

“Much” Media: Towards an Understanding of the Impact of Videos on Canadian Pre-Adolescent Identities

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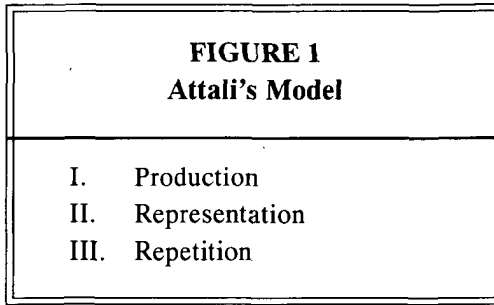
When MuchMusic was launched on August 31st, 1984, it began broadcasting to approximately 300,000 Canadian homes. Today, this Toronto-based music station delivers a “Real Time/Living Movie environment” to over 5,000,000 Canadian households, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And it doesn’t end there: a “hands across the water” pact with the British SKY Channel finds MuchMusic programming in the homes of over 26 million people in 19 countries across Europe, not to mention its increasingly more significant presence in the United States and Latin America. In its short broadcasting history, MuchMusic has made itself well known both within Canada and internationally.

But what do we know about the *impact* of MuchMusic? While recent research has addressed the influence of the American music corporation MTV (Levy 1983, and Hoyt 1985), much less has been directed towards MuchMusic, its Canadian counterpart. The present paper addresses issues surrounding MuchMusic’s programming and subsequent impact, particularly upon Canadian pre-adolescents, who comprise a significant portion of its viewers.

In my preliminary research, I sought first to understand the purposes and functions of videos and concerts in order to comprehend better the economic reasoning behind Much’s programming decisions. Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985) provided me with a possible framework for deepening my understanding of the commercialization of popular music. Attali presents a model that identifies three levels or stages at which persons in control can manipulate music and subsequently use it as a tool to gain additional power.

Attali’s Model

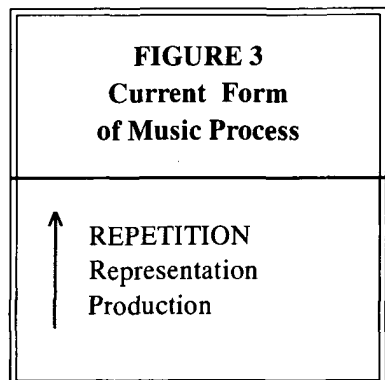
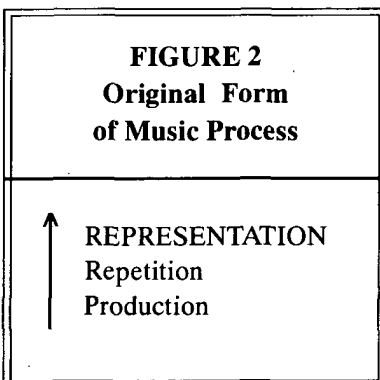
As shown in Figure 1, the first stage in Attali’s model occurs during the production of music. At this time, those in control have an opportunity to codify music to their specifications. The second stage is labelled representation, which is “a system of commerce ... which arises from a singular act”



(Attali 1985: 41). A business based on live concerts is an example of representation. The third level at which music is controlled occurs during repetition, that is, during the multiple consumption of such mass-produced objects as videos and compact disks. Attali makes a clear distinction between representation and repetition: representation has “a tie to the human quality of the production while [repetition] allows for accessibility” (Attali 1985: loc. cit.).

Figure 2 illustrates how these three levels originally functioned: music production and repetition were used to support representation. According to Attali, however, this is no longer so. In Attali's view, today the concert format merely supports the promotion of repetition as shown in Figure 3, and as a result, radio and television, vehicles for repetition, have been made “representation free” (ibid.: 84), that is, they have become independent of the representation process.

Attali's model raises many questions with regard to the contemporary music video. Here, I shall focus on only two. First, are the videos shown on MuchMusic always “representation free” or do different styles of videos combine varying degrees of representation and repetition? Second, if



numerous video formulas exist, to which are Canadian pre-adolescents exposed and what is the subsequent impact? My research was conducted in two stages: interviews with an informant from MuchMusic who performs an important role in programming, publicity and censorship, followed by an interview session at an elementary school. This approach to fieldwork is not new to the study of popular music in Canada (cf., for example, Shepherd, 1986).

A View from Inside MusicMusic

My MuchMusic informant confirmed Attali's theory regarding the importance of repetition: video is now the most popular, and thus the critical, medium for popular-music merchandising. Whereas a decade ago a successful song might have been followed by a video, today the video is often delivered first to MuchMusic and then the song is distributed to the appropriate radio stations. Once at MuchMusic, the video is reviewed by a selection committee; if it is deemed "successful," it is slotted into one of Much's programs regardless of its worthiness for radio. The visual impact is as important as the aural impact in determining the success of a song: a well received video on Much will almost always result in considerable radio airplay.

To what extent, then, is a performer's success still dependent upon the concert format? My music industry informant replied that live concerts are important for the audience member since, among other things, it is here that members of the audience are given an opportunity to "know that what they see [on videos] is real." In other words, my informant stated that the concert format, Attali's mode of "commerce" or "exchange," represented reality for the average adolescent and counterbalanced the video, the repetition-based medium of non-reality. But what happens to an individual who has extensive exposure to videos but no access to concerts? I was told that adolescents inevitably "grow out" of video fads, and, within time, see them more objectively and appreciate the non-reality that they convey. According to my Much informant, adults are unaffected by what they saw in videos during their formative years.

The Views of Pre-Adolescents

My next task was to approach the consumers themselves for their interpretation of the meanings inherent in concerts and videos and to investigate how they differentiate between reality and non-reality. My research was conducted in an Oakville (Ontario) public school which emphasizes multimedia instruction. Students there produce their own videos and therefore might be better equipped to consider the criteria necessary for a successful video. Due to a prior decision on the part of the school administration, I was unable to interview the age group of my choice, nor was I able to show my chosen videos. As a result, my respondents consisted of a class of 27 Grade Six students, 10 girls and 17 boys; the average age was 11.

The interview involved several stages. First, the students provided written responses regarding their musical preferences. 50 percent of the girls and 70 percent of the boys identified "rap" as their favorite style, and the preferred performers were identical for both groups: M.C. Hammer, Ice-T and Vanilla Ice. The remaining 50 percent of the girls identified what Much classifies as "popular music artists" including Madonna, Paula Abdul, Janet Jackson, and New Kids on the Block. The remaining 30 percent of the boys identified "heavy metal" and "hard rock" as their musical preferences: Led Zeppelin, 2 Live Crew, and New Order.

I then elicited the students' responses regarding their perception of reality and non-reality in videos. To this end, I showed two videos, one by a "popular" music performer and one by a "hard rock" artist. For several reasons, Madonna was the first artist selected.

Since her international debut in 1984, Madonna has remained consistently popular among teenage girls (as well as among many boys, albeit for different reasons). Additionally, with the latest controversy over her banned video, "Justify My Love," she has become more controversial, and more popular, than ever before. The first example used was Madonna's 1984 video "Borderline" which was shown in its entirety to the class.

When the students were asked whether they thought the "Borderline" video was realistic, that is, whether it reflected "real life" or not, their responses were fairly consistent. They noted that people do hang out and buy hot dogs, but all agreed that the rest of the situation was unreal. One girl, when asked if this could ever be seen on the street, replied "parts of it, but not in Oakville." The discussion which followed focused on Madonna's videos, and whether "Borderline" was indicative of her style.

The class unanimously agreed that Madonna's videos were generally even more unrealistic than the one shown here; Madonna's 1990 video "Vogue" was cited as an example. "Vogue," perhaps Madonna's most successful video, might be considered most representative of her current output. I was not permitted to show this video to the class, but it was cited by the respondents as "typical" Madonna. When the respondents were asked why they thought her video style was artificial, the responses again were consistent: "That's Madonna."

In order to deal with various styles of video, I then showed Billy Idol's recently released "Prodigal Blues." Did they find this video to be at all realistic? Without exception, the entire class pointed out that one cannot drive a motorcycle blindfolded, so that particular aspect of the video was not lifelike. Fifty-six percent of the class, however, thought the concert footage was very realistic. Many of the others thought this portion of the video was unrealistic only because of the large number of fans, not because of Idol's stage performance. As a result of this concert footage, Billy Idol was labelled more "real" than Madonna.

It is well known that most heavy metal and hard rock performers depend upon concert footage for their videos. This format, called the "performance video" (Abt 1987: 98), often features the artist or artists performing the entire song with an audience, and is often intercut with another narrative or other visual fragments. According to my informant at "Much," this format has been used for heavy metal videos since their creation. Heavy metal fans have never wanted "cartoons" or "fantasy."

Simon Frith noted an additional use of the audience in heavy metal videos when he stated that "live performance ... captures and acknowledges the kind of empowerment that is involved in the concert itself To experience heavy metal is to experience the power of the concert as a whole—the musicians are one aspect of this, the amplification system another, the audience a third." (Frith 1987: 140-41). Indeed, in many heavy metal videos, there is a direct interaction between the performer and audience. This is evident in the last example: at one point, Billy Idol is sprawled out on his audience members who physically "support" him.

To summarize these points: heavy metal videos rely upon active audience participation and were popular only among boys. Such "popular" rock performers as Madonna were preferred by girls. Performers of this sort tend not to interact with the viewer (even vicariously) in the video format. How, then, do these 11-year-old females become informed about Madonna "the woman" as opposed to Madonna "the image" when she is distanced from her audience and constantly mediated?

According to my informant at Much, the concert format enables fans to differentiate between the video persona of Madonna and the real woman. It might be informative, then, to make a comparison between a selected Madonna video and her concert production of the same song to determine the extent to which her identity as a real woman becomes clearer in the latter context. Madonna's 1984 song "Like a Virgin" is appropriate for a number of reasons.

Madonna's "Like a Virgin"

"Like a Virgin" was Madonna's first number one-single and it continues to be extremely popular at her concerts. Some people have defended her concert format because she reverses stereotype roles. Madonna often takes such images traditionally associated with women as mermaid tails and abnormally large breasts (which is evident in the "Vogue" video) and associates them with the male performers in the show. In the concert performance of "Like a Virgin," these breasts are associated with two men; according to some adult informants, this association "neutralizes" the sexual aggressiveness of their motions. The tempo is slower, suggesting, in conjunction with its new modality and instrumentation, exoticism. Throughout the song, the tempo and volume increase: both Madonna and the music apparently reach simultaneous climax.

Having attended a performance in Madonna's "Blond Ambition Tour" at Toronto's Skydome last year, I would like to note that this particular rendition of "Like a Virgin" was not unlike renditions of her other songs. Whereas many were less sexually explicit, all were in a "video format;" that is, they reflected the essence of their respective videos and were rehearsed to the point of being inflexible. Watching a Madonna concert was like viewing a revised video for each song. Direct audience interaction was not apparent to me, nor to anyone with whom I attended the concert. Unlike such heavy rockers as Billy Idol, whose videos reflect their actual concert representations, Madonna's "Blond Ambition" concert was an extension of her video format, and thus, little more empowering to her female audience than viewing her on MuchMusic itself.

There is an additional explanation for Madonna's perceived artificial persona in these selected clips: the lack of realistic contexts.¹ In "Borderline," the action took place both out of doors and inside. The students surveyed found the outdoor scene to be the more familiar, not because of Madonna's actions, but because of its context: it took place on an "average street." When the filming shifted indoors, however, Madonna took on a new persona: she wore a costume, played with unusually large toys, was filmed in black and white and subsequently was perceived as less "real." Similarly, the 1984 "Like a Virgin" video mixed a realistic, "contextualized" outdoor scene with an unfamiliar, predominantly white indoor setting. Madonna's 1990 video "Vogue" was filmed exclusively in black and white and was set indoors; her "mature" video image provides a magnified version of the artificial settings from her previous work.

The ramifications of these manufactured settings are serious. As noted by John Shepherd (1987: 154), "the conceptualization of people as objects decontextualized from social relations implies the possibility for uncontested, unilateral control." As a result of Madonna's increased isolation in her videos, she becomes framed and subsequently controlled by the viewer. This culminates in her concert performance, a series of videos which features a woman oscillating among many artificial images, all of which are pre-packaged for male objectification and female identification.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would suggest that Attali's definitions of "representation" and "repetition" do not always reflect current practices, as demonstrated here by Billy Idol and Madonna. Videos for television are not always "representation free," and, in fact, the success of many heavy metal performers depends upon communicating these empowering representational images. As a result, heavy metal performers convey at least some degree of "humanness." Nor are concerts always repetition free: Madonna (and numerous other "popular music" artists) who target a primarily female, pre-adolescent audience, perform highly choreo-

graphed, “framed” concerts, which, like their video releases, depend upon selling the artists’ “image,” often to the exclusion of audience-performer interaction. How this exposure to “reality” and “non-reality” will ultimately impact upon boys’ and girls’ respective perceptions of empowerment, gender, and societal roles is only speculation. It does seem unlikely, nonetheless, that girls and boys will be quite as unaffected as MuchMusic might suggest.

NOTE

1. I would like to thank Rebecca Green at the University of Toronto for bringing this point to my attention.

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Résumé:

Karen Pegley rend compte de la «réception» des «rock-vidéos» par les pré-adolescents canadiens. Elle applique le modèle de Jacques Attali, et trouve qu'il faut ajuster ce modèle et distinguer étroitement entre les processus musicaux parmi les filles et les garçons. L'auteur illustre ses remarques par une considération détaillée du vidéo «Like a Virgin» de Madonna.