

Reinventing Sound

Reinventing Sound:

Music and Audiovisual Culture

Edited by

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PREFACE

REINVENTING SOUND: MUSIC AND AUDIOVISUAL CULTURE (THE CULTURAL STUDIES CONNECTION)

DAVID WALTON

PRESIDENT OF IBACS, UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA

As president of the Iberian Association of Cultural Studies (IBACS) it is a great pleasure to see Enrique Encabo's collection of essays in print. The reasons for this are not only to do with seeing a colleague bring to fruition a well thought out and innovative book but also to do with the particular geographical space in which this has been accomplished. When a number of colleagues and I began to promote the area of cultural studies in Spain in 1995 (with the first Culture and Power conference in the Autonomous University in Barcelona) there was very little academic exploration of popular cultural forms in the Spanish university system. Since 1995 we have organised regular conferences, published books and articles and incorporated cultural studies courses into our teaching.¹

However, cultural studies, as Clifford Geertz suggested,² is a "blurred genre" which has meant that much has been presented under its banner. This is especially true in the Spanish context where there are no departments of cultural studies as such, something which has resulted in the area being particularly wide-ranging. In asserting this I am not arguing that this "blurred", inter- (or multi-) disciplinary character is, in itself, a weakness—as I have stated elsewhere, its variety, flexibility and sense of openness may be seen as its greatest strength, and it is something that characterizes "cultural studies" in many parts of the world.³

It is this heterogeneous character that has resulted in this prologue and my connections with the MUCA (Música y Cultura Audiovisual) group of international scholars who have written the chapters that make up this book. That is to say, given the blurred lines and interdisciplinary crossover between many areas there is much in this collection of essays that is of

interest not only to those working in musicology and the more specialized formal aspects of music and audiovisual phenomena but those working in areas like cultural studies (and related areas like Media Studies). For example, the authors who have contributed to this book discuss themes which would easily sit comfortably in a volume dedicated to the area in which I work. Examples include analyses of popular music and film, live performance, promotional activities (including self-promotion), ads, video, consumption habits and reception, new media technologies, social media and “transmedia”, audience studies, postproduction, and the role of fans and constructions of the self. Furthermore, some of the approaches draw on strategies and methods which are very common to cultural studies’ approaches like semiotics, and many of the contributions are very self-reflexive in terms of theory and show an awareness of the socio-political circumstances of the phenomena under discussion.

Of course, this short list does not capture the full scope of the essays collected here for they also range over an impressive range of subjects from how music relates to popular and “art” film and video to rock music, the music of J. S. Bach, opera and beyond. In short, it is my belief that readers will find a minefield of stimulating reflections in a book which deserves a place on the bookshelves of scholars working in diverse areas of study. It is also a symbol of how scholars in Spain have been widening the scope of academic study to a point where the situation has changed very substantially since 1995 when cultural studies was hardly known on the peninsula. I hope these preliminary remarks will help readers appreciate what this collection of essays has to offer and understand why, a non-specialist in the field, like me has been asked to write this prologue. Finally, I would like to emphasize that I feel that this contribution is a real credit to the hard work put in by the organizers of MUCA and particularly to the book’s editor, Enrique Encabo.

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Notes

¹ For the identity of cultural studies in Spain and what it should be, and what it might become see Hand and Cornut-Gentile, *Culture and Power*; Cornut-Gentile, *Culture and Power* and "Cultural Studies or the Study of British Culture(s)"; Jordan, "Where is Cultural Studies Today?"; Martín, "Cultural Studies and English departments"; Walton, *Culture and Power*. Anyone interested in IBACS should consult its webpage: <http://www.cultureandpower.org>

² Geertz, *Local Knowledge*.

³ Walton, *Culture and Power*.

PART I:
NEW MEDIA, NEW AUDIENCES

CHAPTER ONE

POPULAR MUSIC
AND TRANSMEDIA AESTHETICS:
ON THE CONCEPTUAL RELATION OF SOUND,
AUDIO-VISION AND LIVE PERFORMANCE

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What I always found striking about popular music—as both a fan and researcher—is the fact that its artists need to make a significant appearance, over and over again, in a multitude of medial settings. This is without any doubt a delicate task. Take the release of an album, for instance: as it is known, an album is very much about creating a distinct musical sound texture. But not only that: also a suitable cover needs to be designed; singles are taken from the record, which, in turn, comprehend a further set of visual representations; parallel to this a website is being created (for some time web activity also concerns social network sites); another task is to produce video clips and to promote the music on TV; and, eventually, the artists go on tour and play festival gigs. With this in mind, the current practice of producing and receiving popular music can be best described as a process of articulating and experiencing artistic self-conceptions within alternating media types. In other words: making a meaningful appearance in different media settings somehow seems to represent the norm within popular music culture.

What is “Transmedia”?

Writing about popular music from a media theoretical point of view is linked to general assumptions concerning its analysis. Since the beginnings of popular music studies researchers were confronted with the question of what is meaningful about this kind of music and how its artefacts can be analyzed in an adequate manner. Some paid increased

attention to the social significance of music, concentrating on the analysis of listening habits and symbolic orders, whereas others marked melodic shapes, harmonic structures or groove patterns as particularly relevant. Taking all the different approaches into account, what seems central to the understanding of pop and rock music is that it covers a wide range of artistic phenomena and social functions. Since the early days of rock 'n' roll popular music was accompanied by a manifest coupling of musicians and their audiences (which is, to some extent, already the case with swing music and other jazz genres in the first half of the twentieth century, but, nevertheless, with the rise of youth counter culture a "new" discourse between artists and audiences is established).¹ From this coupling, pop and rock gained its social vitality and formative power. This implies that popular music, as we know it today, is a rather complex matter. The listener becomes recognizable via music; with the help of music he or she appears as a social subject. At the same time, this reveals that popular music has never been solely about the art of sound production. In fact, it makes those who produce the sounds while being engaged in all sorts of expressive actions stand out.

Hence, the question arises how popular music can be best understood as a stimulus constellation that affects people in multiple ways. At this point the concept of technical mediation comes into play. In a sense one could claim that modern popular music took shape in the form of records, TV and radio programs, music films and so forth. Hereof, it is important to note that technical mediation as well as the manipulation of musical events that goes hand in hand with it are not restricted to mass media; it is also a relevant feature of live performances, which mainly concerns the use of the microphone, the PA set-up, audio-visual media and the stage apparatus as a whole.² In light of the multiple options and standards of music-based media production it seems desirable to analyze popular music as a matter of how musicians (and, of course, all the other parties involved in the production process) succeed in creating a distinct product that attracts the biggest possible audience.

The history of popular music reveals that there have always been musicians who urged to go beyond the mere self-presentation in the media. Once a particular topic or motif is brought into focus, a variety of links and cross-references emerge within the work of a musician or a band. Musical sound, audio-vision and performance are brought into effect in a sequence of mutually dependent events. Consequently, producing music becomes tied to a conceptual framework. Such practices challenge not least the notion of popular music as being created out of a recording, which means: primarily being determined by sonic qualities.³ The term

transmedia addresses this specific reality of cultural production (the German equivalent is “Transmedialität”; the literal translation “transmediality” is not common in the English speaking world, therefore I will drop it). Following media theorist Irina Rajewsky transmedia/“Transmedialität” refers to the occurrence of a specific subject, aesthetics or discourse within various media types, without it being necessary or possible to identify a particular source medium.⁴ In other words: there is no piece of work that inheres in the status of the original. All manifestations of transmedia aesthetics share the same level of authenticity (or inauthenticity, if you like).

Rajewsky uses the term in line with the concepts of intramedia/“Intramedialität” and intermedia/“Intermedialität.” What the three terms have in common is that they address the hybridization of media production. Intramedia refers to media phenomena that involve only one medium (e.g. literature), in which textual references (e.g. text-text-references) are being conveyed.⁵ The concept of intermedia/“Intermedialität”, in turn, addresses hybrid forms that include at least two media types.⁶ Both terms are just as important for the analysis of the artifacts of popular culture as the concept of transmedia. But the latter has the advantage that musical phenomena are not reduced to the aspects of media combination or media reference. Music can be analyzed as a process of aesthetic production by *using* different media forms. As indicated above, the artists and their creative staff are forced to renegotiate their appearance as music making persons against the backdrop of media diversity. Analyzing popular music needs to recognize both the dynamics of artistic production in the course of time and in the context of alternating media types. The term transmedia can play an important role concerning this task, since the identification of special characteristics within a given case is not restricted to the sphere of musical sounds and structures, rather the overall phenomenological spectrum of popular music, including gesture, (moving) image or fashion, is factored in. It is very likely that this perspective captures the realities of popular music fans. The para-social relationships of fans with “their” music support the idea that the attractions of popular music need to be scrutinized in a holistic manner.⁷

Transmedia aesthetics in practice: Three case studies

By means of three examples I will illustrate how transmedia aesthetics comes into being and which artistic agenda is at the basis of it. In so doing, an overview of different periods of modern popular music shall be given.

1. The man-machine: Kraftwerk

The German exponents of electronic pop music Kraftwerk play a pioneering role in regards to the subject matter. Just recently, the band has entered the cathedrals of contemporary high culture, such as the MoMA, Tate Modern and the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The fact that their work is presented in museums of fine arts somehow gives evidence to the fact that it must contain aesthetic qualities that exceed the art of sound production. Founded in 1970 by Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider, Kraftwerk, in the first place, delved into endless improvisations, using typical rock instruments. Therefore they became part of a German rock movement that was subsequently labeled by British journalists as Krautrock. But already in the mid-seventies things changed quite significantly. Kraftwerk swapped their rock instruments with synthesizers and self-built electronic drums. The band wanted to revive a specific German tradition concerning the world of art and design—a tradition that was disrupted by the hypertrophic neoclassicism of National Socialism. One major reference was the Bauhaus philosophy, which, as a core element, conveyed the idea of combining art, architecture and technology. Thus, the band's work would develop a very strong visual appeal.⁸ The imagery being used follows a sober-minded, minimalistic approach, which includes a little bit of humor and irony (Kraftwerk overly accentuate the cliché of the decent and slightly technocratic male German citizen).

But despite this ironic element the band truly reflects upon the benefits and risks of technological progress and the relationship of men and machinery. Their vision is the man-machine, an entity whose creative output is based on mutual dependence. This is not only expressed with the help of album titles (“Autobahn”, “Radio-aktivität”, “Trans Europa Express”), covers and lyrics but it's also in the music. One of the most widespread misconceptions concerning Kraftwerk is that the music is actually *made* by machines, in particular drum machines, sequencers or computers. But that's not the fact: at least until the early 1980s most of the instrumental parts were performed in the studio, although programming tools were already available at the time.⁹ This artistic approach results in a refined and crisp sound that still can be associated with the performance of a band. The energetic, physically stimulating sound of electronic dance music would develop at a later time, with exactly those programming tools playing an essential role.

On stage, Kraftwerk's sonic identity is transformed into aesthetics of technological functionality, as I would call it. For instance, the stage from their 1981 *Computerwelt* tour looked like a control room of a factory or a

power plant, and, furthermore, a set of dummies was part of the show—they served as the materialization of “the robots” which the band addressed in the song of the same name. In the recent performances at Neue Nationalgalerie, the robots were again called into action, now they completely replaced the musicians, at least for one song (which is a regular feature of Kraftwerk concerts since the 1990s). Another interesting point concerning the latest stage set-up is that the equipment is reduced to table-like stands, and it is not clear what is actually inside of it (keyboards, computers, or sequencers?). So instead of four musicians singing and playing instruments the audience experiences four male persons standing almost motionless in front of four toolbars. Watching the performance then almost makes the beholder feel like as if he or she experiences somebody’s everyday work routine. Also the video screen in the background (displaying 3D visuals) is bound to the idea of functional minimalism. In present days it is a widespread practice—at least in the pop mainstream segment—to set up giant stages that take the effect of (temporary) artificial worlds, with the video screen being integrated into the overall stage conception. In the case of Kraftwerk’s recent performances there is only a rectangular screen behind the musicians that marks the end of the stage and looks like a cinema screen.

To close the analysis on Kraftwerk, the sphere of audio-visual media shall be mentioned by the example of the band’s video clip oeuvre. First of all, only in its early days (1974–1983) the band seemed interested in producing music videos or promotional clips (this period comprises nine clips). From 1984 until today only five clips can be listed. This might result from the fact that throughout their career Kraftwerk increasingly became aware of what they actually wanted to achieve artistically, what they wanted to stand for (“the man-machine”). This implied the rejection of “normal” stardom. Accordingly, they ignored many of those activities (such as producing video clips) that “normal” stars would pursue in order to please their audiences. But besides that, in all video clips their passion for technology and modernity shimmers through. In *Trans-Europe Express* (1977) they are shown as businessman-like passengers of the train of same name, which was back then commonly regarded as a highly modern vehicle. In *The Model* (1981) their performances within the futuristic stage set-up of the *Computerwelt* tour are shown; this is combined with found footage depicting typical scenery of the fashion world. Perhaps most obvious in terms of conveying the band’s aesthetic agenda is the video clip to *Showroom Dummies* (1982). The clip is basically composed of all the components that are mentioned above: the businessman-like image, the dummies and the sparse use of additional visual elements. The band

presents itself as a group of androids. Not only the dummies evoke this impression, but also the band members themselves. Their part in the clip comprises being in a freeze position and moving in a mechanic manner. At the end of the clip, the four “androids” even enjoy their time in a club-like setting, being engaged in all sorts of robotic dance actions. The latter may also be taken as evidence to the fact that Kraftwerk’s technoid universe includes the integration of humor and irony and a sense of lightheartedness.

2. “Achtung postmodernism”: U2 (1991-1993)

The second case study covers the sphere of mainstream rock culture. The Irish superstar band U2 might not be associated with intellectual pop music, but rather with big commercial success and gigantic live shows. Yet their artistic biography clearly comprises a period in which their music became part of an overall aesthetic conception, revealing some strong contemplation on social reality. During the recording of *Achtung Baby* in early 1991 U2 witnessed just like the rest of the world the outbreak of the Gulf War. And just like the rest of the world U2 were stunned that this war is broadcasted on TV twenty-four hours a day. Music journalist Bill Flanagan commented on this: “Bono sits at the TV transfixed, amazed that CNN is broadcasting the war live twenty-four hours a day, and that he—like millions of TV viewers—finds himself watching war as if it were a football match”.¹⁰ In an interview with German filmmaker Wim Wenders Bono stresses that the war coverage is synonymous with the influence of the media on people’s consciousness. Within media reality the boundaries between news, entertainment and advertising vanish.¹¹ U2 wanted to reflect upon this issue. As a consequence, they became concerned with various aspects of constructivist and postmodern philosophy, such as the ambiguity of information, the vanishing of common rules and the rising of irony and eclectic forms. Postmodernism and media reality merged into one overarching motif, which can be observed on all levels of artistic production, beginning with the front cover of the album: a serial composition consisting of sixteen images which represent a wide repertoire of subjects. Monochrome photographs mingle with coloured and sometimes blurry shots; people shots show truncated bodies and heads; the spectrum of motifs ranges from urban scenes (with and without band) to a cattle head and a painted Trabant car. Altogether, the disconnection of things seems to be the actual message.

Also in terms of musical style the album appears to be patched together. Various ingredients such as heavily distorted guitars and vocals,

samples and loops, congas, acoustic guitars and a Hammond organ make up the overall sound. Compared with the band's previous albums the song compilation appears to be collage-like. An experimental piece such as *The Fly* follows on the love song *So Cruel; Tryin' to Throw Your Arms Around the World*, a groovy, sample-based track, succeeds the psychedelic soundscapes in *Mysterious Ways*, which is then followed by *Ultraviolet (Light My Way)*, a "classic" rock tune. U2 reveal an interest in overly artificial structures, which can also be detected in the songs themselves.¹² Paradigmatic of this is the first track, *Zoo Station*, especially the intro. It starts with a back-plucked tone repetition with an eighth note rhythm. This is followed by a three note guitar riff, which is characterized by the high level of noise interference and room reverb and which is repeated several times in an almost mechanical manner. After the riff is played for the first time, sounds of the fret hand can be heard. Additionally, the pauses between the riffs are filled with noisy drum sounds. Only from the moment on when a back beat snare drum and a second one-note guitar riff are introduced the metric structure (four-four) becomes clear. Taken as a whole, the intro seems to be put together by sound fragments, meaning that the listener witnesses a musical structure that is not laid out to be authentic in one way or another.¹³

Whereas *Zoo Station* addresses the idea of the fragmentary within the postmodern agenda, the video clip for the track *The Fly* ties in with the lo-fi or do-it-yourself aspect. First of all, the editing is striking, most notably because of its edginess, which implies that harsh cuts occur in rapid succession. Furthermore, the visual track is mostly based on hand camera shots which reveal a grainy, somehow dirty texture. Altogether, these components evoke the impression of a cheap and crude lo-fi-production that denies the notion of auratic and masterful art. Finally, the all-encompassing topic "media reality" is addressed: firstly, in the form of various TV sets and a blue cast in some shots which produces the effect of a TV performance within a TV performance and, secondly, via textual messages displayed on a huge video wall (filmed at Piccadilly Circus), amongst them the line: Watch more TV!

The format which brings together all the band's attempts to reflect upon postmodern living condition is the live performance. The world tour of that time is entitled *Zoo TV*. It started on February 29, 1992 in Lakeland/USA and ended after 157 shows on December 10, 1993 in Tokio. The title *Zoo TV* is, on the one hand, a reference to the Berlin railway station Zoologischer Garten, an important inner city transport hub (just like Times Square or Piccadilly Circus). On the other hand, U2 regard *Zoo TV* as an adoption of the US radio format Morning Zoo, in which disc

jockeys almost simultaneously tell jokes, answer telephone calls and ironically comment on celebrities.¹⁴ This collage-like entertainment format which not only allows intertextual references but literally seeks them forms the conceptual framework of the show. The stage looks like a patchwork of various objects, which is exactly what the designers aimed for. By their own account, they wanted to create a “non-design”.¹⁵ The stage should look like as if it was made of the remains of post-industrial society. Not surprisingly, gigantic TV towers are an essential part of the stage design (in fact, they were made of video screens). Due to their size they seem to represent the omnipresence of the media in contemporary society. This arrangement is completed by big antenna-like constructions and Trabant cars used as spotlights. The re-functionalisation of the latter links to appropriation art, which is a genre within postmodern visual arts that is based on industrially manufactured goods being manipulated and re-contextualized as artworks.¹⁶ The reflection upon the general state of “postmodern confusion” is also subject to the visual material displayed by the TV/video screens. During the performance of the song *The Fly* short and concise sentences written in capitals are shown in rapid succession (including “Everything you know is wrong”, “Taste is the enemy of art”, “Death is a career move”, “Art is manipulation”, and “Watch more TV”; see above). The audience is literally beset with a multitude of truisms, assertions, antinomies, and cynical statements and therefore hardly able to select information. Here, one of the paradoxes of modern information society is addressed: the evocation of disinformation in the light of information overload.

As part of *Zoo TV*, U2 promoted the idea of postmodern pastiche also with regard to the set list, which includes up to four cover versions of well-known pop songs, and Bono’s enactment of different stage personae (song personae plus fictitious characters that were originally created for the show). In the end, it is not possible to untangle whether *Zoo TV* imitates postmodern aesthetics or whether it is part of it. But this—according to postmodern philosophy—doesn’t need to be resolved, because: there is no imitation of the original, just the imitation of the imitation. In this sense, U2 operate at the very heart of the postmodern agenda. From 1997 to 1998 the band kept on pursuing a transmedia approach, changing from postmodernism as the overarching motif to pop culture and consumerism, respectively. Since the early 2000s no aesthetic conception that would shimmer through on all levels of artistic production can be detected in their works.

3. The animated band: Gorillaz

A more recent example of transmedia aesthetics in popular music is the band Gorillaz. It is the name of a virtual, cartoon animated band that exists since 1998, consisting of four (fictitious) members: 2D, Murdoc Niccals, Noodle and Russel Hobbs. The driving forces behind this project are Damon Albarn, mastermind of the Britpop veterans Blur, and Jamie Hewlett, a British comic book artist (“Tank Girl”). It is characteristic of this project that the cartoon image is conveyed across all medial channels of communication. In the following, two media types shall be examined in a more detailed fashion, since they transcend the standard within popular music culture. The first example concerns the band biography entitled *The Rise of the Ogre* published in 2006. Autobiographical works are usually not central to the understanding of the performances of pop artists. Such books appear as a surplus for ardent fans who urge to know “everything” about their beloved stars. But in the case of Gorillaz the prerequisites are different. Since there is no such thing as a personal identity of the band members which the fans can identify with, individual background stories need to be launched. Consequently, the book in question concentrates on telling the fictional biographies of the four band members. In so doing—and, of course, due to the performances in the video clips—personal characteristics as well as a group identity can be assigned by the audience. Furthermore, the book remains somewhat undecided, which, with some certainty, was intended by the authors. The stories of the four band members alternate with commentary by the actual creators and the press. Accordingly, the line between illusion and reality fades—conversely, the reader’s confusion rises.

Secondly, the band’s stage performance shall be addressed. Even in the context of live events the four protagonists make an appearance. This is in the main realized in the form of film sequences that are shown parallel to the performance of the real musicians. Temporarily, the real-life companions were replaced completely, as in the case of the Grammy Awards in 2006 when the band was brought into effect as holographic projections (this was based on the Musion Eyeliner technology). But nevertheless, the real-life aspect plays an equally important role in the live performances of the band, as manifested in the concert documentary *Demon Days Live* (2006). Here, it can be seen that the stage is almost bursting. A rock band set-up, background vocalists, percussionists, a DJ and a string orchestra share the stage space. Additionally, several guest musicians perform, including a children’s choir. The cartoon appeal is transformed into the sphere of real-life performance with the help of

movable screen elements that are used most of the time as light sources, taking on different colours. As a result, the stage becomes as bright and colourful as a cartoon image. Meanwhile, the accumulation of (inter) personal stage actions ensures that the high-density narration of a typical comic strip is translated into the concept of liveness.

Thus far, the aesthetic agenda underlying the works of Gorillaz has been described as being based on textual, visual and audio-visual modes of representation. The last point that is to be made here is that the imagery coincides with the world of sound, in a way that you can interpret sound and vision as forming a coherent whole. The music is loaded with pop cultural references; it links to classic recordings of soul, hip-hop, electronic and rock music. Some of the icons of these genres are actually part of the production, like Bobby Womack, De La Soul or Neneh Cherry. This music creates a distinct pop universe or, one could say, it mirrors pop culture in a bright and colourful way, just like a cartoon creates a condensed and slightly surreal image of reality. Eventually, all modes of representation follow the same affirmation of artificiality and overdetermination.

Conclusions

Dealing with transmedia aesthetics reveals that popular music is very much about creating an artistic identity by all possible means. Popular culture in general is determined by the permanent struggle for the audience's attention, or, to put it more positively, for the hearts and thoughts of the people. There may be great, iconic albums which reveal the aesthetic elaboration of a symphony or evergreens that appear to be common property, but ultimately popular music is about recording and mixing those albums and songs, respectively, creating a suitable artwork, going on tour, performing on TV and so forth. All of this happens against the backdrop of an exuberant everyday output of medial events. Analyzing how the different fields of engagement are tied together, makes you understand the complex nature of popular music. It is quite challenging to create a distinctive and appealing narrative that the audience can enduringly stick to. Also genre conventions need to be taken into account, in so far that an appealing combination of the old (genre affirmation) and the new (genre innovation) is brought into effect. Transmedia approaches are a way to respond to this task. Thus, I assume that the concept of transmedia constitutes a special case within the aesthetic agenda of popular music. But I would add that coordinating elements of artistic expression in a meaningful and coherent way is at the very heart of pop

culture. It begins with wearing the same jacket in a video clip or on stage and it ends with Kraftwerk turning into man-machines.

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Notes

¹ For further reading see Wicke, *Sound-Technologien und Körper-Metamorphosen*, 38-41; Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place*, 34-51.

² Auslander, *Liveness. Performance in a mediatized culture*, 51-54; Krämer, *Das Medium als Spur und als Apparat*, 83-86.

³ See Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, 37-46.

⁴ Rajewsky, *Intermedialität*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ See Schramm and Hartmann, *Identität durch Mediennutzung?...*, 201-219.

⁸ See Buckley, *Kraftwerk: Die unautorisierte Biografie*, 36-45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰ Flanagan, *U2 at the end of the world*, 13.

¹¹ Wenders, *Lights, Camera, Achtung Baby! Interview mit U2*, 69.

¹² See also Harris, *U2's Compositional Process...*, 144-161; Eno, *Bringing up Baby*, 165-170.

¹³ Fast, *Music, Contexts, and Meaning in U2*, 40-49.

¹⁴ Flanagan, 32.

¹⁵ Holding, *Mark Fisher. Staged Architecture*, 98.

¹⁶ See Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object*, 310.

CHAPTER TWO

BABY YOU'RE A STAR: SELFIES, LIP DUBS AND PARODIES*

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*That the powerful play goes on,
and you may contribute a verse...*
Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Introduction: from wannabe to broadcast yourself

Nowadays, we commonly acknowledge the importance of the technological revolution achieved in the past decades as the catalyst for the emergence of a new interactive reality with infinite possibilities for communication, art, and culture. If until recently the frontiers between reality and virtuality were only possible in the minds of novelists and filmmakers, today they overlap and effectively dissolve, forcing us to rethink and re-imagine our own society. Terms like robot, cyborg, simulation, prosumer... they are no longer words associated with fantasy novels, but terms absolutely necessary to tackle and understand how we relate to our world.

When analysing the role of the prosumer¹ in musical processes it might seem logical to begin our first chapter in 2004, when web 2.0 is launched. However, from a strictly musical point of view, we should go back to 1981, to the birth of the first ever music-only TV channel, MTV.² Much has already been written regarding the importance of music for youth,³ a phenomenon which obviously did not begin with this music channel. Nevertheless, the music video along with all of MTV's unique innovations helped to create a new and powerful cultural universe. What was so different and new about this MTV Culture?⁴ Simply put, one could say that the superposition of musical language and visual language resulted in

a new cultural format in which messages are intensely amplified. It didn't just add images to music, but rather represented a novel way to address storytelling, characterized by a fast and furious pace that would have a remarkable impact on other cultural forms such as narrative and films for decades to follow.⁵

With the advent of MTV, the phenomenon of the “wannabe” took on a new dimension. Of course, before MTV there were young rebels who grew their hair imitating The Beatles or shook their hips like Elvis Presley; but with MTV this need to “do as” became a global phenomenon. We can easily remember legions of female teenagers imitating Madonna's choreography in her video *Vogue* or high school kids trying to master Michael Jackson's moonwalk dance routine (which also triggered the design of its own moonwalk video game). This has been widely discussed and appropriately labelled the cultural iconosphere of MTV. According to Jack Banks, MTV coincided with the birth of the first truly international generation: “They wear Levi's, shop at Benetton, wear Swatch watches and drink Coca-Cola. This is not to say there are not culture differences. We don't state that the French are not different from the Germans. But a French teenager and a German teenager are much more similar to each other than they are to their respective parents.”⁶

We could argue that this desire to emulate idols responds only to the novelty of the TV station, but the continued growth of the phenomenon into the 90's and 00's provides evidence that this is a real solid trend. Again the youth around the world want to be like Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, Beyoncé, Take That, Backstreet Boys, Boyzone and Westlife. The height of this phenomenon can be observed with Spice Girls and One Direction (although the One Direction phenomenon owes more to the British talent show *X Factor* than to MTV.)

This leads to the clarification that although MTV is the original music TV channel, some competition arose from the 90's onwards, with The Box, The Hits, Viva, and many other music only TV channels coming into the picture, replicating the MTV model with a mix of local and global talent. Such fragmentation of audiences ended up affecting MTV's potential to influence culture from the year 2000 onwards.

As adolescents take on the serious endeavour of practising and mimicking their idols' dances and looks in the mirror, parodies inevitably start to appear too.⁷ One of the most famous parodies was made by the band Blink 182 in the video *All The Small Things*. The single included in the album *Enema of the State* was an instant hit. For this video, the California band parodied a selection of elements from music videos from artists including Britney Spears (*Sometimes*), Backstreet Boys (*I Want it*

That Way) or Ricky Martin (*Living on a Prayer*). Direct references to the sexual connotations of these videos were treated with comedy and irreverence.⁸ From the most stereotypical images of sexy Backstreet Boys to the candid Britney Spears, the effect of this mockery by three bad, rebellious and ugly guys was a propulsion towards success. Not surprisingly, *Enema of the State* was the final leap to fame for the band: The album sold 4.5 million copies in the US and over 15 million copies worldwide.

It's obvious that skits such as the ones performed by bands like Blink 182 require the viewer's participation, deciphering and understanding the codes and comic clues. However, the fan's role is strictly limited to spectator, an active spectator, yes, but ultimately just a spectator. A radical change took place with the emergence of Web 2.0 and the new interactive possibilities it made available. It is in the context of this new digital society where the figure of the prosumer acquires a special importance.⁹ The possibilities, at present, to interact with the original work are endless, from respectful imitation to scathing parody, always vis-à-vis the reappropriation of a specific artistic piece. We look at three recent examples in the following pages.

Worldwide happiness

The singer and producer Pharrell Williams was no stranger to the music industry or amongst hip-hop fans, however his worldwide success came in 2013 thanks to the song "Happy." Without denying the musical virtues of the song, the magnitude of its success owes more to its visual language than to the music itself. We are not referring to the original music video of *Happy*, but to the vast collection of covers and videos created by the prosumers, especially through the procedure of lip dub.

A lip dub is a type of video that combines lip synching and audio dubbing. It is made by filming individuals or a group of people lip synching while listening to a song or any recorded audio then dubbing over it in post editing with the original audio of the song.¹⁰ This format reached a height of popularity thanks to its appearance in television programs such as *MegaPlayback* in Spain or *Lip Sync Battle* in the United States. *Lip Sync Battle* featured celebrities; it started as a recurrent segment in *The Tonight Show* and it became so popular that it launched as a stand-alone music comedy show in 2015. Although Nielsen ratings peaked at 2.2 million viewers on television per show at the time this chapter was written, the viewing figures in YouTube channel were astronomical.¹¹

Returning to *Happy*, according to the website <http://wearehappy.com/> there are over 1950 videos from 153 countries that covered in their own way the theme of Pharrell Williams (You can search for them on the same page or by entering the YouTube search term “Pharrell Williams-Happy-We Are from [name of the city]”). The style of these videos is usually similar: relaxed atmosphere, dancing and joy (expressions of what the feeling of happiness looks like by different people). They feature adults, boys and girls, children, school groups... and, of course, the song used is always the original track sung and produced by Pharrell Williams. To offer some perspective on the phenomenon we look at YouTube audience figures: the official video of Pharrell Williams has 692 million views,¹² while the first of the lip dubs (for instance) has 5 million views.¹³

This illustrates a colossal reception from prosumers of the *Happy* phenomenon, and it also highlights two paradoxical situations worth looking into.

The first one, also related to phenomenon 2.0, is the selfies. On April 24th, 2014, a young girl from North Carolina had a car accident while uploading a selfie picture to her Facebook profile. She wrote “The happy song makes me HAPPY.” This event made the public reconsider the use and abuse of social networks. In this sad event we would like to underline the convergence of two phenomena: the appropriation of the music (in this case the message) and the obsessive display of the self (through social network selfies) linked to it.

The second negative situation we highlight is even more disturbing: the Iranian regime sentenced seven young people to 91 lashes—their “crime” had been to record a video with their version of the famous Pharrell song. Music, image and ideology converge in this situation. Although the response of the Iranian regime to an entertaining video which does not contain a direct attack on the political principles of their government may seem very disproportionate and even illogical, it can be better understood by considering how music in totalitarian regimes has sometimes been a medium to say what could not be said. For example, let’s think of the protest song in Spain at the end of the Franco regime or in various musical events under Latin American dictatorships.¹⁴ We can therefore note greater implications in a seemingly simple and innocent phenomenon. Again, a clear demonstration of the social power of music (in this case associated with the image).

Songs in a car

Since its inception, the Russian band Serebro has been linked to audiovisual culture. Serebro was formed to represent Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest (2007), and despite the remarkable audience and impact of this annual event, the real global success of the band came in September 2011 with the single “Mama Lover” (from their second album *Mama Lover*, 2012). There is no doubt that this success stems mainly from the video clip, which shows the three members of the band driving on Russian streets. In a quick search on YouTube, it appears that the official video has a total of 26,517,438 views with 14,666 comments.¹⁵ At the same time it is surprising that the video *Mama Lover (Jabugo version)* has a total of 1,348,317 with 971 views comments.¹⁶ Who are the stars of this video? Three women (with a half-naked man as a special guest) which are far from the near-perfect beauty of the Russian girls in the original video. It’s a parody of the most hypersexualised Serebro girls using elements of everyday life (foods like bread, ham, etc.). The overflowing sexuality of the original video is transformed and is ridiculed; these three pranksters show us how easy is to cross that very thin line of ridicule while lip-synching to the original Serebro track.

“Mama Lover” was Serebro’s first single to obtain remarkable international success outside Russia. The video achieved significant levels of popularity in countries like Spain, Italy and the Czech Republic, primarily due to the appearance of over 250 parodies of Serebro’s original work on the internet.¹⁷

While with the song “Happy” by Pharrell Williams prosumers were not using parody, but rather imitation, with Serebro there’s a clear desire to parody, ridicule, and caricature (it is common in the world of parody to replace the beautiful stars of the original video with beer-bellied, bearded men thereby enhancing the elements one wants to caricaturize with hyperbole and excess). In the case of *Happy* the prosumer wished to join Pharrell in the expression of joy and laughter.

As in *Happy*, we find in *Mama Lover* interesting situations concerning the appropriation of original material by the consumer. In Spain two local policemen in Cerdanyola del Vallés (Barcelona) recorded themselves imitating the original choreography of *Mama Lover* while wearing their uniform and while being inside their patrol car.¹⁸ They were reprimanded and had to publicly apologize to the City Council for any damages caused to the image of the police and all public employees.

No apologies were ever offered by Sketchshe or Hecatomb Productions; both groups have YouTube channels with a wide audience

and both feature two videos which resemble each other and are heirs of the *Mama Lover* aesthetics. Both videos feature groups of men or women¹⁹ seated in a car (in the style of Serebro) and through a variety of mash-ups allude to various hits using lip synch. (Sketchshe reference global hits,²⁰ and Hecatombre Productions draw from a mix of Latin and Anglo-Saxon hits).²¹ Although not a direct parody of the video in question, its influence is remarkable, and we notice two characteristics common to the parody universe: the desire for originality, and the desire to have fun. In these parodies there is always a touch of humour, but also a retrospective look at pop history and the most commercially successful songs vis-à-vis visual references that can only be understood by those generations of consumers born under the influence of the MTV cultural iconosphere. Again a cultural universe that transcends geographical boundaries.

A real Wrecking ball: Love, sex, parody

If with Serebro we have seen how the birth of the group was directly linked to audiovisual culture, in the case of Miley Cyrus (daughter of Billy Ray Cyrus), this is even more noticeable. Obviously the task of transforming the super popular Hannah Montana into a more mature pop artist was never going to be an easy one. The passage of the sweet and guileless child prodigies of the American cultural industry rarely occur in a calm and peaceful way (we could list many examples of children who abandoned an exemplary image for a new image of excesses and follies: Britney Spears, Jonas Brothers, Lindsey Lohan, Justin Bieber...). But beyond the controversy, Miley Cyrus found a way with her song "Wrecking Ball" to provide real meaning to her passage. The appearance of the theme and video of the artist was a real wrecking ball.

The song was the second single from *Bangerz*, the fourth studio album by the artist. All previous albums and singles were a success, largely due to an inherited fanbase from her previous career as Hannah Montana. But the numbers generated by *Wrecking Ball* were dizzying: the video set a record by reaching 19 million views within 24 hours of its release.²² It was Miley Cyrus's first success, reaching # 1 on Billboard while also marking the beginning of the most transgressive image of the artist (coinciding at launch with the controversial performance of Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke at the 2013 MTV Music Video Awards).

In the video, Miley Cyrus appears with a hypersexualized image, notably encoded via the hammer and undulating motion of the wrecking ball as visual references to sexuality, the sign of which is unmistakably reinforced by the erotic positioning of the naked singer perched atop the

instrument of sensualised destruction. Almost simultaneous with the release of the official video, we see the emergence of parodies, covers, memes... and the success of all these parallel cultural artefacts is not negligible: if we consider the parodies on YouTube, 14 of them have over 5 million views,²³ an audience typically reserved only for a scant few “serious” artists. The impact of the video for Miley Cyrus has an anecdotal reflection on the disappearance of the pendulum from the University of Michigan, removed by the institution due to the use and abuse of said instrument carried out by students seeking to parody the former Disney girl. *Wrecking Ball*, clearly and evidently now belongs to the cultural iconosphere of the pop universe. No doubt the musical quality of the song is very high, but the visual picture in this case goes far beyond the musical language.

Miley Cyrus was certainly not the first artist to allude to sexual desire and display explicit behaviours in music videos (remember artists like Lady Gaga or Madonna) but Miley was one of the most parodied. Why? We can argue two reasons: the first is obviously related to the difficult conversion of the Disney teen girl into a hypersexualized young adult. If provocation and eroticism are part and parcel of the image of artists like Madonna, Beyoncé, Nicky Minaj in the contemporary collective imaginary... the transformation in the case of Miley Cyrus was too bizarre and abrupt. Mockery is inevitably born from shock. The second reason is, of course, the coincidence of the release of the video with the increased role of the prosumer and viral phenomenon, something we will discuss below.

Video killed the Mtv’star?

The aforementioned examples, despite their differences, share several characteristics in common.

The first shared trait amongst the productions we are analyzing here is that the musical product has not been modified at all. Although there are parodies in which the lyrics are altered (and on rare occasions, the melody), far more frequent are the cases (and hence the intention of our analysis here) in which the original music remains intact. In addition to the already provided examples, we could add many others: “Call on me”, “Harlem Shake”, “Call me baby”, “Sexy and I know it.”... an interesting commonality shared by all of these is that, even though the original song is used, there is no record of legal complaints regarding copyright, authors’ rights, etc. in a time when piracy in the digital environment is also booming. And why not? It’s possible that the music industry is as