

The Intersection of Art and Industry: MTV's Small-Screen Aesthetics, Living Room Marketing,
and the U-Matic Tape

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Within a decade of its launch on August 1st, 1981, MTV captivated audiences across the world with its small-screen aesthetics, production style, and 24-hour programming flow. The channel quickly leaned into its carefully crafted brand identification, along with its seemingly curated approach of living room marketing, that meant meeting the consumer in their space through their televisual apparatus. This structure fit together to become a new brand of advertising—one that created a sense of encompassing everything a young adult needs or dreams about, while simultaneously also selling the bands and the music it promoted on a global level. Supplementing these avenues of research is the digitization of six ¾” U-Matic tapes from former MTV producer Nigel Cox-Hagan’s personal archive, currently under the stewardship of Los Angeles-based VHS store and microcinema, Whammy! Analog Media. These tapes include content that displays MTV’s aesthetics and brand identity during the early 90s in the form of bumpers, original production elements, promos, and opens. The raw production materials outside of their final cut give insight into the structure and design of a larger program. The U-Matic tapes themselves exist to immortalize a style of MTV programming that no longer exists and illustrate the importance producers put on these materials and why they should be preserved. Almost paradoxically, the artistic innovations of MTV’s aesthetic structure represent an era-specific countercultural movement while also existing as wholly reliant on being about consumption and advertising. Examining MTV in this manner unearths the consumer culture at the heart of flashy visuals and musical expression. The synergy of the short and varied format of the music video and art as advertising as an attribute of MTV aesthetics deeply affected both mediums of television and film—in structure and image—through a clear impact on the economic, cultural, and technical symbiotic relationship between record labels and the network and the music industry

and Hollywood. These ties became seen as intrinsic, blurring the lines of modes of operation for all parties involved, in perpetuity.

Within television history, MTV is characterized by its stylized and colorful visuals, alternative artists, and nonstop stream of music and culture. Key to grounding MTV aesthetics as a distinguishable and unique mode of production is deconstructing and defining its components in comparison with other televisual perspectives. John T. Caldwell provides one such example by categorizing MTV within the “videographic televisuality” axis, where its aesthetics represent a pervasive, hyperactive, and intertextual production style that draws on the use of many video materials, forms, and innovation.¹ This is in opposition to cinematic televisuality that simply presents a film look to television. Video’s introduction as a format for not only recording broadcasts and storing production elements, but as a space and tool for manipulation allowed for what was viewed as an “anti-aesthetic.” However, what this actually meant was an avant-garde opposition to traditional structures of time, continuity, story, and character modes established by classical Hollywood cinema, or an “abandonment of traditional narrational devices.”² One of the various ways Michael Z. Newman positions video is as a “cinema killer,” represented by concerns around the image’s “authenticity and legitimacy.”³ MTV crafted their aesthetics in a way that became seen as ideologically deviant. Early in the video versus film debate, these textual forms were used as an argument against the viability of small-screen aesthetics, labeling them as excessive and unacceptable. Considering MTV aesthetics as overproduced, hypervisual, or excessive requires also accepting such as an effect of the political and economic influence of

¹ John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), Chapter 1, Location 266, Kindle.

² E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*, (New York: Routledge), 33.

³ Michael Z. Newman, “Video as the Moving Image,” in *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press), 88.

Regan's America of materialism and capitalism. On one level, MTV aesthetics are a product of its environment that mirror the larger social climate of the time, but also, contradictory, a response against that same climate. The convergence of this dual existence is an especially pertinent facet in its successful transference from being viewed as a low form of entertainment and art to becoming the celebrated blueprint for Hollywood production techniques and cross-industry marketing.

As MTV's aesthetic gained traction in cultural and artistic spaces, the music industry and Hollywood took notice of the mutually beneficial direction of the structure. Working outside of the constraints of cinematic televisuality, the format of the music video provided a testing ground for production effects and visual technology. Even with their small budgets and tight schedules, music videos allowed for creative experimentation in which limits can be established, perfected, and then applied to feature films. One article from 1992 speaks to music videos being "a hotbed for special effects," where directors and producers "learn[ed] about digital image manipulation from music video creators."⁴ Music videos not only proliferated technical advancements in film production, but altered the beats of editing and composition of those films by the strategic incorporation of the music itself. One of the most noticeable and long-lasting impacts of the music video and MTV on Hollywood arrived in the early 1980s with the integration of popular rock and pop songs into commercial films, leading to the rise of the movie soundtrack over traditional scores. The combination of popular music artists with "mini-movie trailers" and film clips became a critical part of film marketing⁵ that promoted the movie, an artist's music, and the sale of the film's soundtrack all at the same time, generating revenue across the recording and

⁴ "Rock 'n' Roll Born: Why Music Videos are the Hotbed for Special Effects," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 1992, S-8, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/rock-n-roll-born/docview/2339654383/se-2>.

⁵ Clayton Rosati, "MTV: 360° of the Industrial Production of Culture," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, no. 4 (2007): 565, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4626271>.

film industries. This approach to creating a more marketable package meant not only leveraging the recognizable “song-image format” that indicated short consumable texts⁶ and fast-paced, emotion-driven editing, but honing in on the perfect consumer for both mediums. Studio and MTV executives understood the role of the audience demographic in making this system profitable by identifying that each of their target audiences were the same.⁷ The establishment of a recognizable image and brand was the first step entrenched within the expansion of MTV’s televisual consumer culture influence in realms outside of the small screen.

In understanding the success of MTV’s living room marketing, it’s important to consider MTV as the most extreme form of televisuality. This is an area where “it no longer mattered where the material came from (stock, live, graphic material), what format it was shot on (super 8, 16mm, 35mm), or whether it was black and white or color.”⁸ Uninhibited by the fixed space and time of cinema, the network was able to permeate into a consumer’s environment at their choosing due to its 24-hour programming flow. At any time, a viewer could switch on their TV and be drawn into the televisual experience through the “mechanism of consumption.”⁹ As a result of this constant flow, MTV exists as one continuous stream of advertising, whereby each music video, bumper, promo, or commercial constitutes individual ads.¹⁰ Being ever-present also allowed MTV to cater to a swathe of consumer desires and personalities that ultimately wanted to be presented with connection to their favorite artists and music. Owing to MTV’s status as “a global brand that [could] be marketed, and used for marketing,”¹¹ incorporating the music video into the music industry was an inevitable move towards facilitating greater commercial success

⁶ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 41.

⁷ Rosati, “MTV: 360° of the Industrial Production of Culture,” 566.

⁸ Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, Chapter 1, Location 281, Kindle.

⁹ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 28.

¹⁰ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 12.

¹¹ Steve Jones, “MTV: The Medium was the Message,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no 1. (2005): 86, DOI: 10.1080/0739318042000333734.

for artists. Record labels even often attempted to emulate MTV music video motifs in order to capitalize off the brand's identification. The music industry and the music video on MTV was not a loosely formed relationship, but rather one that led to established contractual agreements between major record labels and MTV that allowed the network to "choose twenty percent of the company's annual video clip production for its exclusive use."¹² With MTV's strength and verified influence, contracts with the network ensured that a label's artists would get exposure on national and international levels with MTV benefitting from the content they could program. Exceptionally influential on the symbiotic relationship between the industries and MTV, contracts led to a level of vertical integration through "forging links between the production of clips (commissioned by labels) and the distribution of clips through exposure media (MTV)."¹³

The inherently built-in contradictions of MTV's aesthetic are that capitalistic enterprise is antithetical to the counterculture and alternative role art plays in the channel's brand. Economic bonds largely advanced the hybridity of art (in the form of the music video, but also bumpers and promos) as advertising, where ad merges with the textual nature of being a reflection of culture. This is the culture built upon 80s excess where the consumer is drawn into the commercialization of youth phenomena or nuances of nostalgia. Naturally, even when the art is targeted at cultural layers of both past and present eras and their intersection (such as one of the U-Matic tapes that features a promo that equates 1950s-1960s suburbia with images of suggestive and promiscuous behavior)¹⁴, the art is designed to sell MTV's brand through signifiers that grab attention and keep viewers tuned in to be fed "curated" content that will eventually end in a transaction. A performer or artist's involvement in the programming is not a neutral position, but rather one that

¹² Jack Banks, "Video in the Machine: The Incorporation of Music Video into the Recording Industry," *Popular Music* 16, no. 3 (1997): 297, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853047>.

¹³ Jack Banks, "Video in the Machine," 287.

¹⁴ NigelCoxHagan_MTV_Umatic_002.

implicates them as facilitators of such contradictions within art as advertising, as the success of the channel meant exposure to their work and the sale of their music.¹⁵ Living room marketing grew beyond the boundaries of the home—as the network experienced a transitional era in the 1990s—with events and annual programming bearing an MTV stamp or title. For example, the MTV Video Music Awards was defined as “the most influential marketing and promotional tool in the music industry today,” where “performers, presenters, and award winners nearly always [saw] sale spikes following the show, sometimes as high as 60%.”¹⁶ Living room marketing took on a new degree of power with exponential sales metrics emerging from branched off events and programming initiatives throughout the 1990s, which was reflected in MTV’s aesthetics and artistic endeavors.

A little over a decade after its inception, MTV came to realize that “music television [wasn’t] just for music anymore,” and that “news, sports, exercise, fashion, comedy, drama, cartoons, live entertainment, game shows, and awards broadcasts” made for a successful package.¹⁷ It was vital for MTV to reinvent itself during the 1990s, as ultimately consumers craved for a network outside of the niche of just music videos. In doing so, MTV exposed much of what remained unsaid about the role of their brand identity and marketing strategies. In 1994, then-CEO, Tom Freston, outlined the network’s move into book publishing, feature film production, and a home video line. Freston specified that music would remain central to the channel’s brand, but that it would be packaged into half-hour and hour-long programming

¹⁵ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 17.

¹⁶ Marc Pollack, “MTV’s the Place to be seen: Video Nods Allow Music Fans to See it, Hear it and then Buy it,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 1999, 3, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/mtvs-place-be-seen/docview/2469243877/se-2>.

¹⁷ Deborah Russell, “Why they Wanted their MTV: Development of Personality, Packaging Key to Success of First Decade,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 08, 1993, 11, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/why-they-wanted-their-mtv/docview/2362005069/se-2>.

specials.¹⁸ The subtle and “personalized” living room marketing that functioned through evoking a “natural ambience of teenagers gathered in a room to listen to music with their peers”¹⁹ became explicitly the continuous advertisement visible in all places, designed to make MTV “a bigger, more interesting, more vital place for its audience.”²⁰ MTV’s transitional era is evident in the aesthetics and focus of the array of programs of the decade, visible in the U-Matic tapes of former producer Nigel Cox-Hagan.

U-Matic tapes were developed in 1971 for several markets, namely industrial. Throughout the next few decades, they were used widely in news fieldwork, as a portable alternative to production standard 1” tape. In the 1990s, the format was used by artists and production houses, due to being preferred for editing masters.²¹ The U-Matic tape allowed for instant access to dailies and broadcast material, which previously had to be shot on film.²² Cox-Hagan, a long-time producer, creative branding director, and entertainment marketing executive with networks such as Freeform, BET, Nickelodeon, and SyFy,²³ employed the U-Matic in the same way. Containing raw production elements, complete bumpers, and programming promos, the six U-Matic tapes digitized for preservation illustrate the internal creative use and videographic televisuality reuse of materials for advancing MTV aesthetics. Their content provides a visual primary source of how elements were used to give structure to larger programs and the importance producers put on the use and storage of such materials. One of these tapes contains the title art and bumpers for MTV’s “Year in Rock 1993.” Similarly to

¹⁸ “COVER STORY: Tom Freston: The Pied Piper of Television.” *Broadcasting & Cable*, Sep 19, 1994, 39. <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/cover-story-tom-freston-pied-piper-television/docview/1014752137/se-2>.

¹⁹ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 19.

²⁰ “COVER STORY,” 39.

²¹ “Videotape,” Preservation Self-Assessment Program, accessed December 11, 2023, <https://psap.library.illinois.edu/collection-id-guide/videotape#umatic>.

²² Alex Marsh, “U-matic for the People,” *Bitstreams* (Blog), published June 20, 2019, <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/bitstreams/2019/06/20/u-matic-for-the-people/>.

²³ Paige Albiniak, “Nigel Cox-Hagan, Marketing Executive, Dies at 57,” *The Daily Brief, Promax*, April 19, 2022, <https://brief.promax.org/article/nigel-cox-hagan-marketing-executive-dies-at-57>.

“Year in Rock 1992,”²⁴ the visuals of the bumpers indicate MTV News’ focus on not only musical artists, but world events and politics, with blocks designed to introduce those segments. The transitional period of providing information and entertainment was received negatively by some who could not reconcile the artistic and structural shift. Rick Sherwood wrote in a review of “Year in Rock 1992” that the “one-hour special that sets to chronicle the year in music...winds up chronicling the year in MTV instead,” and that in recapping “social concerns as the presidential campaigns, the Los Angeles riots, and AIDS,” MTV is taking itself too seriously.²⁵ Largely, the disparity between the expectations of long-established brand identity and what was being produced for consumption, in both the content of the U-Matic tapes and era-specific writing, illustrates the difference between MTV aesthetics and content. The tapes become integral to defining that gap.

U-Matic tapes possess unique and challenging preservation issues. It is estimated that magnetic tape-based media has a shelf life of only about 10-20 years,²⁶ but estimates tend to vary per brand, stock, and previous storage conditions. Due to the age and the chemical composition of the binder and base, U-Matic tapes are prone to shedding, softening, embrittlement, or excessive or loss of lubrication. To combat these issues, tapes are often rehoused or baked in order to get one clean transfer before further degradation makes doing so impossible. This is a process that varies between institutions, such as UCLA Library’s AV Preservation Department²⁷

²⁴ Art Varkington, “MTV Year in Rock 1992,” YouTube video, 47:15, February 22, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=r8WDq1fYybE>.

²⁵ Rick Sherwood, “the Year in Rock: '92,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 6, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/year-rock-92/docview/2362002233/se-2>.

²⁶ John Van Bogart, “What Can Go Wrong with Magnetic Media?,” in *Magnetic Tape Storage and Handling: A Guide for Libraries and Archives*, 15, (Washington, DC and St. Paul, Minnesota: The Commission on Preservation and Access and the National Media Laboratory, 1995), accessed November 14, 2023, <https://www.clir.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/02/pub54.pdf>.

²⁷ For notes on baking specifications for AV Preservation, see https://docs.google.com/document/d/1zKfeD9SNlfcg_rvik2dZU7R7RHsSocWqHwCP8BUYPu0/edit?usp=sharing.

to Indiana University's Media Digitization Studios²⁸ to Duke Library's Digital Production Center.²⁹ Additionally, as magnetic media, they possess magnetic instability within their pigment as a result of fluctuating magnetic remanence, resulting in the loss of recorded signals.³⁰ For the process of digitizing the MTV U-Matics, first, each tape was visually inspected, looking for any signs of mold, insects, tears, shedding, crinkling, and other damage. Inspection communicated that the six tapes were in a clean and stable condition visually and could be played. Each tape was cleaned using an RTI TapeChek VT3100 machine, as well as wound and rewound—in this machine—to reduce the chance of jamming or damaging the tape or the deck during playback and capture. Before and after each playback, the Sony VO-9850 VCR heads and tape path were cleaned with isopropyl alcohol. During each session, the VCR's top was left open to listen for sounds of squeaking that could indicate sticky shed and to watch for uneven tension or strain on the tape. For digitization, levels were calibrated and then examined via the waveform and vectorscope monitors on both the analog rack and digital side in vrecord. Hearing no indications of binder lubrication issues and viewing no excessive dropout, it was opted to not bake anything, out of concern doing so would negatively affect the integrity of the tapes, resulting in unnecessary binder shedding. Following digitization, a QCTools report and log were generated with each preservation master, and access masters and access copies were created as well. Finally, an MD5 checksum was generated for each file. Overall, the preparation and digitization of the MTV U-Matic tapes highlighted a best-case scenario in the preservation of the format-specific content.

²⁸ For notes on baking specifications for IU Media Digitization Studios, see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YJ8Y8qRjHNSIqqMzbeiG8URdCrXW0Tw2/view?usp=drive_link.

²⁹ For notes on baking specifications for the Digital Production Center, see <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/bitstreams/2019/06/20/u-matic-for-the-people/>.

³⁰ Bogart, "What Can Go Wrong with Magnetic Media?," 6.

MTV has left an indelible mark upon pop culture history. Producing a 24-programming flow of small-screen aesthetics and living room marketing created a strong brand identification that is recognizable across the world. The application of these aspects spread beyond the network's walls, influencing television and film production, and building an inseparable relationship between MTV and the music and film industries. Much can be said about the implications of the intersection of art and industry—as a facilitator of cultural commercialization—and MTV is an example of what has been said. Within MTV's intersection is contradictions of a space for groundbreaking and countercultural artistic expression and, concurrently, a heavily targeted advertisement selling the art as products for consumption. Born during an era of capitalistic excess, MTV is a conflicted product of its time, one in which decided the niche of the music video was not enough to keep an audience fed into returning day after day. MTV was a network that was constantly reinventing itself, especially during the 90s when programming shifted to being a mix of the music central to its identity and news, information, and narrative shows. From there, it traversed into realms outside of the televisual apparatus, like film production and product creation. MTV understood its authority early on and constantly leveraged their influence to be as important as possible, allowing them to sell as much as possible. Nigel Cox-Hagan's U-Matic tapes speak to creation and implementation of their small-screen aesthetics, a network of transition in marketing and programming structure, and spotlight tape-based television formats as precarious records of the cultural zeitgeist at the intersection of art and industry.

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