

Music Video in the Digital Age

David Uskovich, *St. Edward's University*

Does the online context open a space for directors to challenge the representational politics of music video with regard to race, gender, and sexuality?

I want to think about YouTube in the context of the history of communication technologies and media and their relevance to the public sphere. As with radio and television especially, scholars such as John Downing, Tamara Villarreal Ford, and Robert McChesney considered whether or not the Internet could be a means of extending the public sphere, of allowing the voices of the disenfranchised to foment social change. I suppose I am addressing, in a roundabout way, the above question, asked by the Flow committee. This is obviously possible, given Beyoncé's *Formation* video, but I also want to address the idea that YouTube allows a democratization of music video production, which may or may not be key to challenging the above representational politics.

In *Noise*, Jacques Attali argues that practices and discourses within musical cultures often are early predictors of practices within the wider culture. If we accept this premise, then YouTube lies on a continuum that includes the deprofessionalization of the music industry that emerged as a discourse in 1970s Anglo-American punk rock. As Dave Laing argues in *One Chord Wonders*, his analysis of the first wave of British punk, the arrival of consumer grade recording equipment such as 4-track cassette recorders and reel-to-reel tape machines abetted punk's "do-it-yourself" or DIY ethic. Laing calls this mode of production "Xerox music" in reference to the emergence of photocopiers that made it possible for amateur music journalists to publish their own fanzines or "zines". In a similar way, punk musicians and independent record companies could record their own music and take the recordings directly to the pressing plant, thus cutting out the middle man of corporate record companies and managers.

Laing's argument suggests that "Xerox music" and "DIY" represented a democratization of the means of musical production and in a wider sense, a move towards democratizing communication. This development took on new importance with the rise of the Thatcher and Reagan governments. While little commercial pop music of the era addressed the militarism, jingoism, conservative revolution, and economic recession in the Western world in the 1970s and early 1980s, punk bands in the US and the UK used DIY methods to create, record, and distribute music that criticized these very historical developments. In the UK and the US, bands like Crass and Poison Girls sang of sexism and class conflict, and in the US, the Minutemen and Dead Kennedys released numerous antiwar songs.

In the United States in the 1980s, punk became hardcore and extended the 1970s notion of DIY, a practice that would eventually be taken up by what would be called alternative or indie music, right at the moment when MTV launched as the literal new face of the music industry. Punk/indie/alternative artists responded in kind, using DIY methods to create their own underground video networks, shooting videos on camcorders, Super 8, or 16-millimeter cameras. Countering MTV, a number of punk video programs emerged on public access cable television, such as New Wave Theater, Why Be Something You're Not, and Back Porch Video,

The combination of these cable access shows, consumer grade production technology (which eventually went digital with ADAT and digital cameras), college radio, zines, independent record labels and record distributors, basements, bars, clubs, promoters, and booking agents created an independent music network across the US, the UK, Europe, and even

Asia well into the 1990s, even as MTV began moving towards non-scripted and scripted programming. Taking advantage of this network, punk and indie movements like Riot Grrrl and Queercore emerged to critique misogyny and homo- and transphobia, challenging both punk and mainstream representations of gender and sexuality.

When YouTube showed up in 2005, it appeared to be the Web version of DIY, i.e. a digital form of Xerox music or, important to this discussion, a form of Xerox MTV. YouTube allowed a more fully realized mode of DIY music video production, with a built-in, near-immediate form of distribution. It's accessibility allowed musicians to create, edit and upload music videos to a potentially unlimited, global audience.

While it is possible to politicize music video content, in this era of flexible accumulation, what are the risks in challenging representational politics? Since going online, YouTube has become yet another medium for advertising. While one can make a living as a YouTube musician, getting ad sponsorship depends on the popularity of the musician, which is determined by her number of subscribers, views, comments, likes and unlikes. More importantly, given the recent popularity of YouTube demagogues, what are the risks of challenging representational politics for its own sake?