

Dancing in the Dark. MTV, Music Videos, Bruce Springsteen and the Aesthetics of Rock in the Eighties

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Abstract

Although born in the seventies, music videos are considered one of the cultural and media symbols of the Eighties. This paper will focus on the aesthetics of music videos in the Eighties in a new perspective, that goes beyond the postmodern approach typical of its early studies. It will consider the music video as a narrative device to build the image and the aesthetics of a music star particularly in relation to music genres and their symbolic and cultural meaning. Therefore, the rock music videos of the Eighties are particularly interesting because of their relations to three main issues: television spectacularization, the needs for promotion of the recording industries, and the need to keep (or build) the consistency and credibility of the performer / musician. The paper analyzes the production of a rock artist symbol of that decade: Bruce Springsteen, who experimented with different forms of music videos and aesthetics to promote his record on MTV while preserving his image as a “authentic” rock performer.

Keywords: Music videos; Music Television; Television studies; Bruce Springsteen; Popular music; Music Industry.

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This paper will focus on the aesthetics of music videos in the Eighties in a new perspective, that goes beyond the postmodern approach typical of its early studies. It will consider the music video as a narrative device to build the image and the aesthetics of a music star, focusing on relation to music genres and their symbolic and cultural meaning. Rock music videos of the Eighties will be the specific object of analysis; they are particularly interesting because of their relations to three main issues: television spectacularization, the needs for promotion of the recording industries, and the need to keep (or build) the consistency and credibility of the performer / musician.

The story of Bruce Springsteen is maybe the most interesting example of the complex relationship among these three issues, especially as far as his Eighties production is concerned, when he became a world-famous music star. Between 1984 and 1985, his album *Born in the U.S.A.* sold over thirty million copies; seven of its twelve songs were published as 45rpm promotional singles; five out of seven became music videos, starting from the song that launched the album, *Dancing in the dark*. Springsteen's image was built around the idea of a "true rocker": he embodied the values of spontaneity and sincerity that were typical of that music genre. But in the new perspective of music television, the artist had to cope with the delicate issue of how to preserve those characteristics, mainly the "authenticity" of the performance and of the behavior of a rocker. This idea was either deeply rooted in the imagination of artists, critics and fans, and ephemeral and difficult to show in music videos.

Through Bruce Springsteen's video production, from *Dancing in the Dark* onwards (1984, directed by Brian De Palma), the paper will take into consideration the productive and narrative tensions of the whole decade, considering the theoretical approaches that studied the origins of the music video in the Seventies and in the following years.

The birth of the music video: from *Bohemian Rhapsody* to *Video killed the radio star*

In this section, we will briefly analyze the origins of the music video. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard defines the Eighties and the Nineties as the so-called "first golden age" of the medium, while a present "second golden age" is defined by its reinvention on YouTube and digital video platforms, after a long period of crisis due to the end of the relevance of MTV:

The medium of the music video seems to be in a permanent state of simultaneous crisis and reinvigoration. Having more or less outplayed its televisual relevance, the music video has become one of the most visible and important forms of online media.¹

The first golden age started with two emblematic music videos: *Bohemian Rhapsody* by the Queen and *Video killed the radio star* by the Buggles.

In 1975, the Queen published the song that would become their most famous single, *Bohemian Rhapsody*; from the album *A Night at the Opera*. The eponymous movie about Freddie Mercury's life (2019, Bryan Singer) does not tell the interesting story of the music video that was realized to promote that song. Music videos were not an outstanding novelty at that time,² but *Bohemian Rhapsody* introduced many of the characteristics of the music video as we know it. The story of its production highlights the outstanding role of chance: the band had been invited to the BBC music show *Top of the Pops*, but they did not want to sing in playback, as the show required, so they preferred giving up the participation, for not risking to deceive their fans. The band hired the director Bruce Gowers to shoot the band live and asked him to re-create on the set the cover picture of their previous album "Queen II," with their faces in dim light. The video was a huge success: after the debut at *Top Of The Pops* it was repeatedly aired on

1. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, *Music Video After MTV. Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 10.

2. The idea of promotional music videos dates back to the Fifties and Sixties, with the movies and the television performances by Elvis Presley or the Beatles. In Italy the "Musicarelli" were born, that is videos based on songs, and movies like Lucio Battisti's ones aired in several programs of Rai. See Sibilla, *Musica da vedere, il music video nella televisione Italiana*.

television. As a consequence, the record industry realized that music could be promoted on TV exactly as it happened on the radio, that is repeatedly airing a song also without the physical presence of the artists, which could be replaced by a short movie.

In the credits of their first records, the Queen used to write: “No synthesizers were used during the making of this record.” The use of electronic keyboards was in contrast with the rock aesthetics they were referring to, and the same happened to singing in lip-synch³ in a TV show. A music video showing some concert sequences and a creative representation of the band was definitely more “rock” than the classic television playback habit.

Some scholars⁴ considered *Bohemian rhapsody* as the very first music video, together with *Video killed the radio star* by the Buggles (Mulchay, 1979): the first music video to be broadcast by MTV on August 1, 1981, and also the first one to be realized using a storyboard, i.e. the idea of a script based on the song. More recent analysis, such as Carol Vernallis’s one, point to a more complex panorama of the birth of a “Music video canon.”⁵

However, these two videos established and spread music video as a short audiovisual text, where a song becomes a TV content made by music emotions, audiovisual rules and marketing needs.⁶

Although they were born in the Seventies, music videos were considered by scholars as one of the most symbolic cultural and media objects of the Eighties: they influenced not only the musical industry but the audiovisual language as a whole. The music video created a new audiovisual form, most of all a because of a new use of the montage, defined by the rhythm of the music. Their narrative form is not always linear because their aim is to highlight the artists’ performance by means of artificial contextualizations and many special effects, very far from the classical live performance of the rock concert.

This textual form soon became the landmark of a whole TV channel: in the Eighties, MTV was a television *made by* music videos and a television *made like* a music video, that is a flow of short texts — videos, promos (the so-called “idents”), jingles, short presentations of “veejays” (the television version of radio DJs). MTV was born as a low budget television channel: music videos were produced by the record companies, which invested most of their promotional budgets in this sector. On the industrial side, music videos deeply affected the promotion routines of a music star: a short video could literally create an artist, tell his/her story and bring him/her to success.

The Eighties: reading music videos as postmodern objects

After the birth of MTV in 1981, the production of music videos dramatically grew, together with a notable rise in their relevance by industry, artists and audiences. MTV allowed new music to be “discovered,” as well as well-known artists to get stronger and stronger. The latter began to put big budgets on music videos: a spectacular music video could have both a tactical effect (to sell the song and the album) and also strategic one (to strengthen the artist’s identity in the long term).

Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1983) is the most interesting example. The project was based on a 13-minute-long music video, directed by acclaimed Hollywood director John Landis. Jackson strongly believed in this short movie, but his record company did not, so he himself partly financed its production. That

3. It is a performance where the artist/band does not perform live, but pretending to sing on a pre-recorded version, moving the lips in time with the voice but without actually singing.

4. Andrew Goodwin notes that “Accounts of music television that begin by telling us that music video was ‘invented’ in a given year (or that imply such a position by using a chronology that starts with the moment of birth of MTV) miss out of an important step in thinking about this topic, namely, what is ‘music television’? It is essential that we engage this question because it encompasses many other issues regarding the nature of music video texts, and in particular the relation between their economic status and ideological significance.” Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 24.

5. Cf. Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 262–4.

6. Cf. Sibilla, *Musica da vedere*, 17.

video boosted the sales of the album, its VHS version became a bestseller and it scored the important goal of strengthening Michael Jackson's image as the "King of pop" and as a brilliant innovator.⁷

The first relevant study on music videos dates back to 1986, five years after the birth of MTV, when the *Journal of Communication Inquiry* published a monographic number, focused on the content analysis of the phenomenon — but from a very critical perspective. The paper by Margaret Morse, for example, considered "rock video" as a contradiction in terms: an object conceived to sell a kind of music traditionally far from any commercial logic, more linked to transgression and counterculture than to the need to sell records. According to Virginia Fry and Donald Fry, the music video was a tool whose only goal was to promote consumerism.⁸

It is interesting to note that, next to the strongly ideologically oriented reading of the music video in that monographic issue, emerges the post-modernist approach, as a dominant perspective on the study of music video that will dominate the literature from then on and for several years. As the television scholar John Fiske stated, MTV produced and aired programs beside the traditional logics of making sense in television.⁹

The postmodern perspective was reaffirmed the following year by Ann Kaplan, who presents a classification of music videos that was based on categories such as "romantic," "socially conscious," "nihilist," "classic," "postmodernist":

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. (...) 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.¹⁰

In this period, however, Dick Hebdige achieved the most relevant contribution to the postmodern dimension of music video.¹¹ In the few pages where he analyzes the clip *Road To Nowhere* by the Talking Heads, Hebdige identified the postmodern traits of the object, but he also evaluated its linguistic and structural characteristics: the music video is characterized by the "referential density," rich in stratified meanings, which allows different readings and requires repeated views to be decoded. However, this perspective lacked industrial and production dynamics: stratification and density not only have an aesthetic and linguistic aim, but also a promotional goal, that is, to stimulate in the audience the repeated view of what is, in fact, a promotional movie.

By the end of the decade, however, Simon Frith would heavily criticize the postmodernist approach, by stating it generated the greatest amount of " 'academic nonsense' since punk."¹²

In the Nineties a broader comprehension of the phenomenon emerged, capable of going beyond the post-modern categories and the ideological and anti-consumerist interpretations. In particular, the work of Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg¹³ proposes an interdisciplinary approach, based on the need of taking into consideration the relevance of music in music videos. The authors defined music as "the great absent" in the previous literature.

7. Nancy Griffin, "The 'thriller' Diaries," *Vanity Fair* (June 24, 2010), <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/07/michael-jackson-thriller-201007>. See also Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's Thriller," in *The music video reader*, eds. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (London/New York: Routledge, 1993).

8. Margaret Morse, "Postsynchronizing Rock Music and Television" and Virginia Fry and Donald Fry, "MTV: The 24 Hour Commercial", in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January 1986).

9. John Fiske, "MTV: post-structural post-modern," in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January 1986).

10. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking around the clock. Music Television Postmodernism and Consumer Culture* (New York/London: Routledge, 1987), 15.

11. Cf. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the light* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989).

12. Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure. Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988), 5.

13. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *The music video reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993).

As Mathias Bonde Korsgaard argues, in the Nineties not only does the First Golden Age of music videos end, but also the first wave of specific studies: “Though a widely popular object of study in the Eighties and the early Nineties, the first wave of scholarship on music video seemed to end around 1993 with ‘The Music Video Reader.’”¹⁴ The migration of the music video in the new digital space represented by YouTube gives birth to new studies and new points of view: “More recently, however, the study of music video has gradually begun to regain momentum and entered its second stage.”¹⁵

Authenticity and performance

From its birth, MTV made reference to a well-defined tradition: the one of pop-rock icons that used television as an expressive and promotional medium. The slogan “First it was Elvis, then it was the Beatles, now it’s MTV”¹⁶ was a reminder of Presley’s famous performances on the small screen in 1956–57 that turned rock’n’roll into a mass phenomenon, and the Beatles’ performance in 1964 at the *Ed Sullivan Show*, when they became popular in the United States.

MTV, however, required different characteristics to an artist, other than a performance in a show such as the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

From the Fifties onwards, popular music and television share a complex relationship, a sort of marriage of interest: for the music industry, TV as a showcase for songs and artists, where the main goal is to preserve the musical consistency of the latter; while for television, on the contrary, music is a “young” content, very useful for attracting a new and valuable audience, but that must be made spectacular according to its rules.

In general, the relationship between music and TV is defined as “uneasy”: TV is used by musicians for promotion purposes, but “The TV audience is rarely conceived as a musical audience. TV pop stars almost always lacked musical credibility,” writes Simon Frith.¹⁷

Television requires different dynamics compared with the traditional live performance: the musicians perform in a studio, they are often in front of an audience of actors, and they often sing in playback, that is easier to control than a live performance.

Through the music video and MTV, the “lip-synch” technique became a rule. The music video must promote the original version of the song; the one included in the record is not a different “live” version played for the occasion; the viewer and the possible buyer must listen to the song that he can actually buy.

The Eighties music video introduced and enhanced some forms of hyper-spectacular performance that contradicted the idea of “authenticity” that belonged to the aesthetics of music, especially of rock.

As several scholars noted,¹⁸ a part of popular music lives in the myth of “authenticity”: audiences and critics positively evaluate artists when they present themselves as “true,” when their songs are presented as if they were not concerned with music business, and when their performances are presented as “live,” without filters between the artist and his/her audience. The same scholars emphasize as well the con-

14. Cf. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, *Music Video After MTV*, 15.

15. Cf. Gina Arnold, Daniel Cookney and Kirsty Fairclough-isaacs, eds., *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Lori Burns and Stan Hawkins, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Henry Keazor and Thorsten Wübbena, eds., *Rewind – Play – Fast Forward: The Past, Present and Future of the Music Video* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2010) and the work of Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

16. Cf. Serge Denissof, *Inside Mtv* (New Brunswick/Oxford: Transaction Books, 1988).

17. Simon Frith, “Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television”, *Popular Music*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2002).

18. Philip Auslander, *Liveness. Performance in a mediatized culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999–2008). See also Frith, *Music for pleasure*.

traditions of this romantic perspective: singers are always characters, and music is always mediated — from a technological, visual, narrative point of view.

Rock appears to be the nearest genre to the “ideology of authenticity”: in the Eighties, the birth and the success of MTV compelled the artists to cope with a model of communication and management that radically differed from the previous one. Their relationship with the audience does not take place only through records, concerts and occasional performances on TV shows: the small screen becomes the central hub of their careers, but has its own rules that, like playback, often contradict the aesthetics of rock.

In other words: a pop artist could sing his/her own song in playback disguised as a zombie, in the middle of a group of zombie dancers, as Michael Jackson did in *Thriller*, while a rock artist had to present himself naturally. The spectacularization enhances a pop song: the ability of an artist to perform in such videos is a “plus” that fans do appreciate, while rock fans want their artist to be consistent with their “real” identity.

In other words, rock artists tended to have an opposite attitude: they had to show themselves as “authentic” performers, far from that “postmodernist decenteredness” and the “anti-aesthetics” that Kaplan recognized in the format.¹⁹

Authenticity, then, is staged as an effect and a narrative, whose aesthetics are based on those “values.” Pop artists can make use of all sorts of special effects in their videos, but rock videos tended to represent music and artist focusing on performances.

The model of the rock music video is *Bohemian rhapsody* by the Queen, with its mix of live band and visual experimentation, more than the model represented by *Video killed the radio star* by The Buggles, where the band plays in a TV studio, surrounded by an artificial set design.

Rock is not in itself anti-visual and anti-spectacular, indeed: the rock imagery exists from the moment when Elvis built his career by taking part to a tv show. As Andrew Goodwin already noted in 1993, rock “has always stressed the visual as a necessary part of its apparatus — in performance, on record covers, in magazine and press photographs, and in advertising.”²⁰

On the one hand, rock stars knew that music videos were a must for their promotion. They know as well that it is a must also to stick to the spectacularization MTV requires. On the other hand, however, they need to keep their truthfulness as performers / musicians, according to the values of the genre.

The aesthetics of rock in music videos: the story of Bruce Springsteen

Bruce Springsteen is the most successful rock artist of the Eighties: his album *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984) sold over thirty million copies alone. For fans, critics and scholars, since the previous decade, he perfectly embodied the rock spirit and values. The most famous definition of his rock personality is this 1974 statement: “I saw my rock’n’roll past flash before my eyes. And I saw something else: the rock’n’roll future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen.” The author was a young but already renowned figure: John Landau, one of *Rolling Stone’s* leading music critics, who published this emphatic sentence in a local Boston magazine: it became a sort of prophecy which turned to reality with the publication of *Born to run*; at that time Landau was also a music producer, and later on he became Springsteen’s manager, and still is.

In the next paragraph, Landau wrote a perfect definition of the rock spirit:

Springsteen does it all. He is a rock’n’roll punk, a Latin street poet, a ballet dancer, an actor, a joker, bar band leader, hot-shit rhythm guitar player, extraordinary singer, and a truly great

19. Cf. Kaplan, *Rocking around the clock*, 15.

20. Cf. Goodwin, *Dancing in the distraction factory*, 8.

rock'n'roll composer. He leads a band like he has been doing it forever. (...).

Bruce Springsteen is a wonder to look at. Skinny, dressed like a reject from Sha Na Na, he parades in front of his all-star rhythm band like a cross between Chuck Berry, early Bob Dylan, and Marlon Brando. Every gesture, every syllable adds something to his ultimate goal — to liberate our spirit while he liberates his by baring his soul through his music. Many try, few succeed, none more than he today.²¹

Landau described in an evocative way the same characteristics as Simon Frith would just as brilliantly summarize in sociological terms:

The recurring term used in discussions of Springsteen by fans, by critics, by fans-as-critics is 'authenticity.' What is meant by this is not that Springsteen is authentic in a dire way — is simply expressing himself — but that he represents 'authenticity.' (...) he stands for the core values of rock and roll even as those values become harder and harder to sustain, at a time when rock is the soundtrack for TV commercials, when tour depends on sponsorship, when video promotion has blurred the line between music making and music selling.²²

Springsteen embodies the contradictions of the notion of "authenticity" and of rock in general, Frith writes, when confronted with the media: he presents itself as "raw," without any filters, but he is "cooked" instead, as much prepared and controlled as any pop artists.

To understand the aesthetics of the rock video in the Eighties, one must then wonder about how a singer, who is depicted both by the music press and by his fans as being "true," "authentic," "passionate," etc. — was able to translate the same values into a communicative space — television — that in those times was labeled as being pop, postmodernist "consumerist" and anti-aesthetic.

In the early Eighties, Springsteen released his album *The River: Hungry heart* was the first one of his singles to enter the American Top 10, but without any music video; he never appeared on television,²³ with the exception of a few short interviews on local channels. In May 1980, he took part in the movie *No nukes*, taken from a 1979 big charity concert: for the first time, a live performance by Springsteen was filmed and released.

Springsteen's music video production began in 1982 and developed during the decade, with the main goal of translating his peculiar "authentic" and "raw" image into to a mediated language, whose main characteristic is the building of narratives for a "cooked" character. The result was a strong narration, that sometimes turned out to be contradictory in its layering of different elements, but far from being weak and postmodern. On the contrary, this narration was centered on the pivotal and classical idea of the outstanding performer, who dominates the stage, rather than on the fragmented image of the pop singer who, according to the postmodern theorists, is the core of the music video and of the identity of MTV. Springsteen tried to remain coherent to his image and the values appreciated by his core fans, but also he tried to reach a new and broader audience through the music video medium.

Through the analysis of Springsteen's music videos in the Eighties, a differentiation in his production comes out, that allows a tentative categorization based upon seven different modes of representing the artist's presence, that can be labeled as follows:

21. Jon Landau, "Growing Young With Rock and Roll," *The Real Paper* (May 22, 1974), <http://web.archive.org/web/20030202021626/http://home.theboots.net/theboots/articles/future.html>.
22. Cf. Frith, *Music for pleasure*, 241. Academic literature of Springsteen is very broad and articulated in terms of points of view and approaches, but Frith's essay remains the most relevant one. For an introduction, see also Decon Powers, "Bruce Springsteen, Rock Criticism, and the Music Business: Towards a Theory and History of Hype," *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 34 (2011) and Elizabeth Bird, "Is that me, Baby? Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen," *American Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1994), 39–57.
23. Before MTV rock music was not frequently aired on TV. Spaces for live music on TV were limited to very few programs — and mostly singers appeared on TV as guests in shows, or in musical containers like the aforementioned *Top of The Pops*, where playback was the rule. An often cited example of live music on American TV is "Austin city limits," a concert filmed for TV in a studio broadcast on PBS since 1976, or its English counterpart "The Old Gray Whistle Test," aired on BBC2 from 1971 to 1988. Live music was — and is — also visible in the "Saturday night live" (1975-present), where the musical guests perform strictly live.

- the “absence” video;
- the “fake live” video;
- the “true live” video;
- the “performance revisited” video;
- the montage of repertoire images;
- the cinematic video;
- the “half playback” video.

In the following paragraphs each category will be taken into account, with the aim to retrieve some similarities, some connections and some mutual contradictions.

The “absence” video

This category is represented by the music video of *Atlantic city*, directed in 1982 by Arnold Levine. It was Springsteen’s first music video, and it clearly shows his serious trial and error difficult path towards the building of of a video-rock aesthetic.

Atlantic city is a song extracted from the album *Nebraska*, a collection of dark songs, recorded at his home just with his acoustic guitar. The video is a transposition of the imaginary used the cover on the album — a black and white photo of an empty road.

The “fake live” video

The most significant category of the rock music video of the Eighties is the “fake live”: it epitomizes the attempt to create a mix of pop and rock aesthetics with promotional and marketing needs: the “raw” live performance — with the “cooked” dimensions of music video, that is a “clean” singer’s portrayal, the use of playback, some forms of narratives that are connected to the lyrics.

In Bruce Springsteen’s production, this category is represented by *Dancing in the dark* and *Born in the U.S.A.* Both videos were produced in 1984 to promote the eponymous album. *Dancing in the dark* was directed by Brian De Palma and shoot the Saint Paul Civic Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on June 28th and 29th, 1984. On the first day of shooting, the director shot Springsteen’s performance specifically for the video, while on the following evening the song was played and shot twice during a regular concert. The resulting images were edited and synchronized with the studio recorded version of the song. The outcome is a concert where a singer lip-synchs a song he didn’t actually sing in that very moment. The video ends with the famous singer picking up up a girl from the audience and dancing with her, This is a staged story: the fan girl is played by professional actress Courteney Cox.

Springsteen’s look is lacking many of his most famous watermarks of that period: no electric guitar, no bandana, no sweat. He seems is a clean version of the scruffy and sweaty rocker: his hair is well combed, he wears a white, ironed shirt. Moreover, Springsteen dances a rehearsed “choreography” rather than play an instrument.²⁴

In *Dancing in the dark* Springsteen presents himself in a natural set, the concert, but gives up some of his rock symbols, resulting in a MTV-friendly version of himself. This choice proved successful at least

24. In 2011 on YouTube surfaced an unreleased and earlier version of the video which used the same choreography: Springsteen simply danced in a dark room (“Dancing in the dark,” literally) with saxophonist Clarence Clemons on his back. The same coreography is also rehearsed in an home video surfaced at the same time. The earlier video was shot by Jeff Stein but, according to DOP Daniel Pearl, Springsteen left halfway through the shoot, dissatisfied with how he was portrayed. Cf. Stephen Pitalo, “The Untold Story of Bruce Springsteen’s Original *Dancing in the Dark* Music Video,” *The Golden Age of Music Video*, August 4, 2011, <http://goldenageofmusicvideo.com/the-untold-story-of-bruce-springsteens-original-dancing-in-the-dark-music-video/>.

for the MTV standards: that video was aired in heavy rotation, and in 1985 it was awarded the “MTV Video Music Award for Best Stage Performance.”

The music video of *Born in the U.S.A.* was directed by John Sayles, who created a montage of real concert sequences and synchronized them with the studio songs, edited with original shooting of real-life workers. The only staged sequence closes the video: Springsteen walks towards an American flag, to recreate the cover image of the album; he then turns back and stares into the camera.

The live sequences shows Springsteen with a “dirtier” look than in his previous video: he sings in an angry way, strums violently his guitar, wears his renowned bandana and a leather jacket. But the montage is an artificial juxtaposition of sounds and images, where the singer’s lips are often out of sync.

The cinematic video

For his third single taken from *Born in the USA* album, Springsteen tried the *cinematic video* model. In the Eighties, it was quite common to produce videos where the artists did not perform, but instead they appeared as actors in the story, without singing: the result is a sort of a short movie that is strictly linked to the song. In *I’m on fire* (1985, John Sayles), Springsteen plays his alter ego, the “working class hero” who is often the main character in his songs. He’s a mechanic and he is fixing a rich woman’s car, while she tries to seduce him. He is about to answer to her requests, but at the end he decides to stick to his world, because he is well-aware of class differences. This narrative choice is consistent with Springsteen’s imagery, but it is far from his classic “live” dimension.

The “performance revisited” video

The “fake live” video is the shooting of the “live” experience in an MTV context, while the *performance revisited video* aims at transferring the rock performance in an artificial context, as it usually happens in pop music videos. In *Glory days* (1985, John Sayles) Springsteen and his E Street Band are not performing on stage in a stadium, but in a small bar, whose aim is to portray the nostalgic narratives of the song. The song is in playback, and it is juxtaposed with other scenes where Springsteen is playing a character who is similar to the one in “I’m on fire”: a blue collar who plays baseball during his free time, longs for the past and plays with his children. The same model was used by Meiert Avis in *Tunnel of love* (1987) and *One step up* (1988): for example, in the first one, Springsteen is alone in an empty house, playing his electric guitar, dressed in leather (as on the cover of the record of the same title). These scenes are juxtaposed with other sequences shot in a luna park — that is, the portrayal of the metaphor used in the lyrics when dealing with sentimental relationships. The same narratives and visual structure appear in *One step up* (1987).

The “true live” video and the montage video

The *real live music video* is simply a shooting of a live song, added with other sequences, generally connected to the lyrics. Springsteen chose this format for *My hometown* in 1985 — the last one out of the seven singles from *Born in the USA* — and then again in *War* (1986), *Spare parts* and in *Tougher than the rest* (1987). It is an artistic choice: the singer’s need to be represented consistently to his artistic values prevails over the label’s need to promote the original version of the song. Sometimes, they both coexist: *War*’s representation as a live video was a natural one, as the song was chosen to launch a live album, the box *Live ’75-’85*.

The director of *War* was Arthur Rosato, who also signed Springsteen’s next video, a live version of *Born to run* (1986). This time, the director chose a different strategy: he celebrated the artist’s career with a *montage of repertory images*, but they were not synchronized with the song; the result is a sort of live bricolage that tells the story of the rock artist in his natural environment.

These videos share an aesthetics that is suitable for the MTV style but, on the other hand, they succeed in keeping the “authenticity” feel without making use either of the pop, or the postmodern aesthetics.

The “half playback” music video

Brilliant disguise, directed by Meiert Avis, was the first single from *Tunnel of love* (1987), the first studio album after the huge success of *Born in the U.S.A.*

The video for *Brilliant disguise* is perhaps the most interesting attempt to express all the different functions of the music video. It's not a live video: Springsteen is in the kitchen of what it looks like his own house. He's sitting on a chair, dressed in a simple shirt. The video opens with a wide shot, and Springsteen starts playing. The camera slowly moves towards the singer: at the end the camera shots a close-up of his face, singing about his pains and doubts about himself and his beloved one. This model can be defined as a hybrid performance, a sort of a “half playback”: the music is pre-recorded and extra-diegetic, but the singer sings live. The “half playback” is a frequently used technique in TV performances, to avoid the “fake” effect of the lip-synch, especially in close-ups: *Brilliant disguise* video is at the same time an artificial one (the environment, the musical base) and a “live” and real one (the voice, the facial expressions). It presents a recognizable version of the song, but it still respects the artist's need to be portrayed as “real”: he is singing, not just acting.

Conclusions

We tried to retrace the birth of the music video and how the arrival of MTV codified a spectacular model of representation of the music and of the pop-rock singer. Bruce Springsteen's music video share the idea of constructing objects that on the one hand are suitable for the fruition context — music television — but on the other hand they respect the artist's narrative forms through an aesthetic that is not necessarily pop or — as we would have said at the time — postmodern.

Similar examples are quite common in rock genre and can be found in the production of the most successful groups of the period: from Bon Jovi to the U2, “rock” artists almost always chose to represent themselves focusing on the aesthetics of “live” performance rather than on pop spectacularization. MTV even created a specific category at its Video Music Award ceremony for “Best Stage Performance”: from 1984 to 1989 the winners were Van Halen, Bon Jovi, Bryan Adams and Tina Turner, Prince, Living Colour.

Bruce Springsteen's “Dancing in the dark” won the award in 1985, but fans' reaction was mixed, if not overtly critical: in the “fake live” model they saw the a fake and unreal version of their hero rather than a TV representation of the live dimension. But it was clear that the rock music video did not target traditional rock fans: it aimed at a broader audience.

On the other side, academy reading by scholars focused on music videos as an expression of postmodernity: a “decentered” narrative and an aesthetic based mainly on special effects rather than on music itself. A different perspective on rock videos and the analysis of Bruce Springsteen's production has shown that this reading was substantially wrong.

Rock Music videos show instead very specific forms of narrative. As Simon Frith notes, “Music cannot be true or false, it can only refer to the conventions of truth and falsity.”²⁵ This also applies to rock music videos: even on MTV, Springsteen portrayed himself as the embodiment of the values of rock and roll.

25. Cf. Frith, *Music for pleasure*, 12.

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