Music Video as Communication: 
Popular Formulas and Emerging Genres

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In their first issue of the 1990s the editors of the prominent music industry weekly Billboard used the phrase “the video decade” to look back on the ten years that had just come to a close. Indeed, perhaps the most significant development in the field of popular music during the 1980s was the emergence of the rock video. On August 1, 1981, a new cable network, Music Television (MTV), began showing brief promotional video clips designed to showcase the recordings of the singers and musical groups appearing in them. Although this new type of programming service—something akin to 24-hour-a-day visual radio—initially could be seen in only 2.1 million American households, just nine years later it was being offered on 5,050 of the nation’s 8,500 cable systems, with some 46.1 million subscribers (Denisoff 64; Barol 50). The rapid and impressive growth of the channel, along with the appearance of video programs such as the NBC network’s Friday Night Videos and cable superstation WTBS’s Night Tracks, allowed videos to become a significant force not only in the music world, but in other visual media as well. In assessing the major cultural trends of the 1980s many observers (e.g., Pareles, Buckman) pointed to the rise of rock videos and noted how their fast-paced visual style had influenced the look of advertisements, films and television programs. As the 1990s began, then, the term “music video,” a relatively unknown expression just ten years earlier, was firmly established in the vocabulary of American popular entertainment.

Given the popularity and influence of music video, it is important that we understand the rhetorical dimensions of this new type of media. What do videos communicate to the viewers who attend to them? What are the dynamics of the communication process; in other words, how do the aural and visual elements in videos interact to invite viewers to construct meanings? And how might the clips produced during the 1980s have shaped viewer expectations about the medium of music video? These questions surely must be explored if we are to understand the communicative potential of what Robert W. Pittman, one of the developers of MTV, refers to as a “new multidimensional language.”
Communication researchers, however, have provided only partial answers to the questions surrounding the rhetorical dimensions of music video. In large part this is due to the fact their research agenda has been influenced by those who have been alarmed by the sexual and violent images that sometimes are contained in videos. Concerns about these images first surfaced in 1984 when the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) contended that forty percent of the 518 videos its members scrutinized contained at least one episode of violence; and of those forty percent, over one-third portrayed the violence as being sexually related. Three years later, at a Washington symposium sponsored by Tipper Gore’s Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC), US Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop added momentum to the NCTV’s claims by opining that many music videos “are a combination of senseless violence and senseless pornography to the beat of rock music” (qtd. in “Tipper”).

And, more recently, in their November 1988 newsletter the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) added its voice to the criticism by advising parents to attempt to moderate the potential negative influences of sexual and violent images in music videos by watching MTV along with their children (Voland E7).

In light of these vocal concerns, it is not surprising that most of the communication scholars who studied rock videos during the 1980s focused on the presence of violent and sexual images. Through content analyses of random samples of music videos several researches corroborated the fears of the NCTV, the PMRC, and the AAP. For example, Baxter et al. found sexual and violent images in over fifty percent of a sample of MTV videos. Caplan performed a similar analysis and concluded that rock videos “are dominated by violence” (146). Sherman and Dominick focused on “concept” videos, where musical performance is de-emphasized, and noted that episodes of violence occurred in 56.6 percent of their sample. These researchers also found depictions of sexual intimacy in more than three-quarters of the videos they studied. Brown and Campbell likewise examined concept videos, finding that in a sample of seventy-seven videos “over half of the behaviors coded were antisocial in nature” (108). And Burns and Thompson relied on their experience viewing “hundreds” of examples to note that “violence, debauchery, death, Satanism, pain, destruction, decay, and general gloom and doom—all show up with some regularity in rock video” (21).

While these content analysts informed the debate over sex and violence in music videos by describing the nature of video images at particular points in time, they made no attempts to formulate theoretical understandings of the larger communicative potential of the new form of media they examined. Barton and Gregg note that this is often a shortcoming of content analyses of television programming. As they argue, these types of studies frequently fail to account for the formal
qualities of programming which “intermingle” with content to create or evoke “patterns of meaning” (33-34). By focusing solely on sexual and violent imagery the content analysts ignored the recurring presentational conventions in videos which lead viewers to interpret the visual and aural images in them in particular ways. In other words, these researchers described an aspect of the content of music videos but failed to explain how viewers might make sense of this content in the context of watching a “music video” rather than a television situation comedy or newscast.

At the same time the sex and violence studies were being conducted several other communications scholars chose to turn away from examining specific content in order to investigate the more general formal qualities of music video. Yet, they too ultimately provided an incomplete understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of the television programming they studied. Through an analysis of montage structures Fry and Fry demonstrated that music video constitutes a distinct genre which blends the denotative visual characteristics of both TV drama and advertisements. Kinder theorized on the new codes of spectator relations created by video and drew an analogy between watching MTV and dreaming. Kaplan argued that all rock videos are “postmodern,” as they tend to hedge “along the line of not communicating a clear signified” (63).4 And Jones attempted to explain the incoherence in videos by outlining a theory of “digital narrative.” Through their explorations of the overall form of music video these researchers were able to illuminate many of the presentational conventions which set video clips apart from other types of television programming; however, one cannot help but feel that in adopting such a general perspective these scholars may have adhered too closely to McLuhan’s notion that “the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (32). By analyzing form in the absence of content these researchers suggest that, for the most part, all videos are the same— that, indeed, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 24). One need only spend a short time watching MTV to realize that this notion obscures the richness of music video. True, there are many videos which are ambiguous and dreamlike; however, there are an equal number in which rather straightforward meanings arise. Because it cannot account for the presence of these two dissimilar styles, a purely formal approach provides only a partial picture of the communicative potential of music video.

If we are to attain a more complete understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of music video, to comprehend more fully what and how videos communicate and the ways in which the clips produced during the 1980s may have shaped viewer expectations about the medium, then we must analyze the interaction between content and form in popular music videos. Several media critics have demonstrated that a genre
approach is well suited to such an analysis. By uncovering recurring combinations of established forms and distinct types of content within groups of fiction films (Kaminsky), television programs (Newcomb) and documentaries (Gronbeck), these scholars have illuminated the strategies most often utilized by the producers of these media to successfully engage audiences by expressing shared meanings. Cavelti refers to these strategies as “formulas,” and in his analysis of Western films and novels notes how understanding such formulas reveals the cultural significance of popular media artifacts. In what follows I will argue that there are several recurring combinations of form and content within popular music videos which define six distinct formulas or music video genres. By outlining the distinguishing characteristics of these genres I will illuminate the common types of audiovisual techniques that videomakers have used to engage viewers. I will also attempt to provide a sense of the ways in which these techniques may have shaped audience expectations regarding music video as a means of communication.

Formal Possibilities

In order to begin to understand the rhetorical dimensions of music video we must analyze video form. By “form” I mean the overall relationship around which a music clip’s aural and visual elements are structured. Burke notes that “form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form insofar as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (124). The same is true of form in a fiction or documentary film: through the arrangement between its segments a film cues us to “create specific expectations which are aroused, guided, delayed, cheated, satisfied, or disturbed” (Bordwell and Thompson 35). While perhaps not as complex, owing to the longer time format characteristic of film, form in video functions in a similar way. By constructing the relationship between an audio recording of a song and a set of visual images in a particular fashion the producers of a music video hope to engage their auditors in a sensually-rich viewing and listening experience. The general audiovisual pattern serving as the blueprint for this construction is the form of the video clip.

What sets music video form apart from form as it appears in other media is the primacy of a musical soundtrack. In a film or television program music often contributes to the form of the work after a written script has been acted out, photographed and edited. In other words, the music is added to the work to become part of a form that is rooted in dialogue and visuals. This process moves in the reverse direction in the production of a music video. The US record companies who collectively spend over $50 million a year to finance music videos do so in order to promote sales of recordings of musical performances
(Goldberg 62). As one director says of his music videos, "they're commercial devices to attempt to get teenagers to spend their hard earned McDonald's money on records, tapes, or CDs" (qtd. in Lewis 78). Because the music in these promotional clips is created long before any other material is considered, it is the dominant formal element. Visual imagery and other formal components (sound effects, for example) are used to enhance the musical soundtrack rather than the other way around. In the words of Len Epand, the general manager of Polygram records, visuals "heighten music's impact, demanding more attention on the song and performance"; thus "music video remains a music-driven medium" (qtd. in Denisoff 265).

The unique character of music video form gives rise to two general styles of videos which are named in accordance with the nature of the visual images utilized to enhance their musical soundtracks. As a song and its execution are so central to video form, directors often rely on visuals which show the music being performed. By using shots of singers or bands lip-synching to the music on the soundtrack they create a form which works directly to accomplish the goals of the record companies who underwrite their work. Performance oriented visuals cue viewers that, indeed, the recording of the music is the most significant element. However, the medium of television offers many visual possibilities beyond mere lip-synching. And if a director is to produce a clip that might somehow stand apart from the numerous other videos appearing on a service such as MTV—another interest of the record companies who seek to persuade viewers to purchase one album rather than another—then it is to non-performance oriented alternatives that she or he must turn. Those who write about music video often use the terms "performance" and "conceptual" to refer to videos which favor one or the other of these two general types of visuals. Shore explains this distinction and is careful to note that combinations of the two types are possible:

By now we know the many ways in which a rock video can work. There are straight lip-synched performance clips, some of them crashing bores, some of them wonderful if you just want to see a well-shot band performing. There are high-concept clips, full of image overload and deliberately ambiguous narrative tangents that only occasionally resolve to constitute the semblance of a plot. In between, there are various hybrids of the two polarities—clips that mix performance with conceptualized plot...or performance with flashes of associative imagery. (99)

Rather than describing two general styles of video clips, then, the terms "performance" and "conceptual" actually refer to the two most basic formal possibilities in music videos. Conceiving of these terms in this manner is important if we are to understand the formal qualities of the "hybrid" videos which are neither totally performance oriented nor completely conceptual in nature.
While the word "performance" accurately captures the formal significance of one type of visual imagery, the term "conceptual" needs to be refined. Beyond describing the fact that a set of visual images has nothing to do with the execution of a musical performance, what does it mean to say that the relationship between the visuals is conceptual? In the above description of video styles Shore's use of the terms "narrative," "plot" and "associative imagery" indicates that conceptual relationships in videos might be constructed through the use of formal systems modeled after those commonly found in films and television programs. This seems a reasonable assumption; for in attempting to engage their auditors with visual images that do not deal with musical performance the makers of music videos are likely to draw upon familiar codes that will be readily comprehended by viewers. McLuhan and Fiore's observation that "we impose the form of the old on the content of the new" is particularly salient here (86). Music may play different roles in the forms of music video, film and television, yet there is no reason to conclude that there is a similar dissimilarity in the functions of visuals which do not deal with musical performance. Thus formal systems traditionally associated with other audiovisual visual media, in particular, the firmly established formal codes of the first "moving picture" medium, film, may illuminate conceptual video form in greater detail.

In structuring the conceptual visual elements of a music video a director might draw upon five formal systems that have been developed throughout the history of filmmaking. In their discussion of these systems Bordwell and Thompson point out that of the five, narrative form is the most common. Films structured around narratives attempt to engage viewers by telling stories; that is, they contain "a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space" (83). Usually, these events are acted out by characters, with whom the audience often is invited to identify. This form is very familiar to most viewers because it is at the heart of the many popular fiction films produced in the classic Hollywood style (as well as numerous television dramatic and situation comedy programs). The director of a music video might utilize the established appeal of narrative form and structure relationships between conceptual visual images that engage viewers by causing them to desire to witness the resolution of a conflict or the solution to a mystery. This type of form might be particularly appropriate in a video for a song that relates a narrative through its lyrics. In such a clip the visuals might illustrate the story in the song.

Perhaps less common, but equally engaging, are four types of non-narrative film form. Bordwell and Thompson note that, rather than to tell a story, filmmakers use these formal systems to provide factual information (categorical form), to express a point of view (argumentative form), to lead an audience to create links between what might otherwise
seem to be dissimilar objects (associational form) or to invite viewers to appreciate the unique aesthetic qualities of particular visual images (abstract form). For example, a film such as Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, which contains segments devoted to illustrating each of the different sporting events that make up an Olympic competition, is structured by categorical form. Argumentative form is at the heart of a documentary like Lorentz’s *The River*, which openly attempts to move audiences to support a governmental policy. Associational form is used to bring together the visuals in Conner’s *A Movie*, a film which juxtaposes excerpts taken from different types of earlier films to lead viewers to experience tension over contemporary social relationships. And Murphy and Leger’s *Mechanical Ballet* employs abstract form as it seeks to alter its audience’s perceptions of seemingly ordinary objects and people (Bordwell and Thompson 44-81). In situations where a chain of causally related visuals would not be an effective means of enhancing the music on the soundtrack of a rock video a director might turn to one of these non-narrative forms to structure alternative types of conceptual visual images. Once again, the nature of the lyrics, for example, might lead a director to utilize corresponding visual form. Kaplan and Kinder’s observations regarding the ambiguity and dream-like qualities of many videos suggest that, in particular, abstract and associational forms may be commonplace in videos which feature conceptual visuals. Given the imprecise nature of many popular music lyrics, this in not surprising.

**Recurring Forms**

Having outlined the formal systems which might be used to structure a relationship between the visual images in a music video, I turn now to an examination of the ways in which these six possibilities actually have been utilized in popular music videos. In order to attain the fullest understanding of the communicative potential of the medium it is important to analyze the clips that have had the greatest impact upon television viewers. Rather than examine a random sample drawn at one particular moment in time, then, I will focus on the most popular videos that have been produced throughout the music video boom precipitated by the emergence of MTV in the beginning of the 1980s. Near the close of the decade several useful overviews of these types of well known clips were provided by the two principal video music outlets, MTV and NBC’s *Friday Night Videos*. On April 30, 1989, MTV aired the “Top 100 Videos of All Time,” a program featuring the videos which had performed most consistently throughout the history of its “Video Countdown,” a weekly wrap-up of the clips receiving the most airplay. On September 15, 1989, *Friday Night Videos* dedicated a program to its ten “Greatest Videos of the Decade.” And, most recently, on March 11 and 12, 1990, MTV added to its earlier compilation of viewer favorites by presenting the
seventy “Most Requested Videos of All Time.” After repeat showings of the same videos are eliminated, these programs provide a combined total of 138 of the most well liked and influential clips in music video history.

When these popular videos are grouped together according to the formal conventions utilized within them one quickly discovers that performance dominates just about all of the 138 clips. Only two of the videos do not contain visual images of a song being performed by a band or singer. One of these, George Michael’s “Father Figure,” is a narrative presenting the story of a taxi driver who watches over a fashion model. The other, “Stand” by R.E.M., is filled with abstract images of objects, people and animals. None of the 138 clips is predominantly categorical, argumentative or associational. Among the most popular videos produced to date, then, purely conceptual clips are quite uncommon.

Yet performance, while used as a formal system in practically all of these videos, rarely appears without some type of visual enhancement. Just nineteen of the clips contain visuals devoted entirely to activities such as singing, guitar playing, dancing or drumming (for example, Bruce Springsteen’s “Dancing in the Dark” or U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday”). In the vast majority of the videos, 117 of 138, visuals related to performance are intercut with images tied together by another of the six formal possibilities. Forty-eight of the clips contain a blend between performance and associational visuals (e.g., Living Colour’s “Cult of Personality”). Thirty-five feature both performance and narrative form (e.g., Madonna’s “Papa Don’t Preach”). And abstract images are mixed with performance in thirty-four of the videos (e.g., Talking Heads’ “Burning Down the House”). None of the 117 performance oriented clips draws upon argumentative or categorical form.

This overview of form confirms the notion that music video possesses its own unique blend of formal characteristics. At the same time, however, the overview implies that it is inappropriate to use terms such as “incoherent,” “dreamlike” or “ambiguous” to describe these traits. The absence of argumentative and categorical forms in the popular clips indicates that music video usually does not center on expressing an argument or providing information (at least not through the visual codes traditionally used to accomplish these goals). Moreover, the secondary roles played by narrative, associational and abstract forms reveal that telling stories, drawing links between visuals and celebrating the aesthetic qualities of images are not likely to be fundamental concerns in music video. What the overview of form clearly implies is that music video generally is about musical performance. The predominance of performance as a formal system in the popular clips indicates that music video defines itself chiefly by communicating images of artists singing
and playing songs. True, these images sometimes appear juxtaposed alongside abstract visuals or ambiguous special effects; however, it is erroneous to conclude that non-performance material undercuts the distinct thrust of popular videos. To search for coherent narratives and unambiguous statements, then, is to miss the point of this new type of media; for as this overview indicates, meaning in music video must be understood primarily vis-à-vis performance rather than any of video's other secondary formal systems.

Recurring Formulas and Emerging Genres

As the central formal convention in popular video, performance provides a point of entry into the communicative potential of music video. The next step in attempting to understand this potential is to move from an examination of forms to an analysis of formulas and the genres these formulas define. Like a form, a formula is “a conventional system for structuring cultural products” (Cawelti 56). However, where “form” refers to a broad organizational pattern, “formula” describes a much more specific interaction between a form and an distinct type of media content. Because it is more pronounced a formula works to guide an audience’s expectations and interpretations in a much more predictable fashion. For example, although the television programs Cheers, Primetime Live and Murder, She Wrote, all regularly employ narrative form, a similar narrative—say, the story of a person's death—might elicit very different reactions in an audience as a result of the distinct formulas characteristic of each of the shows. On Cheers a particular type of content interacts with narrative form to create a comic formula, therefore the story of a death might evoke laughter. In contrast, a similar tale told on Primetime Live might cause fear or sympathy because this program utilizes a news documentary formula. And in the context of Murder, She Wrote, a program known for its mystery formula, the story of a death might elicit intrigue or suspense in viewers who expect to be taken along on a journey toward the solution of the crime. As these examples suggest, successful formulas define genres. Newcomb points out that in popular entertainment the interactions between form and content which strike a chord in audiences “are widely copied by those producers who hope to cash in on the commercial success that accompanies them. The formulas that survive have wide appeal in a massive audience” (22). In other words, effective formulas spawn groups of similar works which constitute recognizable genres. Analyzing the characteristics of such popular genres yields insight into the communicative potential of media products that is not attainable through isolated studies of individual works.9
The formulas at work in the 138 popular music videos under examination in this study can be discovered by narrowing the formal groupings presented in the previous section. Having outlined broad classes of videos which share formal characteristics, we must dig deeper into the visual contents of the clips within each of these groupings to search for trends that further separate videos into distinct clusters. What specific similarities and differences can be discerned in the imagery of formally similar clips? In other words, what types of images of performance appear in videos which are structured entirely by the performance form? What types of narrative, associational and abstract visuals appear in the videos where performance is enhanced by a secondary form? And what commonalities are there between the images in the two videos which do not contain any performance related visuals? By inductively teasing out more detailed relationships between formally similar videos we can uncover the interactions of form and content which constitute formulas. Because these formulas are drawn from the 138 most successful videos produced to date, those that recur most frequently provide an indication of the types of popular genres that are being developed in music video.

When the similarities and differences in both the form and content of the 138 popular clips are analyzed six recurring formulas emerge. In particular, one discovers several distinct styles of performance imagery which give rise to five genres of performance videos. Moreover, as images of performance so markedly dominate the vast majority of the clips, the two videos which do not contain any of these types of visuals appear to possess their own unique formula. While these two clips plainly stand apart from the others, at times the lines separating the performance oriented genres are not as absolute, and associating a video with one or the other of them is a matter of the relative preponderance of a type of imagery rather than its presence or absence. However, as the following detailed explication will demonstrate, there are very clear differences in the kinds of meanings each of these formulas encourages viewers to create.

*The Anti-Performance Piece*

Although George Michael’s “Father Figure” and R.E.M.’s “Stand” are formally dissimilar (the Michael clip utilizes a chain of narrative visuals while the R.E.M. video features a more random array of abstract images), they do share a distinct type of visual content relative to the 136 other popular videos. Perhaps “content” is not quite the proper term, for what is significant about these videos is not what they contain but what they do not contain. The makers of both clips employ purely conceptual forms and avoid using visuals involving musical performance. This is not to say that the artists do not appear in the videos; they do—Michael is the lead character in a story about a taxi driver’s relationship
with a fashion model, and shots of the four laughing members of R.E.M. pop up briefly amongst a variety of ambiguous images—however, the audience never sees the musicians lip-synching or playing musical instruments. Given the centrality of performance in video form, these two clips stand out conspicuously amongst the most popular videos produced to date.\textsuperscript{10}

By running against the dominant trend in video form the “Stand” and “Father Figure” clips appear to be articulating an “anti-performance” formula. Such a strategy seems designed to lead audiences to perceive each of the clips as being something out of the ordinary. The producers of the videos appear to wish not only to catch the attention of viewers weary of watching a near endless parade of performance oriented visuals but also to position their stars outside the pop mainstream. Given R.E.M.’s well publicized disdain for the trappings of the commercial music industry, this is not surprising.\textsuperscript{11} By appearing in an abstract video which almost mocks established conventions the band is able to simultaneously promote their song and retain their cult or “alternative” status. The Michael clip invites a related, albeit ultimately different, set of meanings. Like R.E.M., Michael appears to wish to stand outside of the mainstream; however, the anti-performance formula in his video works not to make fun of conventions but to place the star above them. The clip encourages the audience to see Michael as something more than a mere pop singer by presenting him as the protagonist in a lavishly produced narrative about a cab driver who watches over a fashion model. The rather pronounced resemblance between this chain of visuals and the movie \textit{Taxi Driver} appears designed to lead viewers to associate Michael with the aesthetic significance of Martin Scorsese’s controversial film. While it is difficult to argue that a genre exists based on evidence provided by just these two videos, there is clearly an anti-performance formula at work here. That this formula does not appear in more of the popular clips suggests that for the majority of music video viewers it has little appeal. However, there is no reason to conclude that such a formula might not be useful for the video maker attempting to reach more narrowly defined pockets of music fans within the total viewing audience.

\textit{The Pseudo-Reflexive Performance}

Among those popular videos which are formed almost exclusively through images of musical performance one discovers two distinct formulas. The first of these emerges from the recurrence of visuals which acknowledge rather than conceal certain aspects of the process of videomaking. Shots of production crews filming and editing performances are featured prominently in the following five clips: Motley Crüe’s “Wild Side,” Guns ’N’ Roses’ “Sweet Child O’ Mine,” Cheap Trick’s “The Flame,” and Bon Jovi’s “Living on a Prayer” and “Bad
Through the use of reflexive or self-referential types of images the directors of these videos allow viewers to see that the bands they are watching are consciously lip-syncing and playing musical instruments for the camera. This shatters the typical illusion that the action on the screen is unfolding spontaneously. However, the reflexivity in these videos about video is only partial, for the music in them—the truly primal formal element—is presented in its usual unadulterated fashion (where the recording used as the soundtrack is exactly the same as what is being sold on a tape, CD or record album). Thus audio production techniques used to construct the key illusion, the musical performance, are never revealed or even addressed. As the content of these clips works to invite viewers to reflect upon some, but not all, of the customarily transparent conventions used to create performance oriented music videos, the formula that emerges from within them is best described as “pseudo-reflexive performance.”

A truly reflexive formula might reveal the entire process of music videomaking, perhaps leading viewers to consider the promotional and commercial motives behind the enterprise, but the videos in this genre never take the audience that far. While the pseudo-reflexive formula creates the impression that the band members are acknowledging the illusion of their performance in order to rebel against the norms of popular performance video, the music on the soundtrack still carries out the usual function of promoting the sale of tapes, CDs and records. The rebellion here, then, is primarily a rebellion in visual style. This phenomenon is most apparent in Bon Jovi’s “Bad Medicine,” where visuals of fans with cameras shooting film of the band in concert are intercut among awkwardly composed and often blurry shots of the band performing at what appears to be the same concert. This juxtaposition encourages viewers to believe that these fans, rather than a professional film crew, are the authors of the performance clip. Thus the members of Bon Jovi seem to be participating in a video which is not being controlled by the usual commercial forces; when, in fact, as the credit shown at the beginning and end of the clip indicates, the video is being produced and distributed by the band’s record company, Polygram. The look of the clip may distinguish it from other performance videos, yet the manner in which the soundtrack is presented places the “Bad Medicine” video squarely in the mainstream.

Ironically, instead of demystifying the process of making a music video, the pseudo-reflexive performance formula actually appears to invite viewers to see this as a complex and rather glamorous undertaking. By presenting images of cameras filming performers and videotape being edited the videos containing this formula provide a comparatively rare glimpse into the “backstage” activity surrounding the production of a performance clip. There is a strong sense that the viewer is in a privileged
position vis-à-vis the audience who might only see the clip through the lenses of the cameras shown on the screen. The Guns 'N' Roses video, for example, continually shifts between two perspectives—typical color footage of the performance and more unusual black and white shots of the video being captured by a film crew—as if to remind the audience that it is being allowed to experience a point of view which is customarily "off limits" to those other than band or crew members. In a similar fashion, shots of a camera crew in Motley Crue's "Wild Side" create the impression that the viewer is on the stage with the band as they shoot a performance video with reckless abandon in front of an adoring crowd. The other clips in this pseudo-reflexive performance genre also seem to place the members of the audience close to the excitement of making a video, but not so close that they might question the motives underlying the enterprise.¹³

The Performance Documentary

The other formula that emerges among videos devoted almost exclusively to musical performance is the result of recurring images of concert and recording studio performances captured in a documentary style. By "documentary" I mean that familiar type of filmmaking which encourages viewers to believe "that somehow that which is shown has actually taken place or is taking place before the camera and is an event that could exist or would have existed had the camera not been there" (Kaminsky 9). In fourteen of the popular videos bands are shown performing live in front of auditoriums or stadiums packed with wildly cheering fans. This creates the impression that these performances have not been staged for the camera; rather, the videomakers are merely documenting events which took place in authentic concert situations (even though live audio recordings from the same concerts are rarely used as soundtracks in the clips). A similar documentary feel is at work in Bon Jovi's "Born to Be My Baby"; here, however, what is presented is not a concert performance but a glimpse of the band at work in an audio production studio recording the song on the soundtrack. The formula shared by the videos in this genre is best described as "performance documentary," as the nature of the visuals utilized within them encourages viewers to feel as if they are observing actual, rather than artificial or "fictional," performance situations. This sense of realism is significant because it creates the unmistakable impression that the action presented in the clips was motivated by a desire to please an audience of fans rather than to construct a promotional video.

This formula appears in its purest state in U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday." I use the term "pure" because this video is the only one of the performance documentary clips to feature a soundtrack which, like the visuals, seems to have been recorded as the concert was performed.
Given that the video is designed to promote the band's live album "Under a Blood Red Sky," the use of the live audio is not surprising. As with these types of albums the makers of the video attempt to capture accurately the sounds and sights of a U2 concert. By presenting sometimes raw hand-held shots of the band members along with their relatively unpolished concert version of "Sunday Bloody Sunday" and the powerful applause of the fans in attendance, the producers offer viewers what appears to be a faithful televised rendering of the live magnetism of U2. This straightforward audiovisual style seems designed to enhance the band's image by placing its performance in the context of an earlier, and for many listeners a more romantic, musical era. The documentary approach and the band's frequent interaction with its audience—at one point the lead singer, Bono Vox, hands spectators at the front of the stage a large white flag on a pole and invites them to "hold it up"—are reminiscent of the many concert documentaries of the late '60s and early '70s. As in films such as Gimme Shelter and Woodstock there is a sense that what is being documented is not just a concert but a communal celebration enacted by a group of young people united by rock music (the setting of the band's performance, an outdoor amphitheater ringed by bonfires, enhances the ceremonial feel). The '60s ethos arising from the "Sunday Bloody Sunday" clip suits U2 well, given the band's highly publicized involvement with the youth-oriented, socially-conscious organizations Band Aid and Amnesty International.

As I have indicated, however, the usual tendency in performance documentary videos is to utilize "live" visuals and a "canned" soundtrack. Rather than out of the rock documentary tradition established some twenty years ago, the roots of this somewhat disjointed approach found in thirteen of the popular videos seem to emanate from the fast-paced sports highlight packages that have come to be a regular feature of television newscasts. As in these packages, there is no doubt that what is being presented has already occurred in front of a live audience; yet the visceral qualities of the music and the frequent use of special effects (in particular, slow motion) invite viewers to experience real actions in something of a superhuman context. For example, in Motley Crüe's "Home Sweet Home" video visuals of the band performing its song in front of an enthusiastic audience are juxtaposed alongside an abundance of shots of highly dramatic moments from the entire concert: fireworks explode as the band appears; the drummer performs atop a kit mounted on a 90° angle; band members swing from the lighting scaffolding high above the stage; and fans reach out from the audience in attempts to touch their heroes. Although most of these extraordinary actions are out of sync with the performance of the individual song (particularly those shown in slow motion), this is not unsettling; for the videomakers anchor the clip firmly in the musical soundtrack by
repeatedly returning to shots of the singer's lips moving in sync with the performance presented there. Emerging from the clip, then, is the sense that, like the sports fan watching an exciting condensed display of significant occurrences from the day's games, the viewer is being offered a unique overview of the key moments from a Motley Crue concert which is rooted in the band's performance of one of the show's most significant songs, "Home Sweet Home."

The makers of several other popular videos further expand the performance documentary formula by including images of off stage activities as well as concert highlights. This creates the impression that what is being documented is more than just a band engaged in a lone performance; rather, the audience is invited to accompany the band members as they travel from city to city on a concert tour. An interesting example is Guns 'N' Roses' "Paradise City," wherein viewers not only witness the group performing the soundtrack in two different concert settings—New Jersey's Meadowlands Stadium and England's Castle Donington racetrack—they also see the band members boarding a British Airways' Concord jet presumably to make the journey from one show to the other. Moreover, the video features shots of the performers signing autographs, visiting a music store, clowning around in a hotel room and adjusting the levels of their instruments during a pre-concert "sound check." As in the other clips in this genre, the videomakers create a sense of synchronization between the many non-performance oriented visuals and the musical soundtrack by frequently returning to images of Guns 'N' Roses performing "Paradise City" at the two concerts. This particular blend of on and off stage imagery appears designed to both showcase the performance abilities of the band and glamorize its "rock and roll" lifestyle.

But perhaps the most unique manifestation of the performance documentary formula appears in Bon Jovi's "Born to Be My Baby." What sets this video apart from the others in this genre is the environment in which the performance occurs. As I have indicated, rather than presenting the band members in concert, this clip shows them in a production studio recording the song on the soundtrack. By choosing this setting the videomakers create a clip in which there seems to be a very close match between aural and visual elements. Even though the songs produced with contemporary multi-track audio recording techniques are pieced together from numerous "takes" recorded over days, weeks and sometimes even months (and no one performance could ever accurately represent the visuals which actually match what the viewer of the typical music video hears), the band does appear to be literally performing the music. The videomakers accomplish this artificial synchronization by cuing viewers that time has been compressed in the video. The most noticeable cue is the changing attire of the individual
band members: because the same persons appear wearing different T-shirts or hats at various moments in the clip it becomes apparent that the performance footage was shot during several separate recording sessions. Moreover, by slightly varying the volumes of particular instruments as the song plays the videomakers suggest that different sessions may have been devoted to perfecting the sounds of the individual voices, guitars, drums and keyboards which dynamically interact as the finished musical product heard on the soundtrack. The pronounced sense of realism created by these audiovisual cues is further enhanced by the use of grainy black and white film and minimal lighting. In sum, the “Born To Be My Baby” clip—like the others in the performance documentary genre—utilizes the notion of the “creative treatment of actuality” that filmmaker John Grierson said is at the heart of documentarian’s craft to invite viewers to partake of a performance which quite “naturally” seems to have occurred independently of the videomaking process (qtd. in Barnouw 287).15

The Special Effects Extravaganza

Where the previous formula arises from a recurring interaction between performance form and noticeably realistic visuals, the fourth formula to emerge from the 138 popular videos is the result of a regular and distinct interaction between the same type of form and the opposite type of images. Like almost all of the other videos being studied here, fourteen particular clips present singers and bands performing songs; but what sets these specific videos apart from all the others is a noticeable tendency for the human individuals in them to be overshadowed by extraordinary sets, costumes, machinery, puppets or manipulations of film or video images. While it is not uncommon for these sorts of “unreal” visuals to be used to embellish musical performances in many videos—a point I will return to later—in these fourteen clips the eye-catching images clearly outshine all the other visual material, creating a sense that what the viewer sees, including the musicians’ performances, is made possible only through the unique capabilities of electronic visual media. Given this triumph of technology over musical prowess, I am calling the formula found in these videos “the special effects extravaganza.” The makers of these clips appear to wish to shatter audience expectations and create the sense that the musicians they are promoting are unafraid to push the boundaries of music video.

One rather straightforward means of achieving special effects, utilized in four of the videos in this genre, is to manipulate the types of material elements—props, sets and costumes—that are frequently used to enhance a theater audience’s experience of a play presented on a stage. In George Harrison’s “Got My Mind Set On You” the former Beatle lip-synchs and strums his guitar alongside furniture and stuffed animals which
move in sync with the beat of the music. Similarly, in Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" the musician intermittently appears on a television monitor which is located inside a giant house filled with dancing machines and mannequins. A somewhat more dramatic approach is used in Bryan Adams "Run To You," where viewers see the singer making his way through artificially created wind, rain and snow. And in Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' "Don't Come Around Here No More" props, sets and costumes are coordinated to conjure up a scene reminiscent of the world created by Lewis Carroll in his classic novel Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (a young, blond actress plays the part of Alice to Petty's "Mad Hatter"). The theatrical roots of the special effects utilized in these four videos are significant, for they create the feeling that the viewer is being dazzled through the clever use of well-established and rather familiar techniques. Thus the makers of the clips can push the boundaries of music video without challenging audience expectations too drastically.

Somewhat more revolutionary special effects appear in the other videos in this genre. In these clips film and video technologies are manipulated to create visuals which obviously can exist only in a mediated way. One technique involves superimposing images from dissimilar sources to place performers in unique performance situations. In Aerosmith's "Angel" the lead singer interacts with a floating apparition of a winged woman. The Escape Club's "Wild, Wild West" features symmetrical combinations of human limbs which writhe in the air alongside the band members. Paula Abdul dances with an animated cat in a cartoon world in "Opposites Attract." And in Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House" the performers are superimposed in front of a wall of flames, and images of their faces are combined to create disturbing new composites. A related type of technical manipulation involves adding unnatural colors to standard filmed performances. In both Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing" and INXS's "Need You Tonight/Meditate," this type of technique is used to give the musicians somewhat animated qualities. As they are so pronounced, the special effects utilized in these six videos encourage viewers to consciously consider how technological advances might alter the previously existing norms of televised musical performance. In particular, there is a strong sense that the human element traditionally so central to this type of endeavor might be overcome by the seemingly awesome power of modern film and video.

And, indeed, in the final four videos which utilize the special effects extravaganza formula contemporary film and video technologies do overcome the human qualities of the performers, and the musicians become transformed into distorted caricatures of their actual selves. In Genesis's "Land of Confusion" multiple superimpositions, unconventional camera angles, and artfully crafted puppets which resemble
political leaders and show business celebrities are used to draw viewers into a nightmare experienced by former President Ronald Reagan. In the disturbing vision the three band members do not appear in their normal human forms; rather, their highly exaggerated puppet “doubles” lip-synch the tune and play replicas of musical instruments.17 Equally striking digital video effects (DVE) are employed in the Cars’ “You Might Think” to continually alter the size ratios between the band members and a young woman. At one point, the images of the musicians are reduced so that they can be shown performing atop a floating bar of soap and then inside a medicine chest; at another moment, the lead singer, Ric Ocasek, is enlarged so that, à la King Kong, he can reach into the woman’s room and scoop her up in the palm of this hand. In a-ha’s “Take On Me” a similar type of transformation occurs, this time the result of a sophisticated intermingling between traditional color film and vibrant black and white animation which are used to establish respective “real” and “comic book” worlds. Throughout the video the band members and a young woman move between these worlds so that their images are never completely stable; at the conclusion of the clip the lead singer desperately struggles to shed his animated self and become purely human.

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, stop motion photography and clay animation (or “claymation”) are used in Peter Gabriel’s “Sledgehammer” to bring about a rapid and continual stream of transformations involving the singer and the objects with which he interacts. During the 4:53-long clip the videomakers present viewers with a dizzying array of changes wherein inanimate objects (e.g., sledgehammers and fruit) are brought to life while human beings (in particular, the singer) take on jerky, mechanistic qualities. Where the a-ha video culminates in a scene of an animated figure fighting to become human, in the “Sledgehammer” clip the final transformation moves in a quite different direction. Perhaps in an attempt to suggest that even modern technology can be subsumed by forces outside of the realm of human understanding, the videomakers end with a sequence in which Gabriel’s body becomes a mass of darkness and stars which rises from a chair to meld into the night sky.

While all the genres I am outlining in this paper arise as a result of distinct methods of presenting (or in the case of the anti-performance pieces, not presenting) musical performances, the visual techniques utilized in the special effects extravaganzas clearly are the most striking. More so than in any other formula, what is likely to dominate a viewer’s attention is the “how” of presentation rather than the performance being presented. This creates a curious situation with respect to how effectively this formula might promote sales of the recorded works of the bands and singers it is designed to showcase. While techniques such as claymation and DVE certainly distinguish these videos from the numerous
others in which conventional film and video practices are utilized, there is the possibility that, in the minds of viewers, the visual intensity of the special effects might overpower the musical soundtrack and force it to return to the “background” position it customarily occupies in traditional films and television programs (this seems all the more likely in videos in which the human images of performers are radically changed into new forms). In this event the already murky issue of video authorship would become even more confusing: are the viewers of a special effects extravaganza experiencing the work of musicians? Or are the musicians merely props in someone else’s audiovisual creation? This is a crucial issue, for viewers might not be moved to purchase musical recordings if the eye-catching special effects so important to this type of music video diminish the roles of the performers too severely.  

The Song And Dance Number

The fifth formula to emerge from the 138 popular videos is the result of a recurring interaction between performance form and visuals which showcase the dancing talents of singers and supporting casts. In eighteen of the clips vocalists lip-sync lyrics while physically expressing the rhythmic qualities of music through energetic and patterned motions. Like the performance documentaries, these particular clips draw upon an established type of filmmaking; namely, the Hollywood musical.  

Although they present only one musical number, as opposed to the many typically contained in the musical film, these videos carry on the longstanding filmic tradition of celebrating what Braudy describes as a type of socially acceptable exhibitionism:

The essence of the musical is the potential of the individual to free himself from inhibition at the same time that he retains a sense of limit and propriety in the very form of the liberating dance. (140)

The excitement in these videos is generated not by new technologies, live concert performances or the videomaking process itself (as in other formulas) but by the enduring human capacity to reach new heights through a physical ritual of becoming one with music. Because this ritual is so well established in popular entertainment (not only in film but in vaudeville and Broadway musicals as well), I am using the traditional phrase “song and dance number” to describe the formula shared by the videos in this genre.

As singing and dancing are at the center of this formula, exceptionally talented performers are often presented on sparse sets with minimal props in order to fix viewers’ eyes firmly on their obvious physical abilities. In her “Pleasure Principle” Janet Jackson lip-synchs and dances alone in a renovated warehouse. Similarly, in “Dancing In the Street” David Bowie and Mick Jagger sing and dance together through an empty
building and out onto a deserted street. Bobby Brown’s “Every Little Step” is slightly more involved—viewers see the performer flanked by five dancers who move throughout giant white letters which spell out the song’s title—yet, still, Brown’s flashy footwork remains at the center of the clip. And in Prince’s “Kiss” the singer performs an erotic song and dance routine with a veiled female while another woman strums a guitar near the edge of the set. By utilizing such minimal approaches the makers of these four clips seem to want to openly remind viewers that, even in an age of highly advanced special effects, traditional singing and dancing skills still can be more stunning than film or video artistry.

When performers possess less impressive physical abilities, somewhat more involved productions are staged in order to create a sense of dynamism. One approach involves presenting a lip-syncing performer who moves in rhythm with a troupe of accomplished dancers. The makers of Debbie Gibson’s “Shake Your Love” create the atmosphere of a dance club by using special effects techniques to shoot the singer flanked by pairs of dancing young men and women. In her videos “How Will I Know” and “I Wanna Dance With Somebody” Whitney Houston lip-syncs through a variety of colorful sets as she interacts with a series of accomplished dancers. And in Sting’s “We’ll Be Together” the singer plays a drunken caricature of himself who rhythmically staggers throughout a bistro filled with dancing patrons. Another way to enhance the limited dancing abilities of a performer is to surround the star with eye-catching sets or props and supporting performers whose footwork is equally unpolished. In “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” Cyndi Lauper is joined by a group of seemingly “ordinary” women and men who joyously strut through the streets of New York and then onto a set designed to look like the singer’s home. David Lee Roth’s “California Girls” shows the singer performing his song and dance on a sunny beach amongst a group of bikini-clad models who frequently move to the beat of the music. In addition to helping Lauper and Roth appear more adept by comparison, the mediocre dance skills of the supporting performers in these last two videos create a good natured sense of spontaneity that is missing from the four others where professionals back up the singers in the leading roles.

The most striking videos in this genre, however, are those eight in which lavishly produced mini-narratives based upon song lyrics are used to showcase the singing and dancing talents of accomplished performers. In these clips there is a clear link to the musical tradition of ’40s and ’50s Hollywood, particularly the notion of the “integrated” ideal wherein musical and dramatic material fit together into a consistent whole. By creating a strong “fit” between song lyrics and performance situations the makers of videos featuring Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson and Madonna give the artists’ music an engaging visual dimension while
retaining and ultimately enhancing the sense that the performers themselves are the authors of the videos in which they appear. In “Nasty,” for example, Janet Jackson proves her lyrical claims about being able to fend off the advances of “nasty boys” by out-dancing a group of males who challenge her as she makes her way through a series of street scenes. The lyrics to Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” are less concrete. Thus a visual narrative in which the singer saves a man falsely accused of murder allows viewers to begin to grasp what Madonna is trying to express through her song, while several related but more ambiguous dance sequences provide an opportunity for the singer to display her physical abilities and prevent the clip from becoming so literal that it might not continue to entertain over multiple viewings. An integration between musical and narrative material is utilized even more effectively in Michael Jackson’s video for the title track to his 1982 multi-platinum album “Thriller.” Here an extended format (13:40) is employed to present the complex story of a teenager who mysteriously transforms into the beastly leader of a group of dancing corpses. In a break with the norms of music video, a purely dramatic sequence in which Jackson is afforded ample opportunity to display his acting abilities is shown during the first four minutes of the clip. Then after the music begins the stunning special effects through which he assumes a new “role” work together with his electrifying dance talents to show viewers that, indeed, Jackson is the “Thriller” at the center of the song. Because the music, lyrics, narrative and dancing in these types of clips is so tightly interwoven, the performers featured in them, like the Hollywood musical stars of an earlier era, appear as multi-talented artists who are utilizing the capacities of an audiovisual medium to their fullest.

The image of the multi-talented artist gives the song and dance number its own unique kind of efficacy. By providing viewers the opportunity to experience dimensions of a performer’s talents that could not be conveyed through purely aural media the makers of the clips in this genre overcome the impression that they are using music video merely to promote the sale of CDs, records and tapes. Moreover, because individual solo artists rather than bands are showcased through this formula, viewers are provided with clear and compelling images of successful human figures in whom they might see aspects of their own selves. Kaminsky notes that this has always been one of the great appeals of the Hollywood musical:

The call is, clearly, for identification with the protagonist; and identification depends upon the myth of skill. For the American audience toward whom the dance musicals were directed, the skill was based upon dexterity, agility and charm. The skilled performer was ambitious, got his chance, and made it to the top. Fred Astaire was, thus, a middle-class identification figure: a self-made, socially accepted success. (74)
While standards of skill have evolved since Astaire’s day—with “dexterity, agility, and charm” giving way to qualities such as flexibility, stamina and, in particular, sexuality—the notion of the individual rising above the crowd through singing and dancing talents retains its appeal. The phenomenon is well illustrated by the meteoric ascents of both Michael Jackson and Madonna; through eye-catching song and dance numbers these performers have come to be widely admired and emulated by contemporary youth.\(^{24}\)

**The Enhanced Performance**

The sixth and final formula to emerge from the most popular music videos of the 1980s is the result of a recurring interaction between performance form and visuals which are tied together through either associational, narrative or abstract form. In eighty-four of the videos shots of artists lip-syncing and pretending to perform soundtracks are intercut with images which function to illustrate portions of song lyrics, to visually compliment moods conjured up by music, to present stories or simply to catch and hold the eyes of viewers. Given the large number of clips in which this formula appears—well over half the 138 being studied here—the genre which it defines appears to be the mainstream of ’80s music video. That such a hybrid between performance and a supplementary form is so widespread is not surprising; for, as we have seen, it is only in performance documentaries—where highlights from an actual live concert are presented—and the more minimalist song and dance numbers—where the extraordinary gifts of performers can be appreciated only in a visual way—that performance form alone is utilized to carry a music video. Apparently, videomakers believe that audiences want something more than a simple staged performance. Yet, as the more spectacular special effects extravaganzas illustrate, there is the possibility that by utilizing too many non-performance oriented images a videomaker might overshadow the artist(s) whose work is being showcased on the soundtrack. The way to overcome this somewhat paradoxical situation, then, is to blend performance and non-performance images together in a manner where the musical work of the artist(s) is kept at the forefront of the video.\(^{25}\) Given the direction in which this prevalent type of hybrid is slanted, I am calling the formula at its center the “enhanced performance.”

The most common means of enhancing a performance, utilized in thirty-seven of the popular videos, is to intercut shots of associational images into scenes of bands lip-synching and playing their instruments. In fourteen of these particular clips, videomakers create a logical sense of unity between the two different types of visuals by utilizing associational images which literally illustrate aspects of song lyrics. The makers of Bruce Springsteen’s “Glory Days,” for example, intersperse
shots of the singer posing as an “over the hill” baseball player among scenes of Springsteen’s E Street Band performing in a bar to provide viewers with an appealing visualization of the aging ballplayer at the center of the song. Similarly, in the Bangles “Walk Like An Egyptian” brief scenes of people contorting their arms and legs are used to show how one walks “like an Egyptian.” Not all of the songs, however, call up such clearly defined visuals; consequently, the makers of the other twenty-three clips enhance performances by utilizing associational visuals which are related in a more visceral way to the general tone suggested by both lyrics and music. For example, in several of the clips filmmakers compliment sexual moods by frequently intercutting brief shots involving alluring females into performance sequences starring male singers or bands. The lusty tone of Whitesnake’s “Here I Go Again” is matched by scenes of the lead singer flirting with a playful woman. The more romantic feel of “I’ll Be Loving You Forever” by the New Kids On the Block is complimented by shots of the group members sharing a game of pool and a pizza with several teenage girls. And the comic flavor of Robert Palmer’s “Addicted to Love” is underscored by scenes of a group of provocatively attired models who deliberately deliver an unconvincing performance as the singer’s backup band. Similar kinds of somewhat subconscious correspondences are utilized to bring together visuals in the other clips where performance is enhanced through these types of associational images.26

A second variation of this formula features a combination of performance form and visuals which are distinctly narrative in nature. In twenty-seven of the popular clips sequences where bands lip-sync and play musical instruments are blended together with images which function as the beginnings, middles and ends of stories. As many of the songs showcased in these clips already relate complete narratives through their lyrics, filmmakers often illustrate the principal scenes in the aural narratives. For example, the misadventures of the rapping narrator of “Parents Just Don’t Understand” by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince are visualized in a series of sequences where older actors appear as his mother and father. Likewise, the key moments in Skid Row’s “18 and Life” are staged for the camera by actors who portray the principal characters in the song’s saga about a teenager gone wrong. These types of visuals play a somewhat more pivotal role in clips where lyrics tell an incomplete tale or only allude to a narrative; here narrative images fill in gaps or extend upon lyrical progressions. In the ZZ Top videos “Legs” and “Sharp Dressed Man,” for example, performance scenes and narrative segments are integrated together to place the band members at the center of fully-developed stories involving young female and male protagonists who are only mentioned in the lyrics to each of the songs. Like the producers of the less literal associational clips, however, the
makers of these more imaginative narrative videos continually draw the motivations for their non-performance oriented visuals from the visceral and lyrical qualities of their musical soundtracks.27

The third and final variation of the enhanced performance formula features a blend between performance form and abstract visuals. Instead of illustrating, clarifying or expanding upon the words to songs, the visuals in the remaining twenty videos in this genre enhance performance in the opposite fashion, by encouraging multiple interpretations of the meanings of soundtracks. As videomaker Russell Mulcahy notes, because they fail to lead viewers to concrete conclusions, abstract images work to sustain audience interest over multiple viewings of a video:

I always prefer to stay away from a literal approach to a song and take it to another level, where people can take it wherever they want. You build that abstract, noncommittal quality in there to give it a more universal appeal, because if people can figure it out, then they get bored with it. You want to keep them intrigued. (qtd. in Shore 110)

The makers of the twenty clips which contain this variant of the enhanced performance formula attempt to keep viewers intrigued by utilizing varying degrees of ambiguity. For example, brief disturbing shots of bizarre nightclub patrons are interspersed amongst performance scenes in INXS's "Devil Inside." Longer, more confusing sequences involving slaves who toil on sets reminiscent of those utilized in Fritz Lang's 1926 film Metropolis are used as a backdrop for Madonna's singing and gyrating in her "Express Yourself." And in R.E.M.'s "The One I Love" extended scenes of dancers and fireworks and time-lapse images of moving clouds and blooming flowers are intercut amongst and superimposed over shots of the band members and their instruments. As in the special effects extravaganzas, the often puzzling visuals in these types of enhanced performances are designed to call attention to themselves. Yet the manner in which the makers of these twenty particular videos carefully balance abstract images and performance footage insures that the musical work of the artists featured in the clips ultimately is not overshadowed by technological wizardry.28

In light of the flexibility offered by the enhanced performance, it becomes all the more understandable why such a clear majority of the most popular videos of the '80s appear in this genre. Like the song and dance number, this formula keeps performers at the center of audience attention; however because it requires no extraordinary performance skills any type of singer or band might be featured. Moreover, by providing a wide range of supplementary visual choices—associational, narrative or abstract—the enhanced performance allows the videomaker to create an eye-catching and engaging clip without having to utilize the expensive and complex types of film and video techniques that are the hallmark of the special effects extravaganza. And, finally, because the performance
sequences in this type of clip are shot in a studio, the videomaker retains a degree of control that is sacrificed when filming live concert scenes on location (as in the performance documentary). Such a large number of the 188 clips utilize the enhanced performance, then, because the formula provides a versatile, inexpensive and potentially effective means of achieving the promotional aims underlying music video.

**Conclusion**

Having explored the rhetorical dimensions of 188 of the most popular videos of the '80s, we can begin to attain an understanding of the ways in which these clips may have shaped audience expectations regarding music videos as a means of communication. Clearly, as my overview of form indicates, the rhetoric of music video is predominantly a rhetoric of musical performance, rather than argumentation, instruction or storytelling. In order to entice viewers into purchasing CDs, tapes and records, videomakers almost always make extensive use of images of lip-synching, dancing, drumming and guitar playing. This is not to say that other types of visuals do not appear in popular music videos; however, as I have demonstrated, when images which serve associational, narrative and abstract functions are utilized it is usually to enhance rather than overshadow the performances of singers or bands. Rarely are visuals which are not motivated by either the lyrical or musical qualities of a soundtrack utilized in any of the 188 popular clips. Thus, in a general sense, the popular music videos of the '80s appear to have lead viewers to expect this type of media primarily to be a conduit for musical performance.

Yet, at the same time, the existence of the six formulas indicates that there is more to music video than the mere presentation of a performance. Videomakers bring different types of contents to performance form in order to encourage viewers to interpret musical performances in dissimilar ways. And, as I have suggested, a key aspect of the interpretive process is the association of a singer or band with a distinct stance toward the videomaking process. Given the frequency with which they recur, performances enhanced through associational, narrative and abstract images appear to represent the mainstream; thus the musicians featured in these types of videos seem to be comfortable with the promotional aspects of music video. Similarly, special effects extravaganzas and song and dance numbers are structured to create the impression that the artists who star in them are eager to make the most of the visual opportunities opened up by video. In contrast, the characteristics of pseudo-reflexive performances create the impression that the bands who appear in them wish to expose the manipulations inherent in the videomaking process. Likewise, anti-performance pieces invite viewers to see their stars as wishing to run against the video mainstream. And performance documentaries utilize live concert situations to convince
viewers that the performing in them was motivated by a desire to please an audience of fans rather than to create a promotional video. Beyond leading viewers to expect to see numerous images of performance in music video, then, the most popular clips produced during the '80s also may have shaped the expectation that communicating an attitude toward the process of promoting one's self is a common feature of the medium.

Notes

1In Raising PG Kids In An X-Rated Society, Gore outlines the PMRC's objections to violent and sexual media content.
2In related content analyses (Vincent et al. and Vincent) concept videos were found to be sexist as well as sexual.
3Kalis and Neuendorf offer similar findings.
4For other essays dealing with postmodernism, MTV and music video, see a special issue of the Journal of Communication Inquiry 10:1 (1986).
5During the mid-’80s the cost of producing a single music video averaged between $50,000 and $60,000 (Denisoff 144).
6Bordwell and Thompson actually use the word “rhetorical” to refer to the type of non-narrative form I am calling “argumentative.” I make this change because, following Burke, I maintain that all form is rhetorical.
7While the NBC program attracts a substantial broadcast television audience, cable television's MTV is recognized as the most important video music outlet because it frequently enters into contracts with record companies which provide clips on an exclusive basis. These contracts were an aspect of a report concerning MTV aired during the March 8, 1990, edition of ABC's newsmagazine Prime Time Live. Another discussion of MTVs dominance of the music video field is provided by Goldberg.
8This conclusion comports with the findings of a uses and gratifications study of MTV viewers. When 608 high school students were queried as to why they watch the cable network the most common response had to do with musical imagery: “They [the students] watch MTV to see particular groups, singers, and concerts, or have a generalized attention to the musical content of MTV” (Sun and Lull 120).
9Campbell and Jamieson provide a detailed discussion of the merits of generic rhetorical criticism (9-32). Feuer (“Genre Study”) explains how the approach has been used to study television programs, in particular, situation comedies.
10This sort of definition by contrast is well established in the marketing of consumer goods. As Marcio Moreira, the creative chief at the advertising agency McCann Erickson World Wide, contends, “The most powerful way to position a product is to define what it is not” (qtd. in O'Neill 14).
11The band discuss their uneasiness over their commercial success in an interview with De Curtis.
12Bartlett and Suber note that the concept of reflexivity has a long history in the fields of philosophy and linguistics. Examples of reflexive paintings and sculptures appear in Lipman and Marshall. And both Ruby and Dahlgren discuss the relationship between social change and reflexivity in more contemporary media.
13Feuer (“The Self-reflective Musical”) notes that the reflexive themes in many of the MGM musical films of the late ‘40s and early ‘50s (e.g., Singin' in the Rain) function in a similar manner; namely, “to perpetuate rather than to deconstruct the
codes of the genre” (173).

The tedium of the recording process is captured well in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1970 film One Plus One, which presents the Rolling Stones repeatedly perfecting their song “Sympathy for the Devil.”

The following are the eleven other performance documentary videos: Billy Idol’s “Mony Mony”; Richard Marx’s “Hold on to the Nights”; George Michael’s “Monkey”; Bon Jovi’s “You Give Love a Bad Name” and “Wanted Dead or Alive”; Def Leppard’s “Armageddon It” and “Pour Some Sugar On Me”; Poison’s “I Won’t Forget You” and “Your Mama Don’t Dance”; Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band’s “Dancing in the Dark” and “Born in the U.S.A.”

This particular blend of human and animated characters is sometimes called “rotoscope,” a technique popularized by the Disney Studio’s feature film Who Framed Roger Rabbit?

The celebrity puppets were popularized by the hit British television program Spitting Image. In 1986 a made-for-America version of the show was aired on NBC (see Waters and Iyer).

Related to this issue is the problem of establishing a long-term identity for a band which has been introduced to music buyers through a special effects extravaganza. The a-ha “Take On Me” clip, for example, was instrumental in launching the Scandinavian group in America; yet the band never was able to follow up on the success of the debut album on which the song appears (“Hunting High and Low”). This leads one to suspect that the interest in a-ha waned once the allure of the special effects in the “Take On Me” video dissipated and the band had to survive on the strength of its performing abilities.

Allan outlines a more general relationship between music video and musical film forms.

For further information on this concept see Delameter (120) and Solomon (71).

The ambiguity of one of these sequences, in which Madonna is shown dancing in revealing clothes in front of a field of burning crosses, created so much controversy that the Pepsi Cola Company cancelled a plan to pay the singer $6 million to endorse its products in a series of television commercials. Cox reports on the events surrounding this episode.

The makers of this clip also break music video traditions by utilizing the filmic conventions of an opening title and closing credits. For a detailed analysis of “Thriller” see Mercer.

The following are the five other integrated song and dance numbers: Madonna’s “Open Your Heart”; Michael Jackson’s “Beat It,” “Billie Jean,” “Smooth Criminal” and “The Way You Make Me Feel.”

By featuring young dancers in Jackson’s “Smooth Criminal” and Madonna’s “Open Your Heart,” the makers of these videos seem to be openly encouraging young viewers to conclude that by perfecting their dancing skills, they, too, might become video stars.

Videomaker Bryan Johnson notes that record companies, in their quest to maximize the promotional potential of rock videos, often attempt to dictate the ratio between performance and non-performance material: “It’s kind of scary when you get record companies throwing percentages out at you: ‘We want forty-percent band, forty-percent concept and the girl in maybe ten percent’” (qtd. in Goldberg 64).

The following are the thirty-two other videos which feature performances

The following are the twenty-three other videos which feature performances enhanced by narrative images: Whitesnake’s “Is This Love”; Def Leppard’s “Photograph”; Run-D.M.C.'s “Walk This Way”; John Cougar’s “Jack and Dianne”; UB40’s “Red Red Wine”; Rod Stewart’s “Lost in You”; Pink Floyd’s “Learning To Fly”; Mike and the Mechanics’ “The Living Years”; Guns ‘N’ Roses’ “Welcome to the Jungle”; Duran Duran’s “Hungry Like the Wolf”; Britny Fox’s “Girlschool”; Beastie Boys’ “Fight For Your Right (To Party)”; Fat Boys and Beach Boys’ “Wipeout”; Kix’s “Don’t Close Your Eyes”; Aerosmith’s “Janie’s Got a Gun”; Warrant’s “Sometimes She Cries”; Bon Jovi’s “Living in Sin”; Motley Crüe’s “Dr. Feelgood”; Skid Row’s “I Remember You”; Madonna’s “Borderline” and “Papa Don’t Preach”; Poison’s “Fallen Angel” and “Nothin’ But a Good Time.”

The following are the seventeen other videos which feature performances enhanced by abstract images: Living Colour’s “Cult of Personality”; The Police’s “Every Breath You Take”; Midnight Oil’s “ Beds Are Burning”; Robert Plant’s “Tall, Cool One”; Bruce Springsteen’s “Tunnel of Love”; White Lion’s “When the Children Cry”; Don Henley’s “Boys of Summer”; Europe’s “Superstitious”; Duran Duran’s “Girls on Film” and “Rio”; Heart’s “Alone” and “These Dreams”; INXS’s “New Sensation” and “Never Tear Us Apart”; U2’s “Pride (In the Name of Love),” “Desire” and “With or Without You.”

Works Cited


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