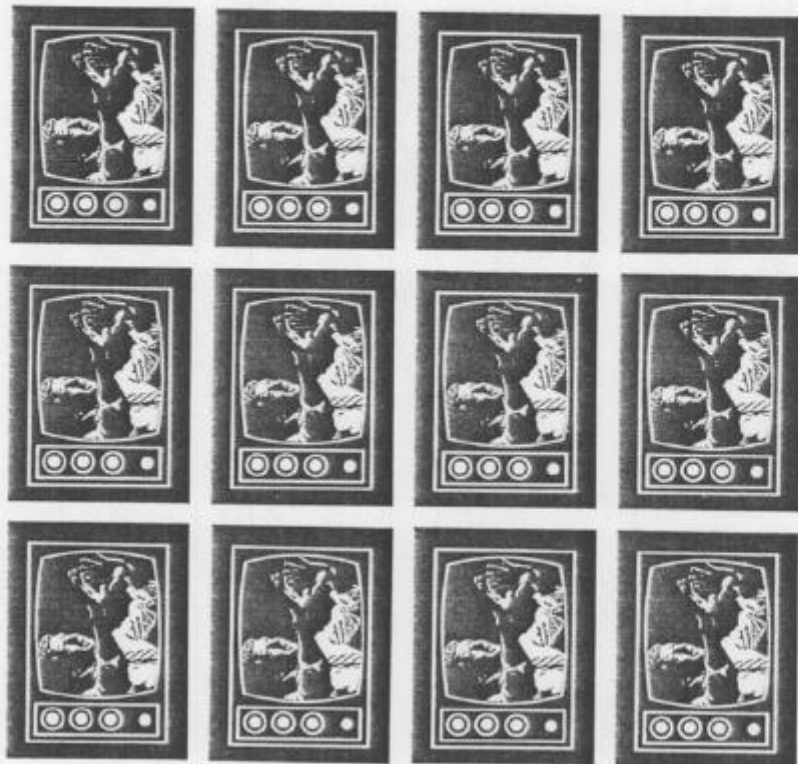


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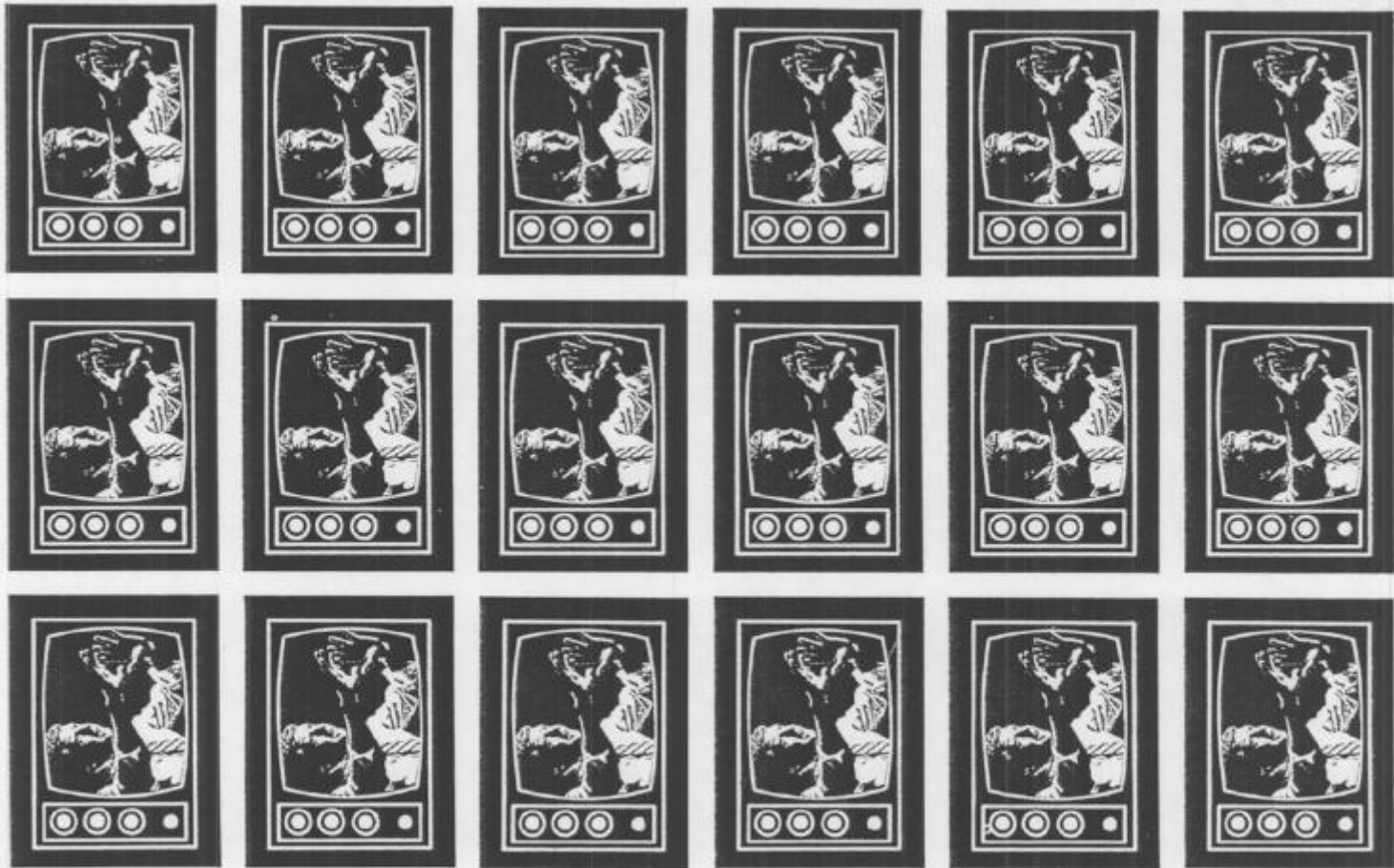
Communications scholar James W. Carey writes that "reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication; that is, by the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms."¹ Music videos are evidence of the transformation of television's symbolic forms into a digital symbolic narrative form based on the extremely visual and extremely electronic. Leonard H. Goldenson, chairman of the board of ABC Television, said in a 1981 speech that "we can no longer rely on our mastery of traditional skills. As communicators, as performers, as creators, and as citizens, [the electronic media] requires a new kind of literacy. It will be a visual literacy."²

It comes as no surprise that a shift toward visual literacy should take place in America, because there is no other country that relies more on visual information. American common sense is dominated by the phrase "seeing is believing," and nowhere was that more apparent than during the Gary Hart/Donna Rice affair. Ironically it was *USA Today*, the newspaper that prides itself on the quality of its graphics and made the print media realize the importance of the visual image, that put it best: "You can dispute allegations made in print. It is hard to argue with a videotape."³

Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy*, identified a transformation in human consciousness brought about by writing. He states:

Writing establishes what has been called "context-free" language...or "autonomous" discourse...which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author.³

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Similarly, electronic visual media have wrought a change in human consciousness by changing not only the way in which information is presented but the possibilities for response. Ong argues that there is no way to refute directly a text. Given our common sense beliefs, it is even more difficult to refute a visual text, not to believe our eyes.

Visual perception (and its easy alliance with electronic media) is responsible for a change in narrative form. The transformed narrative that appears to be emerging (found primarily in music videos) I call digital narrative. My use of the word "narrative" is derived from Ernst Cassirer's theories of symbolic communication which contend that human beings create and locate themselves in cultural patterns that are created by use of symbols, interpret and transcend those patterns, and communicate with each other using mutually evoked images that acquire meaning through use and shared experience.⁴ Narrative, then, is essentially a systematic structuring and restructuring of cultural patterns.

My use of the word "digital" requires a little more explanation. Jürgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees, in *Nonverbal Communication*, write that:

Digital codification...deals with discrete step intervals. The two foremost examples of digital codification are the numerical system and the phonetic alphabet. No gradual transition exists between any one letter of the alphabet and the next...information transmitted through such a system is obviously coded through various combinations of letters or digits.⁵

They also point out the bias of digital codification in relation to narrative:

The principles of analogic codification as contrasted with digital codification have a central importance...that is still perhaps insufficiently understood. The use of words, whether in speech or in writing, has certain limitations...The fist of a prize fighter moves within a fraction of a second to strike the opponent's chin, but a considerably longer period of time is necessary to report such an event verbally. However, the idea of a moment in a prizefight can be quickly indicated by reenactment through gesture in approximately the same time sequence as the original event.⁶

They also write that "words are particularly inadequate when the quality of space has to be symbolized."⁷ It is the symbolizing of space (and time) that is central to digital narrative, and to its prime example, music videos.

The critical moment in the distinction between digital and other forms of narrative lies in the presentation of information, and the subsequent ordering of that information into meaning. Information in digital narrative is presented in bits, atomized parts, much as a computer presents data in bits. The audience is left to make sense of those bits, and to associate each bit (as opposed to merely relate each bit) with another bit or bits. It is not necessary that each bit relate to the one immediately before or after it, and digital narrative is thereby non-linear. To return to Ong's discussion of "autonomous discourse," digital narrative represents a kind of *random* discourse. Not only is it difficult to refute such a text, it is difficult to ascribe any one meaning to it.

Music videos, however, are not meaningless. There is an interpretive context within which videos operate (perhaps best illustrated in a promotional clip for MTV in which a woman argues for "meaningful mindlessness"). Much as the eye will tend to synchronize random movements with rhythmic sound the mind tends to give meaning to random images. But the discovery of an interpretive context in digital narrative is difficult, just as the question of meaning and association is problematic. Videos may be extremely liberating, as they allow the audience actively to construct meaning, or simply confusing, making it difficult for the audience to make any sense of what it views. Many videos seem to have no explicit meaning. They leave so much open to the imagination that the question of intended meaning disappears. But people will try to assign meaning to videos whether they were intended to have it or not,⁸ and music videos acquire several meanings. One of the ways this occurs is through the association process mentioned above. The ability to use one's imagination and participate in the creation of meaning may be one of the reasons for the popularity of music videos.

Of course, not all music videos exhibit digital narrative. Roughly three types can be discerned. First, there are traditional music videos that are visual accounts of live performances (John Cougar Mellencamp's "Check It Out" or Guns 'n' Roses' "Sweet Child," for instance). Second, there are videos that combine live performance with some form of storytelling, that may or may not relate to the song's lyrics (Poison's "Fallen Angel," The Cure's "Charlotte Sometimes," and Depeche Mode's "Never Let Me Down" come to mind). Third, there are videos that manifest characteristics of digital narrative, among them videos by Talking Heads, Peter Gabriel, New Order, and They Might Be Giants.

Digital narrative exhibits many of the characteristics of narrative forms found in television (and other visual media), but differs from previous narrative forms. Understanding and interpreting digital narrative requires a kind of literacy that is not being taught in schools, cannot be understood in the same way as other forms of narrative, but is learned from television (especially via programs such as *Sesame Street*) and through widespread use of computers. It can be found not only in music videos (though it is, thus far, clearest in videos), but in television programs such as "Miami Vice," "The Equalizer," "Stingray," "Moonlighting," and in a wide range of visual popular culture forms, such as magazines, films, and photographs (most notably in the film "Koyaanisqatsi," which entirely lacked traditional narrative, but told a story all the same, via visual images and music).

This form of video literacy is different than the concepts of television literacy and media literacy that James Anderson describes. He writes that media literacy is the "skillful collection, interpretation, testing and application of information regardless of medium or presentation for some purposeful action."⁹ First, the acquisition of video literacy is in large part incidental, as reported by Jerome Singer and Dorothy Singer.¹⁰ Second, the idea of purposeful action must be questioned, inasmuch as one must decide whether purposeful action includes the action of television viewing itself. Video literacy differs from television literacy because video literacy is not necessarily the acquisition of *critical* viewing skills.

Sesame Street, and shows like it, may be teaching children the literacy required to understand digital narrative. With its quick style of presentation and structuring of information in short, colorful bursts intended to move along at a pace that prevents children from becoming bored, *Sesame Street* parallels music videos and other forms of digital narrative. If one considers that *Sesame Street* was first aired during the Sixties, and that about 20 years later music videos are most popular among people who were the first to be brought up with *Sesame Street*, the connection between that program and digital narrative may be more than coincidental. The experience of viewing commercials or a newscast is similar, though, in the case of a newscast it is the news anchor who literally "anchors" the narrative.

Another visual form that children are exposed to and that parallels music videos is the cartoon show. Both are fast-paced, very colorful, filled with action, attention-grabbing, and have characters that appear in different situations and different "episodes." Music videos are obviously not cartoons, but growing up with cartoons may play a large part in the viewing and understanding of music videos. The early Warner Brothers cartoons (Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck), Betty Boop, and Felix the Cat, popular on television in the 1950s and early 1960s, exhibit strong stylistic similarities to music videos.

Marie Winn identifies the "television generation," that segment of the population that used the "television set as a child-rearing aid."¹¹ She suggests that because 1950 is the first year that television became widespread in the American home, the first signs of a television generation appeared in 1964 or 1965, when "those children who were three in 1950 approached college age." Assuming that this first television generation went on to have children not very long after its college years, the second television generation was born around 1970-1972, and is now reaching college age itself. Music videos may therefore be serving the same role as cartoons did for the first television generation - babysitting, child-rearing, and alleviating boredom. It is not coincidental, I believe, that music video directors are now beginning to work on Saturday morning children's shows. Stephen Johnson, director of Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer" and Talking Heads' "Road To Nowhere" videos, directed the CBS Saturday morning show "Pee-wee's Playhouse." The CBS program is modern, unpredictable, a montage of absurdity and motion - just like a music video.

Digital narrative's most prominent characteristic is its non-linear structure, its break from traditional notions of time. Television programs have consistently altered linear time for creative purposes. Flashbacks are common on many programs, serial television shows occur in a discontinuous time (or ambiguous time - how long has it really been since last week's episode of the *Cosby* show?), and women regularly get pregnant and give birth in anywhere from six weeks to three months on soap operas. But music videos show a more complete disregard for linear time. The aforementioned TV shows at least assume that events occur in a certain, traditionally linear and forward-moving, chronological order. A recent Talking Heads video, "Road To Nowhere," takes a man and woman through infancy, adolescence, marriage, and old age within the space of about 20 seconds. A man crawls

into a box and crawls back out a baby. The Eurythmics' "Missionary Man" video shows singer Annie Lennox moving in discrete time intervals as if a slave to the ticking of a clock - she moves with each tick, and her hair, eyes, and other physical features assume entirely new positions with each moment and each movement. The computer-enhanced figure of Max Headroom, in the Art of Noise's "Paranoia," moves his head, body, and speaks in ways that are impossible in real space and time.

Non-linearity is also evident in another communicative sphere, that of the relation of the lyrics of a song that is made into a video and the video images. In general, the visual images somehow relate to the lyrical images. However, it is a trait of videos exhibiting digital narrative that the connection between lyrics and visuals becomes more and more tenuous. In such videos, the visuals leave the relationship to the lyrics open. For example, in a video grounded in a traditional style, such as Don Henley's "Smuggler's Blues," the visuals act as a reinforcement to the lyrics (or perhaps vice-versa, depending on which was arrived at first). In a video exhibiting digital narrative, such as Eddy Grant's "Electric Avenue," the visuals virtually tell a story of their own. It is a story that is connected to the lyrics, but only indirectly. The actions, events, and images of revolution and uprising described in the lyrics are not recreated in the visuals, which revolve primarily around a child and a motorcyclist. There may therefore be a reinforcement or juxtaposition of meanings, depending upon the interpretation of the viewer. The videos become more connotative in this manner, and more open to interpretation.

Digital narrative also uses a different sense of space than is found in previous narrative forms. It no longer acts as a setting, a scene, for a story, but as an image, an isolated experience. In phenomenological terms, it is independent of causality in the narrative.¹² For instance, at the end of Peter Gabriel's recent "Sledgehammer" video, Gabriel is sitting in a chair in a room. Suddenly the ceiling, walls, and floor of the room turn into stars. In fact, Gabriel himself turns into a mass of stars, opens a door (made of stars) and begins walking, literally, in space. But not only is he walking in space, he is made of stars, he is space. A. Irving Hallowell wrote that "there is no such thing as space independent of objects. Relations among objects and the movements of objects are a necessary condition of space perception."¹³ The space of music videos, especially those employing computer graphics and sophisticated editing techniques, is indeed independent of objects, because the objects themselves are independent of causality.

The perception of space in digital narrative thereby becomes problematic. Hallowell wrote:

The human individual is always provided with some culturally constituted means that are among the conditions which enable him to participate with his fellows in a world whose spatial attributes are, in part, conceptualized and expressed in common terms.¹⁴

The conceptualization and expression of space in digital narrative is so fluid, so flexible, that it makes coordination between the perceived space and real space impossible.

A version of this paper was presented at the *International Communication Association 1987 Annual Convention in Montreal, Canada*.

¹James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," *Communication* 2 (1975): 1-22.

²*USA Today*, May 8, 1987.

³Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 78.

⁴Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962) and *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vols. 1-3* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923, 1925, 1929).

⁵Jürgen Ruesch & Weldon Kees, *Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956).
⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Rebecca Rubin reported that different meanings were created by a group of college undergraduates who watched a music video and those who only heard the audio portion of the video. One can only assume that it is the addition of television that effects the change in meaning between music audio and music video. Rebecca Rubin, *et al.*, "Media Use and Meaning of Music Video," *Journalism Quarterly* 63 (Summer 1986): 353-369.

⁹James A. Anderson, "Receivership Skills: An Educational Response," in *Children's Understanding of Television*, ed. by Daniel R. Anderson and Jennings Bryant (New York: Academic Press, 1983).

¹⁰Jerome L. Singer and Dorothy G. Singer, "Implications of Childhood Television Viewing for Cognition, Imagination, and Emotion," in *Children's Understanding of Television*, ed. by Daniel R. Anderson and Jennings Bryant (New York: Academic Press, 1983).

¹¹Marie Winn, *The Plug-In Drug* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

¹²Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

¹³A. Irving Hallowell, *Culture and Experience* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There Rock After Punk?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 50-74.

¹⁷The direct precursors to music videos' use of digital narrative can be found in Bunuel's films, Dali's art, and the Dada movement.

¹⁸James W. Carey, conversations with the author, Summer 1986.

But the real crux of the issue lies in the manner in which space is perceived in reality and via digital narrative. Hallowell argued that culture affects perception of both space and time.¹⁵ Cultural patterns themselves are framed by society's conceptions of space and time, by an understanding of distances and generations, and it will be interesting to discover how society's new ways of seeing affect the transmission of culture. Music videos not only change the relationship between music and television among youth, but affect the creation of meaning from music as well. Many arguments for the dismissal of music videos as music industry commercials have been made, but none is convincing. It is more compelling to think of music videos in the terms Lawrence Grossberg set forth in a 1986 essay:

MTV has provided what American radio never would — a national network of music. But it has accomplished this only by recontextualizing the music, by demanding that it take on a visual and more particularly, video existence.... It is too early to speculate on the effects of this new cultural form. We can note that it is immensely popular among the very young, that the way the music works is significantly altered by its (re)entrance into processes of the visualization of culture, and that it will undoubtedly reshape the listening practices and the investments in the music of these new fans.¹⁶

It appears that where twenty years ago young people would never have given up their music (as expressed in CBS Records' 1969 ads that stated, "The man can't bust our music") they would now be loath to give up their TV (regardless of how boring they may find it). The insertion of ostensibly oppositional, avant-garde practices, once confined to the outer edges of culture¹⁷ and now brought headlong into the mainstream of American life via the TV set, is problematic. Rebellious movements such as surrealism and Dada no longer retain their status as oppositional practices, nor does rock and roll retain its rebelliousness when seen on TV, twenty-four hours a day, sandwiched between reruns of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *The Monkees*. The only response is to turn the TV on or off (an act which is itself a digital construct, a mirror of the binary act). The sole taboo remaining on MTV is explicit sex, which, if it is the only rule left to be broken, could (aside from the adage "sex sells") account for so many videos' use of sex.

In some ways digital narrative is without narrative; it must be constructed by the viewer.¹⁸ The implication for memory is startling. How can digital narrative effectively transmit culture if its meanings are constructed individually? How can shared meanings, meanings which are crucial to the continuity of youth culture and rock and roll, exist in such a narrative form? These questions are significant not only for rock and roll and youth, but for American culture generally. For, though the audience for MTV may be shrinking, the MTV "look" is still spreading throughout popular media, restructuring the politics and practice of being young.