From Anarchy to Chromakey
Developments in Music Television

I feel like I’ve been an adman for the past year. I don’t feel like a singer.

—Roland Gift, Fine Young Cannibals

Accounts of music television that begin by telling us that music video was “invented” in a given year (or that imply such a position by using a chronology that starts with the moment of birth of MTV) miss out of an important step in thinking about this topic, namely, what is “music television”? It is essential that we engage this question because it encompasses many other issues regarding the nature of music video texts, and in particular the relation between their economic status and ideological significance.

I begin this chapter, therefore, by asking two different kinds of questions. First, how and why did promotional music videos emerge? And second, what definitions and understandings of popular music are implied by that first question? In other words, what are the defining properties of “music television”? I will answer these questions with a central premise that runs counter to many recent attempts to understand this new area of cultural studies: I assume that we cannot make sense of music video without locating its development within a nexus of far-reaching changes inside the mass media, including the pop music industry. The analysis of music television presented here is predicated on the assumption that since the cultural industries are currently in a state of increasing convergence, it will repay media analysts to make greater efforts toward the integration of critical concepts drawn from the various disciplines that inform media and cultural analysis.

The media industries are currently involved in processes of convergence, both at the level of institutions (e.g., mergers, cross-media marketing deals, new forms of advertising and sponsorship) and at the level of the text (generic fusions and crossovers within media and between them). Music television is a classic case of such fusion, representing both the blurring of two hitherto separate (indeed, sometimes hostile) media and a new hybrid of programming and promotion that mixes media and genres at the level of the text.

In order to understand music television, therefore, it is necessary to probe ways of combining analyses normally left to their own devices—in pop music, television, and advertising studies. The first step in understanding music television must be to move beyond the analysis of television deriving from film studies and begin to grapple with the questions raised by popular music scholars such as Franco Fabbri (1982) and Antoine Hennion (1990), who have investigated the problem of locating the correct objects and levels of study. The key points that arise out of this kind of investigation are that the production of meaning in the sphere of pop music occurs across a variety of textual sites and in an unusual relation to its commodity form. This in turn leads us into an investigation of the commodity and promotional status of music television—without which, I will argue, the correct questions to pose in textual analysis cannot be known.

Performance as Promotion

It is important to establish from the outset that pop music is, and always has been, a multidiscursive cultural form, in which no one media is privileged. The implication of this for music video analysis is that it becomes impossible to understand the meaning of any individual clip without considering its relation to the wider world of pop culture. The pop industry has always differed from other media in one crucial aspect that places its ancillary industries (TV, radio, cinema, publishing, advertising) at the center of any analysis: most other media forms have traditionally been sustained economically by direct commodity production, by advertising, or by a mixture of the two, but this is not quite true of the music business. The commodity forms of the music industry are records, cas-
settes, and compact discs. These are the products that have to be shifted in order to make profits. And yet these products do not sustain pop meaning, which has always had to draw on other forms—including posters, teen magazines, live performances, film, radio, and TV. As Alan Durant (1984) notes:

Within what is commonly referred to as rock or "popular music," there is no obvious, single format or mode of presentation. When thinking about this area of music... what is in question is not simply a well-established corpus of either records, performances, groups or images. Unlike television, film or arguably theatre, the forms of this music irreducibly involve an intersecting range of practices, without an obvious primacy of any one discourse or text. To isolate gramophone discs as the "text" of rock music, for example, is to marginalise or dismiss a very considerable range of activities... which never accede to reproduction by way of the recording process... It would also be to neglect the important way in which rock's musical forms have spread over a variety of technical means other than gramophone recording—"live" performance itself, of course; cassettes; television and film soundtrack; currently "promotional" videos. (p. 168)

Durant's argument is supported by recent trends in the music industry, where a proliferation of formats and configurations and the growth of mass media-related pop products lend further emphasis to his point. This comment, from music industry lawyer Alexis Grower, indicates the breadth of media involved in promoting today's popular music:

When I've seen non-music lawyers look at music contracts they don't know what they're doing... There are now an increasing number of ways of exploiting an artist's work. Twenty years ago they didn't have videos, cable TV, satellite, pop songs used in adverts, jingle-writing, compact discs, cassettes, the 12-inch market, merchandising, and they didn't have TV advertising to sell records. The contracts have become more complicated because the whole industry has become more complicated, and you want to make sure that your client gets the benefit of it all. (quoted in Garfield, 1986: 255-56)

The point is made also by Island Records founder Chris Blackwell:

I don't think there are any record companies now in the real sense of the word. We're all in the fashion business. You used to be able to sell records purely on music and musicianship. Now it's packaging, media, television and video. (quoted in Garfield, 1986: 244)

These trends in the music industry are not unique. It is also the case that other media are increasingly multertextual (in Durant's terms)—a process that was exemplified, for instance, in the selling of the 1989 Warner Bros. film Batman, which involved tie-ins with the music industry (Prince's Batman the Movie LP, and the sound track from the film itself), publishing (including the Batman comic books, published by Warner Communications subsidiary D.C. Comics), television (through home video sales and rentals, and—eventually—cable and broadcast television rights), and merchandising (Batman bubble gum, breakfast cereal, and so on).

It is useful here to consider an important distinction emphasized by Nicholas Garnham (1983: 2), following Theodor Adorno, between those media industries that distribute products that are essentially mass-produced, recorded forms (film, TV) and those media—including music—that are based on the mass circulation of preindustrial cultural forms (including also books). Why is this important? Because it points to a contradiction inside the music industry, between inherently mass-produced commodity forms such as records and cassettes (which produce profit but insufficient meaning) and preindustrial forms of promotion such as live performance (which help to "complete" the package of meaning, but which until the 1980s generally failed to generate profit even when organized on a mass scale). These observations also demonstrate why isolated analysis of individual texts is inadequate for our understanding of the increasingly intertextual processes of the mass media—textual processes that of course result in part from increasing concentration and integration at the level of ownership in the cultural industries. (The selling of Batman, like the selling of Michael Jackson, has employed vertically integrated economies of scale to improve profitability.)

Music video clips must be contextualized within a framework that explains the role of pop performances in terms of their essentially promotional role within a multidiscursive industry. Jacques Attali (1985) has noticed this phenomenon, but without explaining it:

For those trapped by the record, public performance becomes a simulacrum of the record: an audience generally familiar with the artist's recordings attends to hear their live replication. What
irony: people originally intended the record to preserve the performance, and today the performance is only successful as a simulacrum of the record. (p. 85)

Ironic or not (and rock does, after all, continue to pay homage to the primacy of the "live," raw-sounding recording), this process very obviously derives from the commodification of popular music. Live performances must resemble recordings because it is from the sale of those commodities that profit is generated. However, as I will show, Attali's analogy of the "simulacrum" is inadequate, because pop performances do not merely imitate previously consumed, recorded, commodified artifacts; they must also promote as-yet unsold commodities (other records, or perhaps old music in new configurations, as in the case of consumers buying music they already possess, perhaps on CD).

Pop performance is therefore not only a commodity in itself but also an essential adjunct to the business of selling T-shirts, records, tapes, and compact discs. The emergence of promotional music videos must be understood in light of this fact: that pop performance has always had a largely promotional role. The development of the promotional music video can thus be seen in part as a means of more effectively commodifying the business of promotion—a trend that is also exemplified in the increasing use in the 1980s and 1990s of corporate sponsorship and the expanding economic role of merchandising (the sale of T-shirts, programs, and other tour paraphernalia) in tour budgets (see McRobbie, 1986b; Mower, 1986; Sandall, 1988; Savan, 1987; Variety, 1989: 58; Young, 1986; Zimmer, 1988).

From this perspective music video can be seen as an attempt on behalf of the music industry to find a more efficient and cost-effective method of promoting pop music internationally. It must also be seen in the context of related developments, such as the corporate sponsorship of pop concerts (and radio and TV slots) and the growth of pop merchandising. That last development has reached such a stage of importance that sales of T-shirts at major concerts sometimes outstrip the revenue gained from ticket sales. A further area of profitability has emerged in the shape of spin-offs from video recordings of live performances, distributed via videocassettes, cable television, pay-per-view television, and—with occasion—broadcast television.

The history of pop is thus the history of a form that has become increasingly commodified via the recording and media industries, while it is still wedded to the discourses of performance that are essential to pop meaning. Aspects of visual performance have always been provided via television and movies: what is new about music video is not just its pervasiveness and potential for cost-effective international circulation, but the fact that the record companies themselves control the funding of these new performance texts. Music video therefore lacks the degree of cultural autonomy enjoyed by most previous forms of pop performance, as Dave Laing (1985a) has pointed out. For instance, when a record company helps underwrite the cost of a national tour, it enjoys none of the influence over the performance that it does when it hires a director to shoot a music video clip. While this certainly does not mean that we can automatically "read off" music video meanings from what we know of their conditions of production, I will try to show later in this book (especially in the discussion of stardom in chapter 5) that the promotional demands of music video explain many of its textual features.

Having located music video clips within this context of performance, and having placed performance itself in its essentially promotional relation to pop commodities, I can now turn to the question of the emergence of music television, which has its roots in five developments in the music and media industries: (a) changes in the pop music performing and recording processes; (b) shifting ideologies of pop, organized around the development in Britain of the "New Pop"; (c) expansion of television services, especially in cable television in the United States; (d) recession in the music industry and related concern about the rise of competing audiovisual leisure services; and (e) changing demographic patterns in rock and pop music consumption.

From Anarchy to Chromakey

The question of the origins of music video is a matter that has received considerable academic and journalistic attention. Following Shore (1985), a BBC-TV program tracing the history of promotional videos once cited a short film made in 1934 as an antecedent of the form. Journalists writing about the subject routinely mention the promotional jazz film clips made in the 1940s, sometimes referred to by their brand name of Soundies, and the Scopitone jukebox developed in France in the 1960s. Other sources cited are the various 1950s movies about youth culture and rock and roll that contain sequences not unlike today's promos. On television, in the 1960s, there was The Monkees TV series, and
other televiual pop, such as The Archies and The Partridge Family, is often mentioned. The Beatles are often introduced into the debate, as critics cite the early Beatles films (A Hard Day’s Night, Help!), later promotional film clips (“Penny Lane,” “Strawberry Fields Forever”), and the Magical Mystery Tour TV special. But the most popular candidate for the title of “first” music video is the Jon Roseman/Bruce Gowers six-minute clip for Queen’s number-one hit record “Bohemian Rhapsody,” made in 1975.

Yet the hunt for origins is a fruitless exercise, like the pointless debate about labels (is it pop video, music video, music television, or promotional video/clip?). Certainly many of these earlier fusions of sound and vision are very interesting and tell us a great deal about pop—most important, that music television and pop cinema are as old as pop itself. But if we want to identify the beginnings of music video in its contemporary form, we need to know what is significant about it. If pop sounds and visions on celluloid and videotape date back to Bill Haley and Elvis Presley, to the Monkees and the Beatles, to Abba and the Sex Pistols, then why is it only in the 1980s that critics and industry insiders begin to discuss something called “music video”?

Is it the device of lip-syncing (miming to a song) that is new? No. This technique is as old as Hollywood and commonplace when pop stars appear on TV. (However, I will suggest later that technological changes in music making have subsequently altered its meaning.) Is it the break with “realism” in image making? Once again, no. The aural codes of pop have often made such a break, and attempts by some critics to apply the debate about the cinematic “classic realist text” to pop performance are, as I will show in chapter 4, largely unconvincing.

What is really important about music video is its emergence in the 1980s as a routine method for promoting pop singles. (As long as this is so, music television will always be able to survive the demise of MTV, which many critics seem to view, consciously or not, as coterminus with the form—a slippage that MTV itself is keen to encourage.) This is why the development of music television is inextricably tied into the moment known as the “New Pop”—those acts, including the “New Romantics,” who represented a shift in pop’s attitude to music-making technologies and promotional strategies. Before going on to discuss the complicated interaction of developments in the music and media industries, I want to sketch out the initial moment of the emergence of music video in the United Kingdom and its connection with the New Pop.

Neither The Monkees nor Penny Lane nor Bohemian Rhapsody had any consistent or long-lasting effect on the way pop was sold. The promotional clips that accompanied the music of acts such as Duran Duran, the Thompson Twins, ABC, Wham!, and Culture Club did. As Simon Reynolds (1985) and Dave Rimmer (1985) have shown in their analyses of the New Pop, this was a movement organized around new understandings of the relations among music, image, and business that developed partly in reaction to the perceived “failure” of punk rock.

The question of the music itself is central to my argument, since it was changes in the process of production that helped to lay the foundations for video promotion. The ideology of punk was one of “do it yourself,” in which “amateurs” were encouraged to learn the very basics of pop song production and then form a band. In the d-i-y language of punk fanzine Sniffin’ Glue: “Here’s a chord. Now go and form a band” (quoted in Laing, 1985b: 22; see Laing’s book generally for more on punk). To this end, some groups (for instance, Cabaret Voltaire, the Human League) used synthesizers, sequencers, and drum machines to produce rudimentary avant-punk music. In performance, however, despite the occasional use of machines, the emphasis in punk was always on real performance. Punk’s ideology of workers’ control placed the musicians themselves at the center of things, and while amateurism was celebrated, this was usually in the context of actual, human, performance. Indeed, an overreliance on advanced technology was taken as a sign of “progressive rock”—the very music that punk was supposed to displace.

But when the moment of punk passed, in the late 1970s, musicians began to take a new interest in the mainstream, and in particular in dance music. New acts who formed after punk, or who simply failed to gain commercial success during punk, turned to the movement of the New Pop, just as some members of successful punk bands shifted their musical focus toward dance music, partly via a new interest in drum machines and sequencers. The shift from punk do-it-yourself sounds to a slicker, machine-based music is typified in the careers of Joy Division/New Order, the Thompson Twins, the Human League/Heaven 17, and Scritti Politti. Newer acts who exemplified this machine age were Depeche Mode, Thomas Dolby, and Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

By 1980 drum machines had become so sophisticated that their use in music production was routine. Sequencers had become more advanced and it became possible to store songs and whole sets in the memory of a bank of synthesizers and then take them on tour, to perform “live.”
Computer sampling devices such as the Fairlight CMI and the Synclavier began to usurp the musician's role in the studio, and were increasingly used on stage. It was becoming commonplace for producers to store all the appropriate sounds in a computer, which could then be programmed to an astonishing degree of sophistication—thus obviating the need for the musicians to play at all. Often they did not even need to be present.

This displacement of the musician eventually culminated in the controversy about lip-syncing and miming in live performance. From the New Pop moment onward, distinctions between automated and human performance were increasingly blurred. Bands that used sequencers in their recordings began to play back these automated sounds in the live context, thus integrating the “recorded” and “live” moments. Rap music totally undermined the distinction between the creation of music and its appropriation. As samplers were used in performance, it became more and more difficult for the concertgoer to perceive the source of the sounds heard over the PA. (This is a facet of attending live performances that exactly corresponds to the “sound hermeneutic” function developed in Rick Altman's 1987 analysis of television's aural addresses, in which a sound asks us to look at the screen—in this case, the stage—to find its source.) Throughout the 1980s, pop, rock, and rap audiences became habituated to the idea that some of the music being heard “live” might be on tape, or might emanate from a machine, and/or might consist of a sample of music recorded elsewhere.

Eventually, in late 1990, it was revealed that some singers were actually miming to prerecorded vocals in concert, and legislators in New Jersey and other U.S. states threatened legal action to make it mandatory for promoters to inform the audience of this practice (see Giles, 1991; Handelman, 1990). Soon thereafter, Milli Vanilli were stripped of their 1990 Grammy award for Best New Artist when it was found that the duo (Rob Pilatus and Fab Morvan) sang neither on their own album nor in “live” performance. Other, associated, disruptions of the contract of faith implied when we see a vocalist singing or a musician playing (the truth-performance nexus, which very much parallels traditional notions in broadcasting ideology, such as the BBC’s injunction of professionalism to “keep faith with the viewer”) occurred. For instance, in 1989 vocalist Loleatta Holloway was obliged to take out a lawsuit against the Italian Euro-disco act Black Box when her voice was extensively sampled on the single “Ride on Time,” and lip-synced to in a video clip and in television performances by a model (Katrin Quinol). Indeed, on the Black Box video compilation *Video Dreams 1991* (BMG Video) Quinol is listed as one of the four members of Black Box, even though the credits make it clear that the vocals are performed by Holloway, by Martha Wash, and by Heather Small—one of whom are in the “band”!

Why are these developments relevant to the emergence of music video as a routine sales mechanism? Because the new music-making technologies demonstrated to musicians, critics, and audiences more forcefully than ever before that pop performance is a visual experience. If performing pop music could mean singing across recorded sounds that are almost identical to the music on record and tape, then it was only a small step to accept as a legitimate pop practice the miming of a performance for a music video clip. The changing uses made of technology thus sanctioned and legitimated the practice of lip-syncing as a valid part of pop culture. Importantly, this argument suggests that the later development of acts such as Milli Vanilli was not a “result” of MTV and music television. Rather, both Milli Vanilli and MTV were effects of the uses to which the new pop technologies were put. (I will analyze the economic roots of this shift in the final section of this chapter.)

Until the moment of the New Pop, musicians on television had either attempted to hide the fact that they were miming (bands on the BBC’s *Old Grey Whistle Test* often did this) or poked fun at the whole charade, by miming badly or by introducing extraneous performers not present on the record (tactics used by Marc Bolan of T. Rex and Roy Wood’s Wizzard, respectively, on *Top of the Pops* in the 1970s). The New Pop openly acknowledged pop performance as a visual medium with a sound track. My point is that this has always been true, but it was made increasingly apparent by changes in music-making technology. Music video did not create this change; it was validated by it.

The second important postpunk development was a shift in artists’ attitudes toward marketing and the media. Again, Dave Rimmer’s (1985) account is very revealing here: he shows how many of the New Pop acts were inspired by punk, even as they created sounds and images that seemed to be its antithesis. Music video must also be placed in these contexts of changing pop ideologies. The moment of music video coincides with the rise of the New Pop—those acts (such as Duran Duran, Culture Club, Wham!, Howard Jones) who refused the downbeat style and oppositional politics of punk. Some bands even spanned the shift themselves. The Thompson Twins, for instance, began as a radical independent Afro-punk group and went on—via the dance floor success of “In
the Name of Love” in the United States—to become a mainstream teeny-pop act. Scritti Politti started out as a neostructuralist punk band and, after splitting up, were resurrected as a sleek, studio-based pop group. Joy Division began as a guitar-based, dirgelike punk group and remade themselves (following the death in 1980 of lead singer Ian Curtis) as New Order, with danceable, machine-based pop music. What is significant about this trend is not, however, the process of incorporation or “selling out” that is often the focus of (misplaced) criticism. What is important is the shift in pop/rock ideologies that accompanied these postpunk trends.

The New Pop existed in cultural territory where notions of “selling out” no longer made sense, and sounded increasingly like a countercultural accusation from another age. The New Pop bands did not just introduce new images and music into pop, they also shifted its attitudes toward business and commerce. The key here lies in new attitudes toward media marketing. A central development lies in the formation in 1983 of ZTT Records, a company founded by producer Trevor Horn and rock writer Paul Morley, whose main success was with Liverpool band Frankie Goes to Hollywood (see Jackson, 1985). But the ZTT strategy of the self-conscious, ironic hype that served so well in marketing Frankie Goes to Hollywood had a precursor in another band produced by Horn—ABC.

ABC were a Sheffield band who used dance music and machine-based rhythms as a starting point for self-conscious, tongue-in-cheek romanticism and a celebration of abundance that marked one beginning of the new way of making and selling pop. The band’s approach was based on a knowing use of glamour, with songs that seemed to be jokes about “falling in love,” their most widely known hit was a song appropriately titled “The Look of Love.” This strategy dovetailed perfectly with video promotion, and it is significant that it was ABC who made one of the very first long-form, conceptually linked video productions, Mantrap (RCA/Columbia, 1983), directed by Julien Temple. The New Pop aesthetic embodied in ABC fractured the relation between sound and image in a fashion that was to typify postpunk pop—and that in some ways paralleled the strategies of rap music.11

Punk and rock shared an ideology of performance codes that assumed a correspondence between creativity and performance. That is partly why it is so important for rock artists to write their own material. Performance was seen as an “authentic” event in which musicians communicated their music to an audience.12 Writers and producers who did not perform could not really be accommodated into an act’s public image, despite efforts to acknowledge some record producers as an additional member of the band (George Martin and the Beatles, Eddie Offord and Yes, Chris Thomas and the Pretenders). Where this correlation was severed, rock ideology denied the act in question any true musical credibility and withheld the possibility of an image of authenticity (the Monkees and the Archies are two famous examples).

The New Pop constituted a timely acknowledgment that this ideology did not make sense. By the time Frankie Goes to Hollywood emerged in the United Kingdom in 1983, nobody any longer cared whether or not the musicians played on their own records. In the United States, rock and roll notions of “authenticity” were more entrenched, but by the end of the 1980s Madonna had crossed over into the mass marketplace with strategies that closely resembled those of the New Pop. On her 1990 Blond Ambition tour, she made a point of announcing her intention to do something “naughty,” and then lip-synced through the song “Hanky Panky” (which, fittingly, both derived from and promoted the movie Dick Tracy). In artists such as Madonna and the Pet Shop Boys, the idea of authenticity still operated to a high degree, but it was located in an act’s perceived ability to manipulate and construct media imagery, and could be understood separately from the music-making apparatus. In the British context, as Frith and Horne (1987) have shown, the art schools of Britain had a significant impact in framing this response, as a part of their continuing contribution to rock culture.

By the mid-1980s British pop music had produced many successful acts who did not perform live, and often could not play live, since the music was reproducible only through the use of the multitrack studio and its machinery: Heaven 17, Scritti Politti (in their second, New Pop phase), the Human League, and Wham! each did little or no live performing in their early days, thus breaking with the accepted rock tradition of “paying your dues” through hard work on the club/college circuit. These acts made studio recordings and personal appearances by means of the mass media—including video clips. The New Pop eventually marketed a band with no identifiable members at all—ZTT’s The Art of Noise—and a group in which one member apparently made almost no contribution to the music—Wham! The culmination of these trends was the most critically acclaimed development of this music, the Pet Shop Boys (see Heath, 1990). Their emergence, in a second wave of dance-oriented pop associated with house music and hip-hop, bridged the gap between the
New Pop and rap (their first hit, "West End Girls," was a self-described "English rap" song) and raised the stakes of the challenge to rock authenticity when lead singer Neil Tennant bluntly stated: "It's kinda macho nowadays to prove you **can** cut it live. I quite like proving we **can't** cut it live. We're a pop group, **not** a rock and roll group" (quoted in *Rolling Stone*, 1988). The context of Tennant's remarks is revealing. At the American Music Awards, the Pet Shop Boys had not only mimed to musical backing, but even lip-synced the vocal parts, rather than singing live over a taped accompaniment, as is increasingly the practice on television and in many live rock performances (for example, the concerts given by New Order, which rely heavily on sequenced/taped backing tracks).

It was thus through video clips that the New Pop acts established themselves as "performers," often miming to music they did not actually play. The New Pop was therefore the precursor to the later trend, noted by Théberge (1989), in which artists such as Prince, whose music was often the result of a one-person multitracking process, used performers to mime parts they did not play in order to create the impression of a group performance. This development is by no means reserved for self-consciously "artistic" musicians like Prince: it has been utilized, for instance, by the heavy hard band Whitesnake, when leader Dave Coverdale hired musicians after the completion of the recording process in order to manufacture the image of a new group line-up. A similar situation occurred with the Replacements' video *when it began*. The album from which the song comes (*All Shook Down*, Sire, 1990) was originally intended as a solo release by songwriter Paul Westerberg; his record company insisted, however, that it be promoted as a Replacements product, even though the band plays on only one track (not "When It Began"). In *when it began* (which was airing as the band were touring to promote "their" album), the whole group appear, miming to parts they did not play. (Occasionally, however, a video clip does reveal the multitracking process; for instance, when Phil Collins is seen performing each of the parts in the clip *misled again*, this works to promote his virtuosity.)

Changing music-making practices and new attitudes toward marketing and the manufacture of image thus constitute two foundations for the development of music television. The new music-making technologies enabled lip-syncing to be read as a legitimate part of pop performance, and the new attitude to marketing matched the up-front, and often self-conscious, strategies used in promotional clips. These two shifts made the development of video and television as an integral part of pop culture a real possibility. Music video did not, therefore, create the conditions of its own success; that success was made possible by these changes in the music industry. But this in itself does not account for the rise of music television. Promotional video clips were made because there was an audience, but for an explanation of the link between music and television, it is necessary to address other trends inside the media industries.

**The Happy Marriage of Music and Television**

The changes within the music-making community in the United Kingdom help to explain how the conditions for the development of music video as a routine promotional tool were laid: they do not of course establish a full account of the ascendency of music television, and they constitute a necessary rather than a sufficient set of explanations. In order to understand why music videos developed so rapidly in the 1980s, it is important to explore the political economy of the media industries, because it was here (rather than in audience demand) that the impulse to produce music video clips on a mass scale was generated.

A major factor in the development of music television lies in the global increase in the quantity of television programming. The most obvious example of this is the expansion of cable television in the United States, but even in the more carefully regulated and restricted markets of Europe, broadcast, cable, and satellite television services experienced a significant increase in the number of programming hours needed to fill the schedule. Since advertising (and license fee) revenue did not and could not increase proportionate to the proposed increases in the number of hours broadcast, it follows that television entrepreneurs were concerned with finding cheaper forms of programming, either through a reduction in the average cost of production or through the economics of scale enjoyed via vertical integration that are available to global media organizations. While the second strategy has been pursued by, among others, Rupert Murdoch's News International group, the first alternative is simpler and less risky. It is that demand, for relatively inexpensive programming, that music television initially met.

That the development of music television was broadcasting led (rather than generated by the music industry) is made clear in Denisoff's (1988) research into the origins of MTV in the United States. MTV probably would never have reached the airwaves without the embryonic promo-
ional video industry developed in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and in its first eighteen months the new service had some difficulty persuading record companies of the viability and profitability of promotional clips. The music business was nervous about the investment needed in the clips—which ranged upward from about £20,000 per clip at that point—and anxious that music television would turn out to be a fad, like video games.

MTV's incentive to develop music television was of course advertiser led. Its budgets were underwritten by an expectation that an all-music service would deliver to advertisers those younger consumers (12-34-year-olds) who were traditionally difficult to reach through television. MTV was to be the "environment" that would narrowcast the right kind of music and thus target an elusive socioeconomic group. Denisoff's (1988) work shows that in its early months MTV's main problems were access to viewers (through local operators) and access to programming. Its task was to convince each constituency that there was a market for music television: in doing so, MTV had to construct an audience for music television. The key point here is that it was the television industry, rather than the record business, that led this development.

The situation in Britain was rather different, but not entirely so. Although broadcasting policy did not allow for the same degree of expansion of hours as in the United States, television in the United Kingdom did substantially increase in quantity during the 1980s. Some of those hours were filled with pop music programming, within existing studio-based formats (e.g., The Tube), in exclusively video clip-based shows (e.g., The Chart Show), and within other areas of programming (breakfast television, sports programs, and in new late-night programming).

Subsequent to these beginnings in the early 1980s, which drove the enormous expansion of video clips, music television developed in the United States on broadcast television (for instance, NBC's Friday Night Videos, which first aired in June 1983) and cable (WTBS's Night Tracks, the Nashville Network, Black Entertainment Television's Video Soul, the Video Jukebox Network) and on European cable services (for instance, Music Box, the Power Station, and MTV Europe). There is also an important connection with the movie industry, which in the 1980s began increasingly to use pop sound tracks in order to recruit young audiences, with films such as Flashdance, Pretty in Pink, and Dirty Dancing. Such sound tracks often yielded promotional clips that simultaneously advertised a song, a film, and perhaps a sound track album.

These observations are a necessary contextualization for Laing's (1985a) assertion that the music industry developed video clips in order to gain entry into the domestic audiovisual leisure market. Although some individuals within the music industry saw video as an essential component in its future, most record companies saw no prospects of selling music videotapes directly to the public, and were thus cautious about developing an expensive, solely promotional format. As doubts about music television's long-term future began to fade, and when the longform tape The Making of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (released in 1983) sold almost half a million copies, the music industry gradually developed a commitment to the production of promotional clips. More recently, home sales and rentals are generating significant income for the record companies, although this remains tiny in comparison with sales of the three established "configurations" (records, cassettes, and CDs). In December 1990 (in time to generate Christmas sales), Warner Bros. (through Warner Reprise Video) released the first mass-selling video single (following a ban imposed by MTV and the BBC), Madonna's Justify My Love, directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino, selling 400,000-500,000 copies.

Developments in the music industry itself thus form the final element in my attempt to explain the rise of music television. As Frith (1988b) has shown, music television forms one response to the music industry's crisis of profitability in the 1980s. Through direct sales and rental of tapes and—more significantly—the sale of music and music videos to television companies, record companies began to reorient themselves as "rights exploiters" rather than commodity producers (Frith, 1987a).

These trends do, however, need to be understood in terms of the needs of consumers, for although advertisers ultimately were leading these various trends (that, after all, is the impulse that generated the expansion of broadcast and cable television programming), music television also needed an audience in order to appeal to them. If we examine the key demographic changes in music consumption, it is clear that music television very precisely addressed two trends in the 1980s: the aging of the rock audience and the growth (at least in the United States) of a youth culture that was not centered on music.

The fact that it is not just rock stars but the audience itself that has grown older has been remarked upon by John Qualen (1985):

Recent British and American audience surveys suggest that, for
the first time in history, the rock audience is getting old. In America, for example, the latest RIAA [Recording Industry Association of America] survey indicates that in 1982 the 15-24 age-group accounted for 39% of record and tape sales as against 45% in the years 1979-1981. This decline in the purchasing power of the industry’s key target audience is the joint result of recession, which has hit the employment prospects of young people dramatically, and the demographic decline in the numbers of that age-group. The latter means that even if there is an upturn in the economy which creates jobs for this group of young people, their reduced numbers will not guarantee a return to the heyday of the early seventies. (p. 5)

This generational change has profound consequences for the music industry: it has helped to fracture pop taste, so that there is now a market for music that is neither completely youth oriented nor part of a prerock culture—acts such as the Rolling Stones, Tina Turner, Don Henley, Phil Collins, the Moody Blues, and Steve Winwood are the key artists for this demographic group.

This audience is reached via out-of-town arena shows rather than through performances at small, inner-city clubs; it is catered to by publications such as Q and Rolling Stone rather than the traditional pop press; it buys its music at carefully designed chain stores, such as the Wharehouse (United States) and Our Price (United Kingdom), rather than in the forbidding youth-oriented environment of the small record store. Given the demand for performance and visuality to complement the aural experience of music, this older audience (which is seen less frequently at live performances) is perfectly suited to promotion via television and video. It is this audience that is targeted for purchase of videocassettes such as the live concert performance of Paul Simon’s Graceland album; it is this audience that underwrites the increasingly frequent tendency in the United States to finance a major concert tour partly via pay-per-view television rights; and it is this audience that has its own all-music cable station, VH-1 (Video Hits 1, established by MTV Networks in January 1985 and aimed at the 25-54-year-old demographic).

But the new role of television in pop culture is not confined to this older audience. As Lawrence Grossberg (1986) points out:

Contrary to the common wisdom, the rock and roll generations were not the television generations. . . . If youth in the fifties, sixties and even seventies would have sacrificed anything rather than give up their music, there is increasing evidence that television plays the same role in the life of younger generations. (p. 63)

This is a view clearly shared by the creators of MTV, and it locates yet another pressure on the pop industry to rethink the most profitable site for pop performance today.

So far, I have tried to show that the origins and definition of music video depend on a prior identification of the economic impulses behind the format, and that these determinations depend on an interaction between changes in the processes of music making (and related ideologies about rock music) and developments in the broadcasting industries. This interaction, which created the conditions for the emergence of music television, was then exploited by the music industry, partly in response to changing demographic patterns of music consumption. These points can now be used to establish briefly the context of music video production and, in the final section of this chapter, to ask some theoretical and methodological questions about the nature of commodity production in the study of pop music and promotional video clips.

The Production Context

The production context of music video is rather unusual, and needs some explanation. Most clips are made to promote pop singles and are shot in a very short space of time, sometimes in just two or three days (see Shore, 1985). This occurs partly to minimize the budget, but also because many clips are not made until there is some expectation of chart success, which then necessitates very speedy production in order to catch the relatively brief active sales life of a pop single. But promotional clips are not cheap to make. Estimates of the average cost range from a few thousand pounds to the $2-million price tag on the 17-minute clip, made in 1987, for Michael Jackson’s song “Bad,” directed by Martin Scorsese. 19

This makes music video look like extremely expensive television, on a cost per hour basis. But of course the repeatability of promotional clips is much greater than that for broadcast TV programs. Successful music videos also circulate on an international scale that is generally unhindered by language barriers (English being the international language of pop lyrics, which are in any case less important, in the video age, than they ever
were). Furthermore, the clips can be consolidated into packages and sold or rented as videocassettes, and may on occasion glean revenue via television distribution. Michael Jackson’s BAD was integrated into a thirty-minute television program (Michael Jackson – The Legend Continues) and sold around the world as a documentary.

Unlike many cultural products, music video is not primarily a commodity form, but a promotional one. Record companies do get back a small proportion of the costs of music video production through sales to consumers and some payments from the TV and cable stations that carry them, but the costs of music video are largely written off against advertising or promotional budgets. (However, sometimes artists agree to fund video production as a recoupable advance against future record sales, or even from their own pockets.) Ultimately music video is therefore paid for through increased record sales—that is, the success of another product, rather than the success of the video itself.

Figure 2.1 illustrates this cycle, demonstrating that, economically, music video production is dependent on the increased revenues generated by music video promotion, garnered through consumer spending on records, cassettes, and CDs.

The growth of consumer interest in music video has led to an unusual situation, in which media consumers are willing to pay directly for a proportion of the costs of what is essentially promotional material, through cable TV subscriptions and home video sales/rentals. This may eventually lead music television into a new economic relationship with the music industry and a role as a fourth “configuration,” but currently direct sales are usually limited to only the most devoted fans of a particular act. This promotional role of clips is also displaced into the conflict between record companies and other media institutions over payment for the right to screen music videos. The TV companies have often argued that they should pay nothing for videos, since they are essentially free advertising. The record companies, on the other hand, point out that consumer demand for music video is such that payment is quite proper—videos do, after all, boost ratings, and in many cases they sustain entire cable stations and large sections of network and broadcast TV programming (see Denisoff, 1988).

**Rethinking the Commodified Text**

The intersection of cultural production and consumption continues to be an arena of debate in contemporary cultural studies, and, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the relation between these areas and text analysis needs to be rethought before we can engage with music television. My starting point here is the recent rethinking of cultural consumption in Marxist theory, admirably summarized by Ian Ang (1985):

Put simply, the current Marxist case is as follows: because the production of culture is subject to the laws of the capitalist economy, cultural products are degraded into commodities to
make as much profit as possible on the market. The exchange value of those products is therefore essential for the producers, leading to a neglect of quality. The capitalist market economy is only interested in the production of surplus value and as such is indifferent to the specific characteristics of the goods: caring only that they are sold and consumed. Mass culture is the extreme embodiment of the subjection of culture to the economy; its most important characteristic is that it provides profit for the producers.

But this is a one-sided presentation of the case. Marx himself stated that “a commodity only has exchange value in so far as it is at the same time a use-value, i.e., as an object of consumption; it ceases to have an exchange value if it ceases to have a use-value.” In other words, one cannot succeed in selling a commodity if it does not have a certain usefulness. And it is here that the contradictory character of the capitalist mode of production lies. From the standpoint of production the product only features as a commodity, but from the standpoint of consumption the same product features as a use-value. (p. 18)

It is this line of reasoning that underwrites most post-1970s attempts to reevaluate the nature of the popular and its relation to ideology.

Some developments following this rethinking of the relations of production and consumption generated work that might contribute to a more sophisticated model of ideological process (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1980a). Other work seemed to emphasize the popular and depoliticize pleasure to the point of losing track of the ideological entirely. In other theoretical developments, the Marxist model of ideology was abandoned in favor of a critique of the relations between representations and the “real” and an attempt to explode the connection between economics and cultural symbols (Baudrillard, 1988b).

What all of these areas of work have in common is one fundamental oversight: in a media economy that is increasingly invaded by advertising and new kinds of promotional devices, the use-value of cultural products is rarely something that can be determined solely through study of the media audience. As Dallas Smythe (1977) has suggested, the “chain” of communication in advanced capitalist cultural industries is often one in which the message has been replaced by audiences, who become the “product” to be “delivered”—to advertisers.

The importance of Smythe’s thesis is brought home in this comment from the chief executive of MTV Europe, in answer to a query about whether MTV would ever begin making its own video clips: “I don’t think so. I don’t think you want to compete with your customers.”

The customers here are unambiguously the record companies themselves, not the television audience. Smythe’s essay drew much criticism, and it is surely too simple a model to serve in any general way as a new paradigm for cultural studies. Yet his analysis might serve as a beginning in any attempt to think a way out of the current impasse in cultural studies that has emerged out of the emphasis on the audience.

What is problematic about each of the attempts to rethink the issue of consumption (from Marxist to post-Marxist efforts to do so) is the suppression of the fact that so few cultural texts are today produced as pure commodities. The major broadcasting media (radio and television) throughout the capitalist world function as pure commodities in only exceptional cases—those pay TV and cable TV services that carry no advertising. Newspapers and magazines rely on an enormous extent on advertising revenue, and publishers have now perfected the art of producing the “free” advertising-funded newspaper that defies the commodity production model. It is not necessary to argue, as Smythe does, that advertisers are the “real” consumers here to see that their function as recipients of use-value is grossly neglected. We might, however, follow Nicholas Garnham (1979a, 1979b) in an effort to investigate the concrete connections between commodity and meaning in contemporary culture. My aim here is not to attempt to “reduce” the text to its budget sheets; my purpose is simply to open up the question of meaning in music television, with an acknowledgment that the implied consumer sovereignty of some recent cultural studies work is also quite inadequate.

First, there are empirical problems in seeing music video in these terms. In the field of pop music, the use-value of commodities is undercut in two ways. First, as I have tried to establish, the commodity forms of pop music (records, cassettes, compact discs) seem to deliver insufficient meaning to satisfy consumers, who supplement the meanings offered through the commodity with ancillary texts—live performances, media interviews, photographs, posters, T-shirts, and so forth. Second, as Simon Frith (1987a, 1988b) has noted, the pop music industry in the 1980s has increasingly shifted to a role as rights exploiter rather than commodity manufacturer, and a result of this trend is that the music itself is often a promotional vehicle for other products, services, and corporations.
Thus, in the 1980s, pop music was doubly undermined as a cultural commodity, for it is now not only an incomplete commodity (from the point of view of use-value), requiring essential discourses of promotion (which have themselves become increasingly commodified); since the 1980s, that incomplete commodity increasingly finds its use-value for the music industry itself in its promotional role for advertisers and corporate sponsors. Thus, music television is rarely a pure commodity, but rather functions, as I will show, in this ancillary role—promoting the music itself, which (in its turn) is increasingly mobilized to promote something else (jeans, movies, beer, cosmetics, and so on).

Furthermore, there are broader conceptual issues at stake. In light of the observations above, we can now consider the Marxist analyses of contemporary cultural commodities offered by Wolfgang Haug (1986, 1987) and Nicholas Garnham (1979a, 1979b), which, when synthesized with my earlier comments, will illuminate a great deal about the nature of music television.

Haug provides a more complex Marxist analysis of cultural commodities than that of some recent cultural studies research. As he shows, the question of use-value is not simply a matter of identifying the essence of what the consumer consumes after the commodity has been valorized (purchased). While he does share with some recent cultural studies commentators (such as Jef Ang) a rejection of theories of media “manipulation,” in favor of stressing real use-values, Haug first notes an important nuance in the structure of commodities: that they must offer, in addition to a use-value that may be enjoyed after its purchase, a seeming use-value—which is our motive to buy that commodity. The point is echoed, for instance, in accounts of capitalist advertising as a “magic system” that promises those things that cannot, or have not yet been, commodified in the marketplace (Williams, 1980: 170-95). We might also usefully supplement this observation with Garnham’s (1983) point about the specifics of cultural consumption, that commodities are not usually available for partial consumption, in the manner of a “free sample.” When we pay for a new CD, a new cable television channel, or a movie ticket, we must purchase the commodity before we know whether or not we want it. By the time we discover the answer to that question, it is too late, for the commodity has already been consumed.

It follows from the arguments of both Haug and Garnham that cultural commodities will offer a use-value ahead of time, before the actual moment of consumption:

A duality is produced in all commodity production: first, the use-value; second, and additionally, the appearance of use-value. For until the sale, with which the exchange-value standpoint reaches its end, use-value tends to play a role only as semblance. The aesthetic in the broadest sense—sensuous appearance and the sense of the use-value—here attaches itself from the thing. Domination and separate production of this aesthetic turn into a means for the end of money. Thus . . . in the principle of exchange, the tendency toward the technocracy of sensuousness is set up economically. (Haug, 1987: 106)

Clearly, Haug’s comments have great pertinence to a cultural form such as music television, whose purpose is precisely that of generating the appearance of use-values for the putative purchaser of pop commodities.

One result of this analysis should be to encourage a shift away from a naive notion of consumer sovereignty in cultural analysis. Another effect, in relation to music television, is to draw our attention to the real relations that exist between live performance and video clips. It is not, as is often assumed, that one is a “simulation” of the other (although this may sometimes be true in a limited chronological sense, as I suggested earlier). More important, however, is that they are instances of what Haug calls “semblance.” If we follow Haug’s line of thinking, it is apparent that both live performance and music television constitute forms of the “technocracy of sensuousness.” The spectacular displays of the live performance (lighting effects, smoke, costumes, the decibel level, dancing/choreography, video and film inserts, and so on) that are mirrored in many music video clips are not reflections of each other, but are the “sensuous stimuli” that promote the commodities of the music industry. They suggest, through overwhelming and sometimes outrageous stimuli, the use-values (excitement, arousal, eroticism) that will be delivered if the consumer purchases the commodity (record, cassette, CD) that they promote. (This point will be detailed in chapters 4 and 5.) The link between a simple consumer sovereignty model of cultural consumption and recent cultural studies emphases on “real” use-values is this: both neglect the fact that the “technocracy of sensuousness” deploys a use-value of another kind—the usefulness of the promotional device as a means of delivering an audience/potential buyer.

This makes the music video text an extremely complex and unusual cultural artifact, for it seems to both exceed and contain the commodity it advertises. The music video clip almost manages to provide both levels
of use-value: on the one hand offering the second level of use-value appearance (as advertising) and on the other providing the actual use-value (the song itself). If this were exactly so, video clips would have replaced other media as the commodity form of popular music. However, promotional videos do not quite encompass the first-level use-values. This is because each contains only one song (as opposed to the album-length experience that is being advertised—in this respect they resemble singles, which now function almost entirely as advertisements for albums); because videos are not as easily accessed as records, cassettes, and CDs (even if we tape them through our VCRs they are not as easily replayed); and because their sound quality is generally significantly poorer than that found in records, cassettes, or CDs.

Finally, it needs to be noted that while Haug is careful to avoid the endorsement of “manipulation” theses about mass culture, he refuses to make the necessary theoretical move of seeking out the real use-values inherent in the second-level “appearance of the use-value.” Which is to say that in order to understand the meaning of music television texts we need to deploy the insights of both Haug and Ang. Music television makes this especially clear: it demonstrates the real use-values of “semblance” through the fact that the audience is willing to devote substantial quantities of time and money to the consumption of advertising.

The political implications of this will be explored further in the final chapter of this book. The question of how music television promotes the music itself and establishes its “technocracy of sensuousness” will be addressed via textual analysis in the following chapters.

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THREE

A Musicology of the Image

Kids come to my house all the time with their demos. I put on [N.W.A.’s] Straight Outta Compton and tell them to close their eyes and tell me you can’t see it. Whenever you get a record that you can see, that’s a fly record.

—Daddy-O, Stetsasonic

In a fascinating effort to consider the sound-image relation in popular music, John Corbett (1990) suggestively begins the task of applying film theory to pop through an engagement with the ideas of Laura Mulvey (1975, 1989). The “problem” that Corbett confronts neatly illustrates my thesis about the limitations of certain kinds of text analysis, since its core is the notion that pop music constitutes “a set of objects that produce their own visual lack,” leading to the psychoanalytic observation that “it is the lack of the visual, endemic to recorded sound, that initiates desire in relation to the popular music object” (Corbett, 1990: 84). There are two problems with this starting point. First, it is empirically unsound, in that the popular music text may contain visual lack only if it has already been wrenched from its actual contexts of consumption (identified in chapter 2) and analyzed as something that it is not—a discrete, purely aural, text. Second, the assumptions made by Corbett in this essay (which has some very plausible and sensible things to say about music television) center on an image fetishism that is pervasive in film theory and psychoanalytic theory alike. It seems reasonable to ask why it is that we should want to use theories of the visual to understand pop’s aural codes (even if they could be so neatly distinguished). Clearly this presents a challenge to the more common kinds of psychoanalytic criticism (although see Silverman, 1988, for an exploration of the role of the voice in the formation of the