

Paolo Peverini:
The Aesthetics of Music Videos: An Open Debate

From a semiotic point of view, music videos are a very complex textual form. They use the expressive potentiality of different languages (visual-musical-verbal) to combine the music business' commercial aims with original aesthetic experiments. In the context of deep transformations that involved the cultural industry, music videos, though maintaining their original strategic promotional sense, evolve crucially, assimilating the crisis of music labels, measuring themselves with web textual logics and with new crossmedial music distribution strategies.

Consequently the evolution of this phenomenon is determined by many different factors:

- the multiplication of distribution channels
- a huge number of new bands reaching a more and more competent audience
- the drastic reductions of music video production budgets

This is the whole context which influences the changes in video-musical aesthetics. Now that music television's absolute domain has been left behind, music videos try to approach the audience by imitating new forms of popular storytelling. Low budget productions replace early nineties golden productions, their style often playing with irony and the paradox, and combining it all with low-definition. Home-made images reproduce the winning, auto-produced and self-made YouTube-like aesthetics. Music videos aren't due anymore to be stressed by television's heavy rotation schedule.

Nowadays it is the single spectator who searches and selects the videos. Not the opposite. MTV era is definitely concluded. Digital productions start appearing along with professional film productions, claiming attention to new narrative formulas, where amateurs home movie features are proclaimed a new trademark. Videos become more than often micro-narrations where music business strategies and formulas are ironically put into images. This is not an ephemeral tendency. It is a general disposition involving both Indie bands and mainstream stars.

In this new era of music business where, in comparison with eighties and nineties icons, even stars are ephemeral, bands tend not to wrap themselves in a mythical aura anymore, but instead search a real connection with the audience, sometimes reaching forms of interactions with their fans. Normality is a new tendency. Sometimes performers take even a step backward and hide themselves: already earlier The Gorillaz and Daft Punk did build their success on their absence, letting images talk for them.

REWIND PLAY FAST FORWARD

At the present music videos celebrate their handcrafted origins, from Devo's mythological era to Ok-Go, from analogical effects to collective mash-ups. Today the spectator gains the spotlight. Music business hasn't much to do with album sales anymore. It deals more with live concerts, with performing, or with web connections and social networking and with Labels recognizing fan's unofficial bootleg lip-dub videos.

Starting from a so rapidly changing scenery, this discussion will return to and examine some of the most famous theories about music videos definitions.

Our hypothesis is that one of the most useful criteria in analyzing this phenomenon is the study of the manipulations of the performers' bodies. As a "text within the text", the body is essential to comprehend the semiotic nature of the music videos. Through an analysis of some clips an axis will be set, going from the simple performance-mise en scène, to the total metamorphosis of bodies, up to their strategic negation that represent a new challenge for the competence of fans.