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## THE MAKING OF A PREFERRED ADDRESS

**M**TV was conceived for a specific target audience—a youth audience—the buyers of rock and roll records. Only after the desired audience was identified did development of suitable programming begin. MTV's concept originators found themselves in the difficult position of having to interpret the symbolic interests of a perceived audience group, guided by a demographic profile, consumer lifestyle research,<sup>1</sup> and the vague content directives implied in the MTV concept. In his initial delineation of the concept, creator Bob Pittman had specified the use of television images to interpret rock music soundtracks, but the question still loomed: "Which images?" A specific system of representation had yet to be formulated.

In actual production practice, demographic thought is realized according to what David Marc (1984, p. 32) has referred to loosely as an "ideological template." Producers interpret audience research according to their own conceptions of what appeals to certain audience types, relying on "knowledge" about the targeted constituents that is taken for granted by society. These ideological assumptions become a gauge used to manufacture a signification practice. But knowledge is always socially constructed and tied to the interests of those who exer-

cise power within the social system. Producers can become unwitting collaborators in the reproduction of social relations of inequality and can create ideologically biased television discourses.

Muriel Cantor's study of the content selection process for children's television, a form of specialized programming, revealed the ideological underpinnings that form producers' attempts to interpret a specific target audience:

Certain of the producers' conceptions of their audience are more often stereotypical than they are thoughtfully drawn. . . . Many times the product to be advertised will determine which sex is the target for the program. If the toy is meant for boys, the show will be an adventure, western or space-fantasy. Girls are reported to prefer comedy and rock and roll groups (1974, pp. 110-11).

Cantor's (1974) description embodies Marc's (1984) "ideological template" at work. Ideology, quite explicitly, plays a role in the content selection process described. Stereotypes are an ideological shorthand for the biases generated by a social system in which preferred meanings about audiences are constructed and naturalized. Gender difference becomes a marketing variable that prompts advertisers to produce sex-specific toys, and provokes producers to fashion program narratives that reproduce socially promulgated gender ideologies. In a similar vein, MTV's production mandate, to develop a television address that embodied the cultural significance of rock and roll and that would appeal to a youth target market, meant activating ideological assumptions about rock music and youth.

### The Ideology of Rock

In choosing rock music as MTV's focal point, Pittman evoked the specific, pre-existing ideological discourse of rock

and roll. While on the surface "rock music" is a neutral label that distinguishes a particular kind of music, it also comprises a set of ideological assumptions about music creation and social life. Rock emerged as not only a musical genre, but a system of discourse through which the effects of the commercialization of music and the industrialization of music production can be negotiated, and by which social inequalities can be activated in a cultural arena.

In an ideological division reminiscent of the high culture/popular culture distinction, rock discourse forged a hierarchy within popular music by creating a structure of value against which "pop" music could be devalued. Rock was made to stand as a higher form of popular music, as *the* representative of art and artfulness. Rock criticism developed to assert rock's new position of importance, with *Rolling Stone* leading the formulation of an evaluative standard in the popular arena. The academic community contributed to rock's elevation by initiating university courses devoted to the sociology of rock music. Enthroned as the more progressive style of music in the early 1970s, rock succeeded on ideological grounds despite the greater popularity of mainstream pop music (Chambers, 1985).

Pop music was negatively defined against rock's professed artistic superiority. Pop's reliance on formulaic musical structures and on conventionalized repetition in form and lyrical content was subjected to aesthetic standards of uniqueness and complexity borrowed inappropriately from high art culture. It was maligned as the creation of the commercial music industry, and therefore deemed trivial and unworthy of critical attention. Pop musicians were denied the status of artists because of their association with extreme popularity and commercial success. Audiences for pop music were chided for being less sophisticated and more susceptible to the record industry's persuasive salesmanship.

Simon Frith (1981, p. 1) has described the rise of rock music

discourse as "a last romantic attempt to preserve ways of music-making—performer as artist, performance as 'community'" in making the face of the commercialization of music. Rock discourse aligns itself with the romantic scenario of the struggling artist, a scenario that finds expression in the circulation of stories of the ways in which rock musicians have "paid their dues." True rock musicians are thought to have earned the right to an elevated status because they have worked harder, experienced the pain of little recognition, and honed their craft by logging time in small music venues. This "model of self-improvement," as Dave Laing (1985, p. 60) termed it, serves the project of devaluing pop music artists by allowing rock musicians to be "pitted against the 'instant' nature of many teenybop artists, *apparently* with little performing experience and *apparently* manipulated by a producer or a manager" (emphasis added).

Rock's ideology of artistic superiority was complemented by an ideology of authenticity, or what Laing (1985) has called an "ideology of sincerity." Accordingly, rock was considered to be the more genuine form of popular expression, an outgrowth of people's experience of their socially subordinate status. In contrast, mass popularity for pop music was interpreted as a sign of industrial manipulation and not of cultural production. By setting itself against both industrial control of music and consumer support of industrially produced music, rock discourse made strategic use of the pessimistic theory of media manipulation associated with the Frankfurt School.<sup>2</sup> And as Frith (1981) has pointed out, rock discourse appropriated folk music discourse, which had already articulated the concept of musicians as purveyors of ordinary people's experiences and sentiments.

The contradictions of rock discourse become readily apparent upon examination. Rock discourse's anticommercial stance encourages a position of political opposition to the capitalist organization of cultural production, yet at the same time it

denies the extent of capitalist control over its own creations. Rock songs, like pop songs, are created under the rubric of industrial production and distribution. Both generate profit for record companies. Rock music is dependent on consumer support even though commercial success is not among the criteria by which rock ideology expresses authenticity. And although rock discourse defines pop music as inauthentic expression, by virtue of its popularity, pop music can be said to speak to and for an audience. Such a position, however, requires a theoretical shift away from the Frankfurt School critique toward a perspective that accepts audiences as interested cultural subjects whose designation of certain persons and groups as popular is a sign of selection and active participation.

In an attempt to uphold the distinction between genuine popular support and commercial popularity, rock music discourse eschews promotion. Pop music, as a consequence, is associated with artifice, salesmanship, and an objectionable commitment to promotion. Similarly, the notion that musicians possess an "image" is antithetical to the rock sensibility because it opens up the issue of industrial creation. Rock discourse attempts to reconcile the promotional impetus of all popular culture forms, including rock music, by using the concert tour as the music's primary promotional vehicle. A concert tour localizes the promotion of rock singers and bands, and combats the impression of distance associated with national advertising campaigns. The rock concert works well as a communal event for fans and provides musicians with a stage not only for the performance of their music, but for their assertion "in person" of the ideology of authenticity. As described by Laing (1985, p. 64), the ideology is enacted in vocal performances "not by how skillfully a singer can STENIFY or present an emotion . . . but by the listener's idea of how far a singer 'really feels' what is being communicated." Bands are strateg-

cally defined as the musical unit of choice because bands are more readily to be defended as creative collectives, less susceptible to the rigidity of industrial labor relations and creative hierarchies imposed by the record industry. Pop music is not associated with bands in the same way as rock music and tends to be linked with textual forms of promotion, including publicity photos and television exposure. Although the history of rock music is bound up inexorably with television promotion and publicity—Elvis' appearances on "The Ed Sullivan Show," rock artists' performances on "American Bandstand"—the struggle to maintain a difference between rock and pop is accomplished partly by giving more weight and value to concert tours for rock musicians and less to mediated forms of promotion.

By creating a standard of difference, a structure of value around rock music, rock discourse became useful to the goal of elevating white-male musicianship and creating an idealized vision of white-male spectatorship. Its allegiance to art and folk values and its denouncement of commerciality and popular pleasure were made to conform to gender ideologies, and were fashioned into material strategies for oppressing female musicians and female audiences. Enforcing a division between rock and pop meant female musicians could be relegated to pop music categories and, as a result of the association, devalued as artists. Fans of pop music could be judged incapable of appreciating aesthetic complexity. By denying the expressive potential of pop music and its ability to function as authenticating discourse, female participation in music was undermined and political articulations kept at bay. Rock music cultivated an address to male youth. Rock concerts became circumscribed as a male-youth leisure practice. But rock's ideological devotion to male discourse was not an entirely new or original proposition. It was a product of many historical precedents to devalue and exclude the musicians and audiences of subordinate social

groups, especially women and blacks (as discussed more fully in Chapter Four). And because rock was defined as an expression of youth, it relied on social assumptions about what it means to be young.

### The Ideology of Adolescence

Pitman has stated that he designed MTV to "mirror the issues of people moving from adolescence to adulthood," what he calls the "essence of rock" (Levy 1983, p. 76). The sense of journey and transition that Pitman's description evokes is characteristic of the ideological terms in which adolescence is typically regarded. In the United States, adolescence is viewed as a distinct stage of life that lasts from the onset of puberty to the full assumption of adult roles (Zemon Davis, 1965); and the *process* of maturation is a key demarcating concept. Adulthood is considered to be an achievable state, arrived at through a series of biological changes (sexual maturity) and the social assumption of roles and responsibilities (social maturity). These roles and responsibilities are largely defined in terms of participation in the social units of productive work and the nuclear family, two central oppressive structures of capitalist life.

As a result, youth are positioned within a transitory, social "space," and are accorded varying degrees of flexibility and freedom. While passage rites and conformity pressures are constructed to keep the range of play limited and ensure movement toward adulthood, there is a certain amount of social tolerance for leisure activity, sexual exploration, and displays of rebellion against parents and other social authorities. Such practices have come to constitute the accepted ideological frame for "normal" adolescent behavior, but only within other dominant social parameters of class, gender, and race. For example, poverty and racism attenuate adolescent license by first making adolescent employment an economic necessity, and

then making gainful employment difficult to find. Gender, as a limiting parameter, establishes a field of difference that makes adolescent privilege more available to male youth.

Adolescence and gender are brought into a particularly charged relationship by the fact that adolescence is activated in individuals as a result of biological maturation. Gender itself is a system of social differences based on biological difference. It is not uncommon in psychological accounts of adolescence to find discussions of gender difference—the fact that biological changes happen at different ages for girls and boys leads many psychologists to point out different levels of emotional and sexual maturity. But very little work has been done on how the social conditions of gender difference, the social system of gender inequality, are manifested at the time of adolescence.

As their bodies mature, children are called upon to publicly display their adoption of the heterosexual norm and the nuclear family configuration that economically and ideologically supports the nation. This affects boys and girls in different and specific ways. For female adolescents, biological transition and social transition collapse around the notion of reproductive function. Girls' new physiological capability is translated into the social role of mothering. As Katherine Dal-singer (1986, p. 10) pointed out, adolescence has been linked so inextricably to ideological conceptions of gender that much of the literature produced on female adolescence frames its discussions in terms of a transition from girlhood to motherhood. Feminists working in the fields of psychology, sociology, and the study of youth culture have just begun to suggest how girls' experience of adolescence is made distinct as a consequence of their gender status. In voicing this opinion, they have flown in the face of their respective literatures' tendency to define adolescence as a uniform social experience.

Barbara Hudson (1984) has described adolescence as a system of discourse that fundamentally incorporates assumptions

and definitions of *male* experience, activity, and desire. Adolescence and masculinity are united ideologically to support a social system of male privilege. Socially sanctioned retreats from parental surveillance and the constrictions of domestic life, aggressive attention to leisure practices and associated peer activities, pursuit of sexual experiences, and experimentalities with social roles and norms—things typically associated with adolescence—embody the very activities and attitudes that help boys to assume their privileged position in the patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> Toward this end, boys learn to feel comfortable in public space, adjust to competitive pressures, network with their male peers, build a familial support system, and prepare for risk-taking in future work endeavors. However, the social authorization given to such practices is directed specifically to boys, and does not extend as fully to girls.

As Hudson (1984) described it, adolescence is unproblematic as a "masculine construct," but becomes the source of contradictory expectations when applied to female adolescents, who are subject to conflicting gender discourses—most notably the discourse of femininity. The femininity discourse exists as a set of expectations designed to restrict girls' behavior and choices, especially at the time of adolescence. Hudson's (1984, p. 42) fieldwork in schools and social service settings in Britain revealed that authorities activate the contradiction in their contact with girls by asking them to "develop 'masculine' characteristics of independence, political and career interests" as well as "a personality style of caring for others, looking after children, being gentle and unassertive." Female adolescence, in Hudson's terms, is about negotiating two contradictory discourses: adolescence and femininity.

The American writer, Susan Brownmiller summarized her own inscription into the femininity discourse at the time of adolescence, recalling the experience of contradictory impulses:

As I passed through a stormy adolescence to a stormy maturity, femininity increasingly became an exasperation, a brilliant, subtle esthetic that was bafflingly inconsistent at the same time that it was minutely, demandingly concrete, a rigid code of appearance and behavior defined by do's and don't-dos that went against my rebellious grain. Femininity was a challenge thrown down to the female sex, a challenge no proud, self-respecting young woman could afford to ignore, particularly one with enormous ambition that she nursed in secret, alternately feeding or starving its inchoate life in tremendous confusion (Brownmiller 1984, p. 14).

Angela McRobbie (1980) pointed out the consequences of gender discrimination on youth cultural expression—how it mediates against girls' participation in the street culture of boys. For boys, leisure is a privileged arena provided for the “sowing of wild oats” and experimentation with roles and dangers before beginning a lifetime of work. “The street” is a major site of sociability and escape, the formation of subcultures, rebellious play, male bonding, and female pursuit. But herein lies the problem for adolescent girls, for they are subject not only to expectations based on their age, but, overwhelmingly, to expectations assigned to their gender. Both women and girls experience the streets as dangerous and fearful places. The concept of “sexual geography” described by Rayna Reiter (1975) in her study of male and female use of public space in southern France can be applied to the United States as well. Females are expected to use streets as the route between two interior spaces, whether places of employment or consumption activity. The social consequence of street loitering or strolling is the label, “prostitute,” and the coding of one's body as available to male pursuit. Women's level of comfort on city streets is tenuous at best—rape and harassment are constant threats that structure their street behavior. A girl learns the gestures of deference early: to avoid making eye contact, and to “shrink” her body so as to take up as little space as possible.

Thus, leisure practices that involve public space are often considered to be inappropriate for girls. Subcultural youth groupings, many of which are allied in part by musical preferences, are usually off limits to girls. Leisure time is itself subject to a division along gender lines. Middle-class and lower-class girls in the United States grow up in a culture in which women's work in the home is a constant, yet devalued, activity, and work outside the home is still underpaid and limited in scope. In the many instances in which women work outside the home, household labor becomes an even more relentless form of double duty. As teenagers, girls encounter the expectation that, like their mothers, they will assume the role of invisible worker at home, even as they are encouraged to seek higher education and a career.

The social authorization of adolescent license produces great tension over what limits should be placed on leisure time and activities, and on how much experimentation and rebellion should be tolerated. Here again, gender difference is a determining factor. Michael Brake (1985, p. 23) has described the discrepancies in the ways male and female youth are articulated as social problems: “Males have usually been involved with illegal activities such as theft or violence or vandalism, and females with sexual misbehavior.” The perception that girls are somehow “less delinquent” than boys has generally resulted in a greater provision of social programs for male youth (Nava, 1984). Prostitution is considered to be the predominant mode of female delinquency, a form of behavior that is less visible than many male delinquent activities and easily misidentified. Girls who engage in street loitering or walking, so called “normal” behavior for boys, can become associated with delinquency and even find themselves institutionalized.

In effect, girls are excluded from much of the leisure activity, social-bonding practices, and subculture formation that critics of male youth culture identify as important arenas for

the negotiation of social contradictions. Girls' leisure activities take different forms as a consequence of gender inequality or, perhaps more aptly stated, as a result of female resourcefulness and the will to resist subordination. Yet typically, girl culture is described in terms of a negative relation to male street culture and a functional relation to female gender oppression, rather than as a distinct cultural form in its own right. For example, Erith (1981, p. 229) acknowledged the existence of the girl culture modes of dance and dressing up, but only as a manifestation of their socially objectified position: "All this female activity, whatever its fun and style and art as a collective occupation, is done, in the end, individually, for the boy's sake. It is the male gaze that gives girls' beauty work its meaning." But, it is precisely the "fun and style and art as collective occupation" that speaks to the expressiveness of girl culture, the complementary world of leisure and social bonding it creates for girls. Girls' preoccupation with creating "looks" through dress and make-up has many meanings when viewed within the context of female friendships and imaginative play. To reduce these activities to an overdetermined desire to please boys is to reproduce the male bias in cultural criticism. In contrast, McRobbie (1984, p. 145) described dance as an activity of control, pleasure, and sensuality for girls—an activity that offers girls "a positive and vibrant sexual expressiveness and a point of connection with other pleasures of femininity such as dressing up or putting on make-up."

### The "M" Stands for Male

MTV was designed to be a visual arena for rock music; therefore, finding ways to interpret rock ideology visually became its implicit agenda. But in its clear intent to use rock and roll for purposes of commercial gain, MTV's concept was fundamentally at odds with the anticommercial stance of rock dis-

course. MTV had successfully convinced the record companies to start making what amounted to television advertisements for rock-music singles and brought together program and advertisement as never before in American television. From the perspective of rock ideology, MTV was an insidious creation of the marketplace and the most serious threat yet to rock's ideology of authenticity. *Rolling Stone* hinted at the implied ideological crisis in its 1983 review headlined, "Ad Nauseam: How MTV Sells Our Rock and Roll" (Levy, 1983). MTV was not only perceived as a violation because it engaged in rock-music promotion but because its involvement in promoting rock music with television texts recalled practices associated with pop music. MTV blurred the boundaries that had been erected between rock and pop music. It eroded the consensus on rock's difference and superior value, and thereby undermined rock's ability to serve as a venue for social inequality in popular music culture.

WASEC tried in various ways to combat this basic contradiction in MTV's concept. Demographic thinking was elevated from an industry development and operations strategy to a textual address in spots such as the "I want my MTV" campaign. By asserting a parallel between demographic research and democratic rule, the company hoped to establish in rock audiences a belief in the channel's sincerity of motivation. A more sweeping compensation strategy was the foregrounding of another element of rock discourse, the ideology of (male) adolescence. With rock's ideology of authenticity under fire because of MTV's promotional impetus, one way of reassuring audiences that the channel was true to rock discourse was to represent textually its implied male ideology. MTV was put in the position of illustrating what previously had never even been spoken—rock's white-male bias.

The attempt to embody rock ideology visually resulted in the early exclusion of black music and black musicians from

MTV. But rock discourse had already undergone something of an ideological crisis over the suppression of its original debt to black musicians, and the rock establishment was quick to wage a publicity war against the channel's treatment of black artists. In 1983, at the peak of the bad press over MTV's alleged racism, during an interview with veejay Mark Goodman musician David Bowie (who is white, but draws on black music in his work) inquired about MTV's policy on the airing of black music videos:

BOWIE: There seem to be a lot of black artists making very good videos that I'm surprised aren't used on MTV.

GOODMAN: We have to play music we think an entire country is going to like. . . . We grew up in an era where the Isley Brothers meant something to me. But what does it mean to a seventeen-year-old?

BOWIE: I'll tell you what the Isley Brothers or Marvin Gaye means to a Black seventeen-year-old, and surely he's part of America (Levy 1983, p. 37).

Goodman's statement that MTV's playlist must appeal to the tastes of an entire nation was an attempt to cover the channel's demographic partiality with democratic rhetoric. The economic rationale underlying the statement is MTV's dependence on its successful proliferation in cable markets, the majority of which are located in white suburbs. But the response also reveals the extent of MTV's ideologically naturalized view of its youth audience as upscale and white. Not until the phenomenal cross-over success of Michael Jackson's album *Thriller*, which represented a realignment of commercial and ideological positions, did MTV broaden its format to include more black music. By then, in a form of cultural red-lining, black-artist videos were being distributed on the newly established cable channel, Black Entertainment Television (BET).

The ideology of (male) adolescence surfaced in the choices

WASEC made in compiling MTV's continuity segments. When it came to designing the sets, from which the veejays would announce upcoming videos and read music news segments, male-adolescent leisure interests were most clearly in focus:

The furnishings, according to one of the providers, are "the kinds of goodies a fifteen-year-old would want in *his* bedroom"—stuff like stereo equipment albums, wooden boxes, videogames and vaguely nifty doodads on the wall, including gold records donated from the likes of Men at Work, Loverboy, and Journey (Levy 1983, p. 33) [emphasis added].

Although the bedroom setting was more in keeping with the cultural arena of female adolescents—a place to hang posters of pop stars, have sleep-overs, dance to records, try on clothes and make-up, talk on the phone—girls were not considered in the set design.<sup>4</sup>

The selection of veejays was made on the basis of how well the personalities enacted the ideological divisions between rock and pop. Sue Steinberg (then Pittman's executive producer) described the selection of veejay Nina Blackwood as a decision based on her "young-looking, sexy, hip" image (Levy 1983, p. 34). It was Steinberg's prediction and hope that Blackwood would make "the young boys . . . go nuts" (Levy 1983, p. 34). Girls' penchant for intense fan behavior was acknowledged in MTV's selection of male veejay Mark Goodman. Steinberg described him as the "teen-idol type," stating, "We hoped young girls would write letters, start fan clubs" (Levy 1983, p. 34). Both choices reproduced the ways in which women and girls are positioned by the adolescent and rock discourses. In the case of Blackwood, a woman is sexualized in accordance with male-adolescent prerogatives. In Goodman's case, the female music fan is coded as obsessive about stars and images, but uninterested in musical artistry.

Guided by MTV's reproduction of rock and adolescent ideologies, as well as their own sense of music consumers, the record companies developed a male-oriented textual address in their music videos. Consequently, the channel soon came under heavy fire for airing videos with violent and sexually suggestive images in a public fury that outpaced the dismay expressed over MTV's exclusion of black music: "What possesses those pot-gutted, hairy-backed, bat-decapitating 43-year-old spandex-and-studs idiots to use some gorgeous, pouting, 16-year-old professional model (and part-time topless dancer) to play the 'girlfriend of the lead singer' part in their videos?" (Sommer 1985, p. 9) In part, the charges constituted a convenient rallying point for the moral panic of politically conservative parent groups. They also reflected the diffusion of concern over sexist textual operations, voiced by feminists in the 1970s, into the popular consciousness of the 1980s. The charges of sexism, however, were never related directly by opponents of MTV to the channel's reliance on the notion of target audience, or to the privileging of male adolescence in its interpretation of the targeted group. This is alarming given the defense offered by MTV spokespersons that MTV's texts and policies were the result of its need to cater to a youth audience. Pittman consistently responded to allegations of sexism by naturalizing the highly ideological category of adolescence that MTV's format attempted to reproduce: "It's not the Barry Manilow channel. . . . Some songs are unhappy. Some have a dark message. It's the essence of rock. It mirrors the issues of people moving from adolescence" (Levy 1983, p. 76). Pittman's response illustrates the disparity between MTV's rhetoric (that it was enacting an address to a broad demographic category of youth of both genders) and its textual practice (the representation of male adolescence). It also reveals how problematic the social complexities that underlie certain demographic and ideological categories can become for producers of televisual content.

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### MALE-ADDRESS VIDEO (1983)

**M**TV'S PREFERRED address to male adolescents was executed in individual music videos by making the image of "the street" an over-arching sign system for male-adolescent discourse. To invoke this attachment of young males to the street, male musicians were shown loitering on sidewalks, strolling along avenues, and riding in cars. These representations of street-corner activities served to valorize leisure, the arena in which adolescent boys carve out their own domain. Even when the physical image of the street was absent from a video, it remained an implied presence, for as a sign system it summarized perfectly the male-adolescent quest for adventure, rebellion, sexual encounter, peer relationships, and male privilege. The videos evoked male-adolescent discourse by representing boys' privileged position with respect to their female peers. Drawing on the connection between male-adolescent license and adult-male rule, the male-address videos activated textual signs of patriarchal discourse, reproducing coded images of the female body, and positioning girls and women as the objects of male voyeurism. Both the image of the female peer (the adolescent girl) and the more mythical (for boys) image of the adult woman were prominently featured. When girls appeared, they were not represented as equal