start exhibiting a bit of diva-like off-screen behaviour) but rather the boy or girl next door. The only difference between them and the 'ordinary' viewer was that they were peer leaders, recruited for their street kudos. VJs from all over Europe often came from pirate radio or would have some other authentic...