

## Careening through the Chronotypes: Response to *I Want My MTV*, directed by Tracy Stephenson Shaffer

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When MTV premiered in 1981, I was television-less and in college, but I remember watching it in the early years of graduate school, and I even wrote a paper on archetypal sexist imagery in MTV videos that required me to screen the Rolling Stones' "She Was Hot" in class. Apparently that video was partially censored for MTV, re-edited to remove some of its racier imagery.<sup>1</sup> It is pretty bad, low-hanging sexist fruit (*cf.* the appearance of Robert Palmer's video of "Simply Irresistible" in *I Want My MTV*—hereafter IWMMTV). I remember having the general impression that, like so much mass media and popular culture, MTV objectified women's bodies. I don't know if that's why I avoided it, but outside of tuning in for that paper, I cannot recall sitting still and watching MTV in its heyday; I do recall that it seemed to be on in the background at friends' apartments or at parties.

In sum, I don't identify with the "MTV generation." I'm kind of in between, born in 1960 at the cusp of the boomer generation and smack in the middle of what has been called "Generation Jones." During the MTV peak years in the early 1980s through the mid 1990s I either did not have a television or I did not have access to MTV due to lack of cable, or I was too busy with graduate school and performance and moonlighting as a clerk at my local chain Video Adventure to watch much TV. I watched movies instead, a perk of the Video Adventure years. But all kinds of memories came pushing through the cobwebs while I watched IWMMTV, and I was surprised and delighted by them. It seems that one picks up the cultural zeitgeist even if one is not directly tuned in. We had no

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<sup>1</sup> The story of the song and video is recounted in "Barry D's 80s Music Video of the Day" on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/fHHXQAUSxrs>.

internet yet; we consumed most of our music through radio broadcasts, LPs and cassettes and then CDs on our home and car stereos, live concerts, and nightclubs. Although one could argue that music has always been in visual culture, and vice-versa, MTV's "aesthetic convergence of sound and sight" marked major shifts in an increasingly "fragmented media environment" (Behr). IWMMTV gestures back at an historical moment that can be followed forward to the present age of YouTube and TikTok.<sup>2</sup>

The global COVID pandemic undoubtedly influenced the decision to stage IWMMTV as a video performance, and, as I will discuss below, it finds its way into the show's image language. Having attended many virtual performances during the pandemic, I was pleased to discover how well this performance works as a streaming video. There is something wonderfully intimate and reflexive about having this performance all to myself on my very personal little theatre bubble the iPad, to be able to "rewind" it (like Kate Ward does with her VCR in IWMMTV: "turn around" *rewind static*, "turn around" *rewind static*), to go back and re-watch, to scrub through and locate certain bits as I compose my thoughts about the project. Increasing the sense of intimacy--that the performance was "mine" to interact with--was that I first watched it in bed early one morning. As Francesco Casetti writes:

Television made us feel as if we were in two places at once—at home and wherever the events occurred. Now, mobile devices allow us to be in contact with everyone—and everything—from everywhere. In reality, if we approach this on the level of experience, we see that the "where" continues to be important. Experience is always grounded in a physical context, in addition to being embodied in a subject and embedded in a culture. It takes place, and it shapes a place. This is true of the screen: Every screen occupies a space and also gives life to a visual environment. (130)

The "visual environment" of performance these days is not just a home; it's a stayed-at home, an isolation ward.

I continued my dance with IWMMTV by switching screens, climbing out of bed and sitting nicely occupying space at my computer, thinking as I did so about the screen and its materiality evoked by the MTV-vintage squarish TV box logo with the 4:3 aspect ratio that now seems so very clunky. Nowadays screens are wider and higher-resolution but also can be very small and portable. They are also, as Casetti describes, ubiquitous: unlike the early days of MTV,

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<sup>2</sup> Behr roots many entertainment-industrial and cultural shifts in MTV: "MTV forged new paths in entertainment by serving third-party produced content like music videos to a wide audience, paving the way for platforms like Netflix, pushing forward formats like reality TV, and yoking popular music and movies closer together. Beyond just hosting some of the key pop moments of the last 40 years, it has had a huge effect on shaping the cultural landscape of today."

we experience IWWMTV amid an expanded “continuous flow of images and sounds that reaches us from the many screens to which we are daily exposed” (73). There is for me a good deal of nostalgia tied to that frame and that box. Seeing through my iPad screen into the box on the MTV logo and the static accompanied by the distinctive sound and image of changing channels with a dial (*clunk, fuzz, clunk, fuzz*) reminded me of how much technology has changed in the last several decades. Then I turned a dial; now I tap an app. That the former seems to have more texture and grain is probably due to my own situated tactile and sensory experiences. It seems so much easier to tap, and the choices of “channels” is vast. I pull out my phone and tap Facebook. There’s a meme going around to the effect that we are now as far from the early 1980s as the early 80s were from the early 1940s. Whoa.

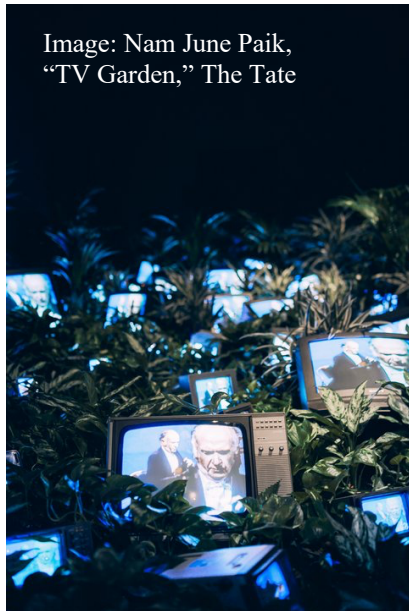


Image: Nam June Paik,  
“TV Garden,” The Tate

If the medium is the message, then part of my experience of watching IWWMTV was akin to a walk-through of Nam June Paik’s “TV Garden” installation. This installation reads very differently now than it did in the early 1970s; it seems a visit to a haunted graveyard rather than it was originally intended, as a Buddhist situation of technology as part of the natural world (Paik). Look, there’s my MTV, RIP.

But IWWMTV was simultaneously a digital experience, streamed via a Vimeo link, not less but differently material. In 1981 the analog TV screen was a domestic object; the TV was a piece of furniture. It stayed put; you might have a rabbit ear antenna on it that you fiddled with to get a good signal, or if you were lucky you had cable or a Qube box.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays if I watch

<sup>3</sup> In the mid-70s my mother won a color TV on the local game show “Bowling for Dollars.” Hard upon that, to complement the new color set, my dad, who wrote his master’s thesis on educational telecommunication, signed us up for a new interactive TV experiment going on in Columbus, OH, called Qube. All I can remember using it for was their all-night broadcasts of the Watergate hearings, watching the Barbra Streisand-Kris Kristofferson *A Star is Born* over and over and finding where they hid the porn key during “school without schools” in the energy crisis at the endless pool table party going on at a friend’s house, and something called “Sight on Sound,” an ancestor of MTV. “Sight on Sound” carried a bunch of concert footage but there were also some of what we would now call music videos. and because it was on Qube, voting on tepid multiple-choice questions, which passed for interactivity (*cf.* contemporary “like” buttons). This is where I probably saw my first music video, though my memory of it is very dim.

a music video, it's traveling to and from a server through fiber optic and/or copper cables to my router to the Wi-Fi ether, or it's bounced off a satellite into a cellular signal, on a platform like YouTube, either on my phone or my tablet. Watching IWMMTV I'm accessing old technology via new, and as I watched I found myself oscillating back and forth between the two. Or more precisely, careening among a heck of a lot of chronotopes.

IWMMTV remixes up five main tactics:

1. The parodic remake (with homey swede<sup>4</sup> aesthetic in some cases; with higher tech rotoscope and skillful graphics and editing aesthetic in others, and sometimes a mix of these—method mashups within method mashup).
2. Everyday Life Performance (ELP) interviews recorded as artfully reenacted talking head interviews.
3. What director Tracy Stephenson Shaffer describes as mashups of “memorable moments” from MTV—assumedly downloaded from YouTube—short clips of vintage videos staged most often as cutaways from or lead-ins to the new material created for this performance.
4. The paratextual technological grain material like the channel changes (*clunk fuzz, clunk fuzz*) that move us clunkily but efficiently from one clip or scene to the next and function a bit like Brechtian interruptions and *verfremdungseffekte*.
5. The remade (re)framing of the MTV channel itself--the initial countdown, with space-suited performer very seriously (and therefore hilariously) re-enacting the famous sign-on using a familiar set piece we keep in the HopKins Black Box theatre at LSU, and the MTV theme song with the colors of the logo changing.

As I watch, I'm not sure what's coming after the next *clunk fuzz*, and part of the delight of IWMMTV is the little jolt of surprise when the channel change *gestus* produces something I immediately recognize, for instance when Bonny McDonald as Kate mentions a Peter Gabriel video that I had forgotten I loved back in the day—I thought, ooh, I hope there's a clip of “Sledgehammer,” and there was! IWMMTV is an artful mix of remixed materials—but as we know,

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<sup>4</sup> “Sweding” refers to the practice of remaking a famous movie (or in this case, music video) in a homemade, DIY, no-budget manner. The term for this practice originated with Michel Gondry's 2008 film *Be Kind Rewind* and spread through YouTube. In some ways (but not at all in tone) it is the video age's answer to Poor theatre, and has been firmly established in the Performance Studies kitbag of methods, featured in festivals and classes and conferences, and employed as a major method in IWMMTV. Sweding was popularized in Performance Studies largely through the scholarship of Lindsay Michalik Gratch, whose *Creating Memes, Sweding Movies, and Other Digital Performances: Adaptation Online* devotes a chapter to the phenomenon.

everything is a remix now.<sup>5</sup> The impulse to remake and remix is deeply connected to parody, to which I'll return below. For now, I want to note that the way IWMMTV travels — how the performance moves — is in some ways homage to the old channel changes, but in others very much the way we travel nowadays through the internet, moving rapidly from one thing to another. Everything new is old again. The *clunk fuzz* is gone, but I'm readily on the move, nervously changing my channels.

I don't think we felt everything to be a remix back in 1981, although certainly now we can point to and describe media from then as just that. Our critical framing of mediated performance has shifted perhaps even more than the media themselves. I felt the most profound recovery of my remix-innocent eyes in the ELP interviews, but of course was conscious of the ELP method of "remixing" an ethnographic interview. IWMMTV felt like a wild ride in multiple times; time itself seemed to remix.

Feeling the need to go back and grasp how IWMMTV unfolded, I made myself a playlist:

1) MTV rocket countdown, remake of sign-on, with a toy rocket sweding the countdown and a performer in homemade—hazmat?—spacesuit (so the pandemic rears its ugly icons right away) and MTV logo color changes with someone off camera singing the music of the MTV theme song

2) Short clip of "Video Killed the Radio Star" by The Buggles from their album "The Age of Plastic"

*channel change*

3) Intro clip of swede of "Video Killed" by "The Blargles" from "The Age of Cardboard"

*channel change*

4) Crosscut between the Buggles original and the Blargles swede, with channel changes when we cut from one to another

5) Scrolling text over black explaining the launch of MTV in 1981 and describing the performance we are watching, with radio signal tuning in sounds and circa 1980s music clips

6) Show poster image with performer in hazmat/spacesuit (or is this one the original image? which is remixed from the Apollo moon walk?—my frames begin to slip) with animated titles I WANT MY MTV and the "I want my MTV" bit from Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing" (Later I will watch the Dire Straits video online to hear the song again, and I am surprised to recognize some of the cartoon aesthetic from later in the show)

*channel change*

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<sup>5</sup> "Everything is a remix" alludes to the title of the famous four-part video series by Kirby Ferguson, which originally appeared on Vimeo in 2010-12. In 2015 Ferguson remastered and combined the four videos; it now resides on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/nJPERZDfyWc>.

7) First clip of Johanna Middleton in an ELP of Clayton Neblett, 10 years old when MTV was launched (inviting me to calculate—I was 21)

*channel change*

8) Clip from Run DMC's "Rock Box" that opens with the image of a TV set changing channels (more frame slippage) that moves into the screen into a mock lecture, "What is rap music?" (and yes, I looked up this video later, too—and I want to suggest its remix methods and frame play as a significant influence on the whole structure of IWMMTV)

*channel change*

9) Back to Middleton/Clayton, discussing "MTV Raps"

*channel change*

10) Historical footage of "MTV Raps" show introduction

*channel change*

11) Back to Middleton/Clayton, who goes on to discuss "popcorn" music and to mention the group Aha

*channel change*

12) Clip from Aha's "Take on Me" video

*channel change*

13) Initial short clip from Jonny Gray's remake/parody of "Take on Me"

*channel change*

14) Back to Middleton/Clayton conceding that Aha was cool

*channel change*

15) Clip from Aha's "Take On Me" video, notable for its mix of video-graphic real images mixed with animation (a remix of a person moving)

*channel change*

16) Gray's whole remake/parody of "Take on Me" as "Load Me Up," which uses a more complex mix of rotoscope and animation and actual video of Gray (holding a screen, drawing, drawn) and makes the distinctive move of rewriting lyrics to reflect our current pandem(pan)icked virtual lives with title cards "ONLINE TEACHING HAS ITS DANGERS" "HaHa" "Upload Me" and "Teaching Highs and Lows." In a montage framed with Gray reading a text on "Understanding Comics" and teaching "The Graphic Novel in Performance," we watch as implicitly what Gray is reading passes behind him until an animated arm snakes out from in front of Gray and screen bottom and grabs him—all of this to a delightful mix of voices singing "boop boop" in imitation of the percussion and melodic tracks of "Take On Me."

I need to stop making this playlist so it doesn't run to 50 pages, but I note here that we are not even ten minutes into IWMMTV at the end of "Load Me Up." IWMMTV is an extremely rich and intricate performance, with so much packed into its half hour that I can only begin to unpack some of it here. I like that, a lot. And I like that we aren't told what to make of it. IWMMTV hearkens back to what Tom Gunning called the "cinema of attractions": "a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a

chance to solicit the attention of the spectator” (383). We don’t ask what a fair-ground attraction, a ride, means: we experience it, and ascribe significance to our experiences.

As in Gray’s performance described above, many of the contributors to IWMMTV created “sweded” versions of entire music videos, several of which are previewed within the whole mix before they play straight through. Each of these constituted its own performance-within-the-performance, so I will attend to each of them here. “Load Me Up” impresses with its bang-on darkly timely-satiric and parodic methods and images: The drawn figure of Gray materializes through a drawing arm, as if pursued through the video, landing in hostile virtual/drawn/real worlds—which reminds me of the scene in the Buster Keaton film *Sherlock Jr* when Keaton crawls up into the movie screen and the setting of the movie he’s entered keeps changing on him, buffeting him around through various meta-cinematic dangers. Aha! (pun intended)—I see what Gray is doing here, moving his avatar-selves in and out of screens and textures, which is not altogether different from the “Load Me Up” days I have teaching and meeting on Zoom routinely. Like Gray, in my pandemic-era labor I’m simultaneously multi-present and lost. This video was loaded, with multiple images of Gray, with how-we-all-feel teaching and living virtually in this pandemic, with the sometimes playful, sometimes terrifying self-and-other mediatizing that—even though by now might feel mundane—is truly loaded. Toward the end of the video Gray sticks his arm through his iPad. I move my arm to try.... No, it was too expensive. I’ll stick to metaphoric reenactment of this gesture.

*channel change—chunk chunk fuzz fuzz*

Michal LeVan’s giddy swede of Madness’s “One Step Beyond” sent me careening around the room dancing, recalling doing the Madness walk with my buddies in college. That was then (remember being close to other people’s bodies?), but now is lurking here too: the reduced COVID-swede production conditions the mise-en-scene, with LeVan playing all the roles (excepting two special guest cameo appearances from some of his own old friends). The sweding deflation of the music here is laugh-out-loud creative: kazoos and mouth harps and humming—whatever is to hand—stand in for the orchestration. It *IS* Madness. And my favorite moment is when a black cat calmly walks through the frame, video bombing LeVan’s earnest dance on the front porch, a moment of feline deflation of the whole “re” enterprise. Do our non-human others have re-mixing competency?

Misty Saribel’s Oinko Boinko “Weird Science” (mashed up with Palmer’s “Simply Irresistible”) sweded video is sly and dense and playful. Casting young women—the director’s daughter’s crew—is a stroke of rhetorical genius, as is Saribel’s gender bending of the agent-object relations in the original. It feels very like the director let the kids loose to play with the gendered MTV codes. The result is a delicious remix of how they signify, which Saribel has the skill and sense to edit into a layered and atomized feast that leaves in the busy doings as

well as the “backstage” reactions to it (“Are we really wearing men’s underwear on our heads?”). Not what teacher said to do, indeed. The lyric “It’s my creation” takes on deeper significance as I watch the next generation tear down the master’s house. I want to come over and play.

This might be a good moment to climb out of Tom Gunning’s wild ride to address the sexual and racial politics that seep into IWMMTV. In a 1983 interview with MTV VJ Mark Goodman, David Bowie asked why “so few Black artists [were] featured” on MTV and challenged the policy of “narrow-casting,” which relegated Black artists to “around 2:30 in the morning till around six.”<sup>6</sup> The ELP performances in IWMMTV give body and voice to how MTV did its cultural work. MTV created its own otherized “ghetto” of Black music in segments like “Yo MTV Raps,” and Middleton’s Clayton is a shrewd remix of a 10-year-old negotiator of the cultural margins, which really aren’t margins at all—they are just placed there on MTV. I’m as impressed by the artful performances of Middleton and McDonald as I am by their subjects’ ability to locate themselves in the sometimes-unlikely forests of pop culture. In and despite: McDonald’s Kate Ward finds her queerness through Cindy Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” freakiness (vs. Madonna’s studied “Material Girl” artificiality) and as a remixed version of her 9-year-old self. MTV—sometimes espousing the cultural codes that constrain us—can also be a place of possibility, to try on others and remix ourselves.

IWMMTV is largely deft parody. It is peppered with re-enactments of performers’ social gesticulations that are the textures in the fabric of music video culture in the 1980’s: the way MTV stars had of staging in-your-face closeups, as if they were attacking the camera (and thus the spectator, for whom sometimes there is a surrogate onscreen) with their lyrics—for instance, in LeVan’s re-enactment of the prologue to Madness’s “One Step Beyond,” pushing his face at the camera admonishing both us and the reclining person (also played by LeVan) in the reverse angle: “Hey you, don’t watch that; watch this!” In several videos performers re-enact the suggestive ways boys brandish their phallic guitars (which used to seem cool but now seems both creepy and campy). Parody resounds even in the moments of IWMMTV when performers are “playing it straight,” not trying to poke fun at a convention or style; we do not, cannot, and should not read phallic guitar movements in the same way today as we did in the early 1980s. As Linda Hutcheon notes, parody “is very much an inscription of the past in the present, and it is for that reason that it can be said to embody and bring to life actual historical tensions” (xii).

*Channel change, clunk fuzz*

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<sup>6</sup> The Bowie interview is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/XZGiVzIr8Qg>. Bowie’s critique evokes the Jim Crow practice of another entertainment industry, the cinema, which segregated Black audiences into the balconies or to their own “Midnight Ramble” showings.



I'm left with the grace notes on the tinny toy piano at the end of Lyndsay Michalik Gratch's (and family's) swede of "Video Killed the Radio Star." The swede aesthetic (although maybe belied by the amount of skill it took to put this video together) is moving here—this is a family (and thus, another COVID bubble) performance, with the kid's toys put to use as music kit (the playing of the instruments as well as the lip-synch in original MTV videos was playing-synch, so this makes so much parodic sense). The child's resemblance to the child in the original is uncanny. I will confess to crying when I saw this video, partially because I miss these particular performers as well as the experience of being co-present at live performances, and I'm angry and sad at the politics that have made the pandemic linger and protract the days of virtual performance. Time will tell, but I believe in a decade or so we may look back upon IWMMTV and see it as a performance that is as much about the pandemic as it is a parody of MTV culture in the 1980s. Variations on the swede aesthetic emerged time and time again in the pandemic, spreading through social media as we all stayed at home and played with what we had at hand, for instance, in the Getty Museum's challenge to recreate artworks using household objects (Waldorf and Stephan) or the family quarantine bands, like YouTube stars the Colt family. Although they are present throughout IWMMTV, "Video Killed the Radio Star," with its repurposing of toys and family and cardboard, evoked pandemic aesthetics for me most powerfully. I'm grateful to have been provided a place to play and think about the significance of that play, of losing and finding and remixing my selves in IWMMTV.

Did video kill the radio star? Doubtful. The glaring question I haven't explored here is what happened to popular music when it became visual—but I find in the end that I haven't much interest in this question, and that the question is really a pretext for a performance that is about so many more significant things. IWMMTV is about how we (re)mix up music and images, operating within the pandemic chronotopes. I studied adaptation in graduate school while I was largely ignoring MTV, and I never would have guessed this kind of thing was where adaptation would go. There's something very wise about this project in terms of how the field of Performance Studies continues to take us on wild rides into the cultural zeitgeist, despite and in some ways because of this pandemic, which has certainly entered the remix. We use what is to hand. We are adapting.

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