

L. ANN KAPLAN



# ROCKING AROUND THE CLOCK

MUSIC TELEVISION,  
POSTMODERNISM,  
& CONSUMER CULTURE

E. ANN KAPLAN

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# Introduction

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF MTV

This book is concerned with rock videos as exhibited through Music Television – MTV – as an institution. What I have to say about rock videos only applies directly to their presentation within the MTV context. The textual analyses naturally stand on their own to a degree, and points made in those parts of the book have implications beyond MTV as an institution. But the larger arguments about postmodernism and spectatorship only make sense within the discussion of MTV as a commercial, popular institution, and as a specifically *televisual* apparatus. I will briefly address both issues, whose full implications will emerge as the book progresses

MTV is a 24-hour, non-stop, commercial cable channel, beamed via satellite across the United States and devoted to presenting rock music videos around the clock. Originally owned by Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC – the station has recently been purchased by Viacom International), MTV is an advertiser-supported, basic cable service for which subscribers do not pay extra. As of Spring 1986, the channel reached 28 million households<sup>1</sup> (it is available wherever there are cable systems to hook it up). The brain child of Robert Pittman, WASEC's then Executive Vice President,<sup>2</sup> MTV was begun in 1981 for an initial cost of \$20 million. MTV earned \$7 million in ad revenue in the first eighteen months, and in May 1983 the station already had 125 advertisers representing 200 products including Pepsico and Kellogg, that bought air time



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for spots from 30 to 120 seconds at a cost of from \$1500 to \$6000.<sup>3</sup> By 1984 the audience had grown to 22 million, aged between 12 and 34, and ad revenue had reached one million a week.<sup>4</sup> By the end of 1983 the channel had \$20 million in ad revenue, and figures for 1984 show more than one million a week in ad revenue, with an audience of 18 to 22 million.<sup>5</sup>

In August 1984, MTV became a public corporation and announced that it had agreements with four record companies for exclusive rights to new videos. It was in response to Turner Broadcasting Company's announcement that it would initiate a competing 24-hour music television station that MTV opened its second channel, VH-1 (intended for what Robert Pittman called "an untapped new audience," namely that between the ages of 25 and 49), for an initial cost of \$5 million.<sup>6</sup>

Pittman's genius was in imagining, and then implementing, the concept of a 24-hour station devoted entirely to rock videos. For, while rock videos existed before MTV, they were largely tapes of live performances, played on late-night television and mainly used for publicity purposes (the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields" video made in 1967 is an exception in anticipating the contemporary surrealist/fictional tape). Some Top Twenty programs also featured videos, but it is only since the invention of MTV that regular channels like NBC and ABC have featured rock video programs (e.g. NBC's "Friday Night Videos" and ABC's "Hot Tracks") and other cable channels, like Channel 3 in New York, have put on programs like "Video Box" and "Video Soul," which, like "Hot Tracks," feature mainly black artists. Since MTV, Feature Film Cable channels like HBO also run rock videos between films (HBO has a spot called "Video Jukebox") and USA Cable Network runs videos on its "Night Flight." The recent home VCR boom has now brought increased access to rock videos through the cassette market. A new cable channel – U-68 – is recently available in the East Coast area, featuring videos considered too "avant-garde" for MTV (this channel recently abandoned its rock video format). The Apollo Entertainment Network has produced a series of taped concerts from the renovated Harlem Apollo Theatre, filling in the gap in airplay time for black bands.

These other television sites for video music, then, attempt to

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remedy the gaps left by MTV's particular "format" – as Bob Pittman calls it when questions are raised. MTV essentially duplicates FM Radio's white rock focus, although FM has perhaps more variety than the cable channel. Clearly Pittman is pleased with the mix of heavy metal, new wave, and pop that he has managed to produce, but people predict that there will be a series of specialized channels in the future, including a jazz-blues channel and a black pop/funk channel, to fill in the gaps. MTV Networks have already begun the trend in their second channel, VH-1, that features "pop" as against "rock" music – a broader category that permits black artists to get airplay. (These issues will all be discussed in more detail later on.)

If MTV is enmeshed in discourses about rock music, it is the insertion of these discourses in the specifically *televisual* apparatus that produces a result drastically different from prior organizations of rock. By "televisual apparatus" I mean: the technological features of the machine itself (the way it produces and presents images); the various "texts," including ads, commentaries, and displays; the central relationship of programming to the sponsors, whose own texts – the ads – are arguably the *real* TV texts;<sup>7</sup> and, finally, the reception sites – which may be anywhere from the living room to the bathroom.

Research on individual aspects of this apparatus has already begun. For instance, scholars may focus on problems of enunciation, that is, who speaks a particular TV text and to whom it is addressed; or look at the manner in which we watch TV (who *controls* the set when it is watched) and at the meanings of its presence in the home; or they may study the so-called "flow" of the programs, the fragmentation of the viewing experience even within any one given program, and the unusual phenomenon of endlessly serialized programs; or, finally, scholars may investigate the ideology embedded in the forms of production and reception, which are not "neutral" or "accidental" but a crucial result of television's overarching commercial framework.

One of the as yet unresolved issues in such research is that of the degree to which theories recently devised for the classical Hollywood cinema are pertinent to the very different televisual apparatus. One striking way that the televisual differs from the filmic apparatus is in the prevalence of programs that are "serials"

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in one form or another – that is, continuous segments to be viewed daily or weekly. The most obvious are soaps or prime-time dramas, but, stretching the idea a bit, we should also include the news (regularly slotted and so highly stylized as to be “drama”<sup>8</sup>) and the game shows, which are equally stylized. All of these programs exist on a kind of horizontal axis that is never ending, instead of being discrete units consumed within the fixed two-hour limit of the Hollywood movie or, like the novel, having a fixed and clearly defined boundary.

In a sense, TV has neither a clear boundary nor a fixed textual limit. Rather, the TV screen may be conceived of as a frame through which a never ending series of texts moves laterally; it is as though one turned a film strip on its side and pulled the “frames” (episodes on TV) through a strip projector that way instead of vertically. Peggy Phelan presents an alternative metaphor of Foucault’s Panopticon, in which the guard surveys a series of prisoners through their windows. She sees the TV producer as the “guard” and the individual TV viewer as the “prisoner who watches in a sequestered and observed solitude.”<sup>9</sup>

The “guard” metaphor also works well for the spectator’s relationship to the various episodes (serialized programs of various kinds) that represent, in Foucault’s words, “a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised.” For the spectator has the *illusion* of being in control of the “windows,” whereas in fact the desire for plenitude that keeps him/her watching is, in this case, forever deferred. The TV is seductive precisely because it speaks to a desire that is insatiable – it promises complete knowledge in some far distant and never-to-be-experienced future. TV’s strategy is to keep us endlessly consuming in the hopes of fulfilling our desire.

MTV’s programming strategies embody the extremes of what is inherent in the televisual apparatus. The channel hypnotizes more than others because it consists of a series of extremely short (four minutes or less) texts that maintain us in an excited state of expectation. The “coming up next” mechanism that is the staple of all serials is an intrinsic aspect of the minute-by-minute MTV watching. We are trapped by the constant hope that the next video will finally satisfy and, lured by the seductive promise of immediate plenitude, we keep endlessly consuming the short texts. MTV thus

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carries to an extreme a phenomenon that characterizes most of television. The “decentering” experience of viewing produced by the constant alternation of texts is exacerbated on MTV because its *longest* text is the four-minute video.

Later on in the book, I will be extending this discussion so as to clarify precisely the nature of the televisual “imaginary” as against the filmic one. I will be arguing that MTV reproduces a kind of decenteredness, often called “postmodernist,” that increasingly reflects young people’s condition in the advanced stage of highly developed, technological capitalism evident in America. As an apparatus developed only in recent decades, TV may be seen as at once preparing for and embodying a postmodern consciousness. MTV arguably addresses the desires, fantasies, and anxieties of young people growing up in a world in which all traditional categories are being blurred and all institutions questioned – a characteristic of postmodernism.<sup>10</sup>

### WHY WRITE A BOOK ON MUSIC TELEVISION?

In one sense, my writing a book on MTV requires no explanation: I have long been interested in popular culture, focusing particularly on the classical Hollywood film but also on women’s popular fiction and commercial television. And MTV, as a new popular phenomenon, would seem to warrant study as much as anything else.

However, as it is many years since I last studied adolescent or youth culture, a few words of explanation may be in order. I first became interested in youth culture when teaching in a further education college in London in the early 1960s. At that time, of course, there was not much youth culture proper, this being prior to the explosion of the Beatles and the proliferation of a very clearly defined adolescent and young adult group whose various cultural innovations and political activities would become news headlines for more than a decade.

Bobby Duran, Adam Faith, and Cliff Richard (sometimes seen as a tame British Elvis Presley) more or less represented the music interests of our students in those days. Well-dressed, clean, and conservative, these rock singers did not represent much of a rebellion to the status

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quo. The Teddy Boys alone, with their well-oiled hair and suits modeled on Edwardian dress, suggested any oppositional culture. We had in all this only a glimpse of the mid 1960s and 1970s youth culture explosion, in which rock and roll was to play a central, often subversive, role that has been well-documented.<sup>11</sup>

At Kingsway Day College, London, following the approach worked out by Paddy Whannel and Stuart Hall, we tried to indicate the disparities between the trivialized experiences of this early British pop music and commercial film, and the more complex possibilities of what we still called “great art.”<sup>12</sup> But this was carried out with enormous respect for the commercial works our students were drawn to, and usually involved understanding, and helping them understand, the bases for their interests rather than attempting to turn them toward the canon. Mostly we tried to interest them in the new working-class culture of the period, represented by the plays of Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, and John Arden; the novels of Alan Sillitoe, David Storey, and John Braine; and the films often made out of these novels by Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson, John Schlesinger, and Karel Reisz.

However, this lesson in realism was rather bleak and humorless, just like the works themselves. Only so much could be said about the banal, boring working-class lives of the protagonists, and texts did not seem to offer a way out. No wonder the British Youth responded with glee to the Beatles, who finally introduced joy/exuberance/fun into the traumatized post-World-War-II British landscape. But by then I had left England.

It is a far cry from the early steps toward a youth culture in Britain briefly sketched in here to the full-blown, heavily commercialized youth phenomenon that MTV represents. In the 1960s I was part of the politicized youth culture, although we all kept up with the Hippies, the Flower Children, and the rock and roll culture, especially as represented by the Beatles, the Stones, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin. But in the 1970s I dropped out to become an adult, only vaguely keeping track of punk, new wave and heavy metal – largely through my daughter.

Obviously these “developments” partly paved the way for MTV. Perhaps the subject attracts me because it contains remnants from the first ten years of the youth culture that I had known, together

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with the less familiar – to me – 1970s. But MTV also attracts because it seems to embody aspects of contemporary youth culture that signify a new era. It attracts, that is, by its very combination of similarity to, and *difference* from, my own various youth cultures; and by seeming to be an index of a new stage of things, a different kind of consciousness. I will be suggesting what this new consciousness involves, using postmodernism and psychoanalysis to illuminate it. More than much previous popular culture, MTV makes evident its address to adolescent desire, to the spectator's imaginary repertoire, which now takes precedence over any obvious political stance toward dominant culture. Obsessed like much popular culture has always been with sexuality and violence, rock videos nevertheless represent these in new ways.

This new consciousness is perhaps partly the result of the Cold War, nuclear technology, multinational corporate capitalisms, star wars, advanced computer and other high tech developments, as well as, on a more mundane level, being produced by highly sophisticated new marketing strategies, building upon ever-increasing knowledge of psychological manipulation. In other words, MTV seems to embody what Jameson and others have been calling *Postmodernism*.

I am concerned with postmodernism on a number of different levels. The first level, already briefly touched on but to be fully developed later, presents the televisual apparatus as itself postmodernist, with MTV carrying this characteristic to an extreme; second is the more strictly aesthetic level, to be addressed in Chapter 3, where the technical, formal strategies of MTV videos are seen to generally embody postmodernism; third is the postmodernist "ideology" or "world view" as it emerges from in-depth analysis of specific videos, a project to be undertaken in Chapters 4 and 5.

The effort to find a label to indicate a new stage of things in itself reflects the nature of the crisis. People of older generations sense that the old categories will no longer serve, and yet can do no better than to come up with a term that includes the prefix "post" attached to what was a familiar category, namely "modernism."<sup>13</sup> By this strategy, one hopes to indicate a connection with what was, with the familiar, while at the same time noting the difference, the new, the unknowable.

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Now MTV obviously is connected with past developments, as my analysis will reveal. But that connection may not quite be what the “post” prefix suggests: that is, what is important is the sort of use made of the past by contemporary youth culture rather than *the fact that* the past is used. The manner of use suggests a drastically Other consciousness for which a completely new word may well be better than “postmodernism.” But we have not yet made a sufficiently clear break with the past, nor with the concept of historical evolution, to arrive at a new word. And for my purposes, the notion of the postmodern is helpful in providing a method of conceptualizing what is *different* about the new phase. One cannot think without a shaping framework: it seems to me that the only way to understand a new phenomenon must be through understanding why one’s current categories do not fit. Working dialectically, then, we can move beyond current categories to new ones in a way impossible without *moving through* the old ones.

Clearly, since each generation enters the stream at a different point, the same phenomenon will take a different shape if studied by people with different starting frameworks. Someone looking at MTV from the position of growing up in the 1970s is bound to bring to it frameworks other than mine, and come up with different results. Indeed, someone like Greil Marcus might argue that I cannot possibly write about MTV since I did not grow up with it, and have not belonged in a network of teenagers who “lived” rock music daily, and for whom this was a silent common bond.<sup>14</sup>

I do not agree with the notion of rock music as a kind of mystique that someone outside the specific generation cannot understand. But reading Marcus made me aware of how different MTV is from previous rock cultures in terms of its address. For Marcus, 1960s rock was something that bound his small circle together in a largely non-verbal way; they shared the common, secret bond of enjoying the same songs, all of which represented a certain stance toward the establishment, a shared set of mildly subversive values. This is something that I will be exploring later, so let me merely note here that the very fact that MTV addresses itself to a broad, generally youthful section of the American public that ranges from 12 to 34 on up distinguishes it from earlier rock cultures, which addressed

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much more homogeneous groups, clearly defined in terms of values, age, and social status.

But the point about looking at MTV from different conceptual frameworks raises a problem that confronted me in setting out on my project, that is, what use to make of rock history in my text. As will be clear in a later chapter, MTV situates itself in a special way vis-à-vis past rock movements, and must be positioned outside of what has become a familiar linear history of rock developments.

Like most history, that of rock music has now developed its own narrative pattern, repeated from text to text. One of the earliest histories was Nick Cohn's *Rock From the Beginning* (1969), whose basic linear model has been taken up by later histories (such as Jahn's *From Elvis Presley to the Rolling Stones*).<sup>15</sup> Let me briefly rehearse this narrative, if only to indicate a historical sequence that now seems to have run its course. By this I mean that trends set in motion originally by black musicians have possibly gone as far as they can, as is arguably the case with modern art developments. Part of what we call the postmodern is precisely this phase of a movement that seems to have reached the end of its line.

MTV arguably emerges at this historical moment just because such an impasse in popular rock music has been reached. The historical "line" goes pretty much as follows: Everyone sees the 1950s as the great founding moment of rock music, which has its origins in black Rhythm and Blues, and in the Country and Western music that itself drew heavily on black music. Most historians comment on the way that white imitations of black songs were acceptable whereas the black originals were not. Billy Haley and Elvis Presley are central to everyone's story as setting the stage for all that happened subsequently. Presley, with his extraordinary mixture of pop and blues, foreshadows later rock developments. Early 1960s rock is viewed as a product of both Rhythm and Blues and of 1950s rock: the Beatles are credited with revolutionizing sound with their new instruments, new combinations, and new use of Indian forms and musical themes.

Historians vary somewhat in the degree to which they see late 1960s so-called "acid" or "protest" rock as innovative; most agree that the "hippie" music did introduce new sounds and new instruments, and that the advances possible through new musical technology (especially the capacity to increase volume) did have a big



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impact. Most writers agree, too, that this period represents the high point in recent rock history, and honor the original contributions of the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, the Who, Led Zeppelin, and the Kinks (among others) from Britain; and of Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, and the Jefferson Airplane, from America. The important “protest” element is generally agreed upon, although the actual political significance of the stances taken by late 1960s rock musicians in their lives and lyrics is debated.

The narrative generally sees the 1970s as representing a decline in American rock, which had led the way in the late 1960s. Continuing the story of mutual back-and-forth influencing between England and America, historians now see the British moving in to fill the gap with their new wave and punk rock bands that gradually revitalized the American scene in the mid 1970s. Punk and new wave took on a different tone and style in America: already well on their way to postmodernism, it took the peculiar nature of the 1980s political scene in America to move the trends over into a full-blown postmodernism.

In this recurrent “dialogue” between America and Britain, MTV may be America’s latest contribution. If postmodernism really does herald a new era, requiring totally new historical and aesthetic paradigms, it may signal the end of the kind of historical processes that rock history texts describe. That is, we may no longer be looking for “pendulum” swings but for something else.

Whether or not MTV can be considered as in the mainstream of rock history, or an altogether different development, it seems necessary to link it, however tenuously, with the past.<sup>16</sup> I will argue that rock and pop forms from the past thirty years or so are currently being used to express a new sensibility that has been labeled “postmodernist.” As we’ll see, MTV uses themes, motifs, and forms from rock and pop history indiscriminately and without recognizing what it is doing, or making distinctions between rock “proper” and its popularized forms.<sup>17</sup> It cannot therefore be said either to represent a reaction to what went before or to foreshadow what will come hereafter. It is precisely those sorts of linear progressions that it violates in not situating itself within their parameters.