

“The Show Must go On”: 1980s Music Videos, Moral Panics, and AIDS

Linus Johansson

The 1980s was a time of flourishing popular music as well as sizable profits for the cultural industries in Western Europe and USA. It hosted adolescents wearing puffy pants and shoulder pads, listening to portable cassette players, and casually watching MTV, but the period’s legacy is somewhat obscured in clouds of hairspray and shimmering pastel colours. Nonetheless, despite shallow fads, famous artists would occasionally address political issues such as The Cold War, apartheid in South Africa, or famine in Ethiopia. This was done through arguments and charity, but foremost by musical means, including videos with social messages. When objecting against the nuclear arms race, protesting constitutional racism, or raising funds for charity, sympathies were easily won. However, when popular musicians used sexual references, controversies arose. While some artists engaged in humanitarianism, others caused moral panics, and some did both.

During the mid-1980s, public debates about sex and youth cultures were highly polemic, either emphasising freedom of expression and the democratic right to information or calling for censorship and legal retribution. Conservative organisations such as the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), initiated trials against a selection of artists, claiming their songs caused immorality, and even death, among its adolescent listeners. The debates hardened during the AIDS-crisis, and homosexual men were particularly shamed. However, several popular artists publicly questioned such allegations. They took part in the democratic process by participation in debates, television appearances, and by arranging music festivals. Moreover, they produced music videos, which allowed them to reach out to audiences in ways that their opponents could not.

The aim of this article is to analyse this clash as part of a participatory democracy, where both sides used different resources and approaches to push their respective perspectives through, and where the music video became a crucial means for political activism. In order to follow this development, this article will address four overlapping historical phases from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, when relationships between music videos, sexuality, and moral panics were particularly tense and always transforming, in Western Europe and USA. First, a historical introduction provides examples of genderbending music videos from before the outbreak of moral panics (1978–1984). Selected examples show a variety of contemporary genres, but apart from being popular, the videos have been selected because of sexual themes in lyrics and as portrayed in the videos. The second phase involves the early

history of MTV, the formation of the PMRC (1981–1985), and an example of a banned video. Regarding the third phase, the broader debates about AIDS (1984–1987) are analysed in terms of moral panics, contrasted by a charity video celebrating sexual diversity. Lastly, the article draws attention to changes in debates, and the de-escalation of the AIDS-crisis (1988–1992). A video with educational aims illustrates this, the final phase of this history.

As a multimodal expression, music videos belong to three domains of meaning: words, music, and images (Burns 2019: 184). The singer is usually the main character (Goodwin 1992: 77f), integrating lyrics into melodies, and expressing moods such as joy, sadness, aggression, or eroticism. The voice is an instrument, found in different settings. Some play guitars, some synthesizers. Some use live drummers, some use drum machines, and so on. More than pointing out patterns and subjects, the aim is to display diversity. 1980s music videos have been described in terms of an abandonment of narrative (Goodwin 1992: 143), but in these analyses, they are instead seen as compiled of multiple, or parallel stories. Visual narratives such as the use of live images, retelling the lyrics, creating parallel stories, et cetera, are explained step by step, through close analyses of the videos. (Burns & Hawkins, 2019, Osborn 2021, and Abbott 2022). Analyses of individual videos mostly reflect my own interpretations, although references to other literature on the subjects occur. My understanding of the period is above all informed by historians such as Gaar (2002), Nekola (2013), Sanneh (2022), and Weeks (2018). Accounts for moral panics are mainly based on Gustafsson & Arnberg (2013), using Cohen (1972). In combining these approaches, the article aims to explain how music videos from the period 1978–1992 both caused moral panics about sex and questioned conservative values. The first phase of this historical process involves music videos from the late 1970s towards the mid-1980s.

Genderbending Music Videos: 1978–1984

The term "music video" was hardly used prior to MTV, but due to the channel's instant success it soon became common (Tannenbaum & Marks 2011: xxxviii). Sex has many visual features, and videos challenged moral boundaries in more ways than songs alone could. This phase follows chronological examples belonging to popular genres such as disco, new wave, synth pop, and glam metal. The first video played on MTV was, fittingly, The Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" (1979). It was not a disco song, but it had a steady dance-beat, hi-tech sounds, and a sing-along chorus. The video displayed mediating technologies of its time, such as the radio, television, and tape recorders, but also sophisticated machinery such as computers, synthesizers, and transparent tubes transporting women in science fiction-styled outfits. It applied visual effects including colour filters and multilayered imagery. Although not outspoken about sexuality, the glamorous outfits and male falsetto singing exhibited genderbending features.

Among the more obviously genderbending videos of the time were Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" (1978), Village People's "Go West" (1979), and David Bowie's "Boys Keep Swinging" (1979). The so-called "Queen of Disco", Sylvester was openly gay, as were most members of Village People, (Sanneh 2022: 330) whereas Bowie was bisexual (Sanneh 2022: 57; Whiteley 2013: 253). Sylvester's video mainly took place on a glamorous dance floor, with lots of disco balls and himself singing falsetto in various outfits, including a glittery dress. With its call-and-response vocals, Village People used a live performance narrative (Osborn 2021: 65), in a television studio, in front of an audience. The rock-oriented sound of Bowie's "Boys Keep Swinging" did not reveal much influence from disco, but the video did. Most of the narrative was based on a simulated performance (Osborn 2021: 66), in other words, recorded in a studio without an audience. Bowie wore a simple, elegant suit, dancing confidently on a small stage. His gaze met the viewer's as he sang about the wonders of being a "boy". He looked and sounded like a man, but the video was rather "a mockery of male bonding" (Reynolds & Press, 1995: 18).

In 1979, disco suffered a backlash. At the baseball promotion event Disco Demolition Night, which had strong connections to the "Disco Sucks"-movement, albums were publicly destroyed, similarly to a book burning (Sanneh 2022: 326). This did not stop Diana Ross from recording the joyous disco song "I'm Coming Out" (1980). Like the expression "to go west", used by Village People, "to come out" commonly refers to revealing one's homosexuality. This was not necessarily the intended message (for all listeners), but Ross knew about her gay fans and had likely heard the expression (Sanneh 2022:107). There was no official video at the time, though a live recording in Central Park in New York was made as late as in 1983, although not in a television studio but on an open-air concert stage. She wore a purple, glittery dress and her excited voice inspired to showing the world you are more than they assume. On MTV, many early music videos showed inspiration from the late 1970s, including dresses, sexual themes, innuendos et cetera, but there were few controversies around these videos (Castanger 1999: 184). Objectification of women became more common during the 1980s, and so did moral debates on the issue. Artists' genderbending attributes did not necessarily decrease but changed over time. The following four examples represent popular genres and sexual themes from 1981 to 1984.

In 1981, new wave was mainly seen as a form of rock, perhaps closest to punk and glam rock. But the genre also took influence from disco, and in turn inspired early synth-pop. Duran Duran's "Girls on Film" was a hit song, but the original video was too sexually objectifying for MTV, and an alternative version was made. Both were based on a simulated performance narrative, including a stage, a photo studio, and female models. In the original version, the stage turned into a catwalk, eventually expanding into a massage parlour. The editing was simple and plain, and not processed with advanced video

technology. It featured lightly dressed women, one of whom was a model, and another a nurse in a short dress, filmed from a naughty worm's-eye view. Nonetheless, one of these women was a champion sumo wrestler, and one a cowgirl, riding a man with a horse mask. Despite objectification, all these women eventually demonstrated greater strength than the men in their company. In the censored version, however, most women were models, dancers, or musicians. Apart from a few short extra narratives, focus was on female faces and postures, and much effort had been put on editing and video effects.

Objectification was not always and only a display for the heterosexual male gaze, with half-naked girls dancing among phallic symbols et cetera. African American duo The Weather Girls, formerly backing vocalists for Sylvester, turned perspectives around in "It's Raining Men" (1982). As they hosted a news broadcast on television, men were indeed falling from the skies outside, with umbrellas, hats, trench coats, and tight underwear. They were objectified in ways that could have attracted both heterosexual women and homosexual men, but they played an active part in the narrative. The song showed influence from disco, but also featured powerful, gospel styled vocals. Fittingly, the words "Hallelujah" and "God bless" occurred, complemented by sexual innuendos, such as to go out into the rain to get "absolutely soaking wet". A few minutes in, the men danced almost naked around a heart shaped bed. Enjoying the performance, the Weather Girls themselves lied on the bed, shown from a bird's eye view.

Lacking a chorus, Eurythmics' "Sweet Dreams" (1983) repeated one verse, a wordless bridge, a middle eight, and a solo. The "clinical coolness" (Rodger 2004:19) of a monotonous, single phrase synth bass line and a drum machine strictly following the pulse, kept the song together. Androgynous singer Annie Lennox assumed the character of a dreadful world leader, wearing a suit, short, red hair, colourful make-up, and gloves. Like a dominatrix (Reynolds, Simon & Press 1995: 295; Rodger 2004: 17), she wielded a cane in phallic gestures, as if it were a baton. Advanced technology such as space rockets, television screens, and computers appeared in multilayered colour-filtered imagery throughout the video. In contrast, there were sensual close-ups of Lennox's closed eyes and moving lips. She sung about people who want to use or abuse, while others want to be used or abused. Her voice was sad and worried, and the sadomasochistic innuendos were alternated by stricken, wordless calls (ad lib-singing). Lennox's voice intensified as she switched from "head" to "chest" voice, when returning to the same note (Rodger 2004:20). Diverging from the lyrics, the video's extra narratives (Osborn 2021: 68) included farm life, meditation in front of gold records, and passing a river.

Presumably in conflict with most examples so far, 1980s heavy metal has been described as "the opposite of androgynous pop" (Horrocks 1994: 155), but also, as in itself, androgynous (Walser 1993: 12). Heavy metal was not a

new genre, and the androgyny in mid-decade glam metal bands had more in common with earlier metal genres than with contemporary pop. Denim and studded leather supported a macho image, while long hair and make-up looked feminine. Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" (1984) was playful towards masculine ideals and desires, but it also objectified women. The main characters were the confused nerd Waldo, some cool, teenage versions of the bandmembers, and teachers in bikinis, wearing beauty pageant ribbons while dancing on pupils' desks much like strippers. Singer David Lee Roth displayed genderbending features such as extravagant dance moves, feminine postures, flamboyant vocals, and a both muscular and androgynous stage persona (c.f. Walser 1993: 45f; 129; Whitley 2013: 257). The video primarily followed the lyrics and hosted two explicit narratives (Osborn 2021: 68). One was set in a school bus and one in a classroom. There was also an embedded narrative with no connections to the lyrics (Abbot 2022: 248). Although the song lacks obvious musical similarities with disco, this narrative took place on a dancefloor with a disco ball, where band members performed a less than well-rehearsed variety act.

In summary, this phase started with the genderbending late 1970s and was followed by sexual objectification during the early 1980s. Disco had had strong influences on songs and videos up to the turn of the decade, but gradually lost it. New genres emerged and with them, new ways of expressing sexuality.

From MTV to the PMRC: 1981–1985

The second phase of this history began in August 1981, when MTV premiered. Initially, the channel mostly played videos and featured only a few hosted shows (McGrath 1996: 5). However, during a decade of great success, it launched news broadcasts, genre-specific shows, and their own video awards.¹ Music videos would not have had its success without it, but the channel's position regarding democratic rights is problematic. MTV made it easier for the industry to target specific groups of listeners, but also mediated political commentary. And while it supported humanitarianism, it promoted objectification of women. Daytime videos on heavy airplay (Goodwin 1992: 12; 80) featured lyrical innuendos, sexy voices, and to some extent erotic imagery, but were not verbally or visually explicit. Provocative videos were shown late at night, and offensive ones were seldom played at all. As sexuality became a more common theme, family-, school-, and religious communities pointed out depraved songs (Chastagner 1999: 180f; Gaar 2002: 352; Nekola 2013: 421) and held artists responsible for premarital sex, sexually

¹ Goodwin (1992: 143) summarises the schedule for "a typical day in March 1991", including VJ sessions, themed or genre-specific shows, news, hitlists, field reports, et cetera. McGrath (1996) explains MTV programming such as Club MTV (pg 168f), 120 Minutes and Dial MTV (pg 147), and Yo! MTV Raps (pg 173). Some of these shows, and a few more, are discussed by Sanneh (2022: 33f).

transmitted infections, abortions, homosexuality (Nekola 2019f; Brackett 2018: 285), promiscuity, perversion, sadomasochism, and necrophilia (Walser 1993: 154f).

Although MTV was not infused with moral panics, it banned Queen's music video "I Want to Break Free" (1984) (Desler 2013: 395). Unlike the original version of "Girls on Film", there was nothing sexually objectifying in it, apart from singer Freddie Mercury's hairy torso in an extra narrative. Sentimental lyrics about a painful breakup, over a riff-based 12-bar dance groove, was hardly provocative either. In the main embedded narrative, however, band members were dressed in drag, as characters from the long-running British television drama *Coronation Street* (1960–). This was too much for conservatives but appealed to crossdressers among Queen's fans (c. f. McLeod 2001: 200). Wearing his moustache and arm hair, while also wearing makeup, a short latex skirt, pink earrings, a tight, pink, sleeveless top, and pushing a vacuum-cleaner, Mercury was the most genderbending character in the video. Guitarist Brian May, in hair rollers and a dressing gown, sipping of a cup of tea, portrayed a charming lady, while bassist John Deacon was a grumpy old woman who wore a hat indoors while reading a magazine. The one who most imitated a woman, in this case a cute little girl, was Roger Taylor in a school-uniform, a curly blond wig, and a hair clip. As drummers are commonly thought to be overtly masculine, this was most unexpected. But he reminded the viewer of his position in the band by tapping his foot to the beat. Starting with the band name, genderbending was far from new in Queen's image and one of their albums is titled "Innuendo" (1991). However, they were also known for complex musical arrangements and virtuoso performances, celebrating both rock and classical music, including opera, such as in "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975) (McLeod 2001: 194). Nonetheless, "I Want to Break Free" was a simple pop song with a humorous video, which conservatives did not find amusing at all.

In 1985, the PMRC was formed by the "Washington Wives", mainly spouses of highly ranked American politicians, led by Al Gore's wife, Tipper Gore, and James A. Baker III's wife, Susan Baker (Chastagner 1999: 181f). PMRC wrote letters to legislators and gave interviews in the media, describing youth music as among other things "pornographic" (Brackett 2018: 285; Nekola 2013: 419f; Tannenbaum & Marks 2011: 278). On their list of "The Filthy Fifteen", artists with "the worst" songs were prosecuted. The list included four categories, including violence (13,3%), drugs (13,3%), the occult (13,3%), and sex (60%). The trials were largely unsuccessful but led to an agreement by which the industry started to use a warning label with: "Parental Advisory / Explicit Content" (Brackett 2018: 289). However, as moral panics faded during the 1990s, these warning labels came to be seen a mark of authenticity and used in marketing (Castagner 1999: 189).

The PMRC's outspoken ambition was to inform and protect the public, but some of the accused artists had the same ambition. The will to replace fear

with knowledge was expressed by among others Madonna, who emphasised a need for sexual education for adolescents (Gaar 2002: 353f), and by Cyndi Lauper, who featured in the charity project USA for Africa the same year. Their EP “We are the World” was a project of participatory democracy, supporting starving Ethiopian children. It was released in March 1985, three months after Band Aid’s “Do They Know it’s Christmas”, and two months before the PMRC was formed. In July, the Live AID concerts raised both money and consciousness (Gaar 2002: 350). Furthermore, it coincided with the growing AIDS-crisis.

Moral Panics and the AIDS-Crisis: 1984–1987

Around 1980, the as-of-yet unknown virus HIV began a fast-growing pandemic (Sörberg 2008: 155), first discovered among the gay population where it had devastating effects. The third phase of my study begins in the mid-1980s, when HIV and AIDS had become a symbolic matter (Weeks 2018: 317), labelled a “gay disease” (Björklund & Larsson 2018: 1) or a “gay plague” (Weeks 2018: 323).² As the culture wars continued (Nekola 2013: 407f), conservatives found support in biblical hermeneutics (ibid: 411) and “the official attitudes towards homosexuality hardened significantly” (Weeks 2018: 321). Due to the stigma associated with HIV, moral panics made it difficult, even dangerous, for homosexual men to get tested. The disease had originated in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it had already caused enormous suffering due to global injustices, unequal power, and economic troubles (Björklund & Larsson 2018: 1). Eventually, the worst consequences affected the “oppressed, marginalized, disenfranchised, or poor” (ibid: 5). When the virus spread among heterosexuals in the West (Weeks: 323), injecting drug users quickly became the largest group (Sherman 2007: 193), in turn seen as “deserving” the disease (Gaar 2002: 353f).

Although political tensions were high, artists’ reactions to the AIDS-crisis could be peaceful and subtle. Despite not directly referencing AIDS, Dionne & Friends’ version of “That’s What Friends Are For” (1985) (originally by Rod Stewart in 1982) collected money to support both public awareness and clinical studies (Gaar 2002: 356; Attinello 2013: 223). Dionne Warwick’s mixed gender, cross-racial super group featured Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight, and Elton John (Sanneh 2022: 114). The performance was overwhelmingly merry, cozy, and serene. Taking place in a recording studio, the video was not particularly provocative, although it featured a gay white man kissing a straight black woman on the cheek (Sanneh 2022: 124).

The mid-1980s was clearly a time of moral panics. Cohen’s (1972) model of this phenomenon illustrates how self-proclaimed experts identified a

² In Sweden, for example, people with HIV were obliged by law to inform any potential sex partner about their HIV status, and many meeting locations for homosexual men, such as sauna clubs, were closed (Björklund & Larsson 2018: 3f).

supposed threat, appointed misusers, selected victims, and identified offenders referred to as "Folk Devils". It also explains the calls for legal action, reliance on hearsay, and focus on symptoms rather than on causes (Gustafsson & Arnberg 2013: 20f). While some emphasised the need for medical treatments, others suggested that AIDS helped society by eradicating unwed mothers, prostitutes, and other people in need (Sherman 2007: 190f). Debates "dramatised and illuminated in an unprecedented way all the contradictory tendencies of the decade" (Weeks 2018: 322). Gustafsson & Arnberg's (2013: 20f) adaptation of Cohens model applies to these events in several ways. First, moral entrepreneurs with access to mass-media and public debates declared themselves experts. Second, cultural expressions that were expected to corrupt young listeners gave them the image of the misusers, and innocent sufferers of HIV, such as children, were simply victims. Third, Folk Devils were appointed, such as artists who made sexually provocative music videos or worked against moral panics, or homosexual men who were blamed for the HIV pandemic. Duran Duran and Queen both experienced censorship, although their videos were much different in terms of their sexual themes. Furthermore, Queen played an important part as moral panics about AIDS entered its final phase.

Education, Charity, and the Death of a Star: 1988–1992

Dionne & Friends were early to promote education and clinical studies, but more followed, and debates changed towards the end of the decade.³ In 1988, the American Health Resources and Services Administration received funding for support of children infected by HIV. In 1990, the charity television special *Red Hot & Blue* featured video performances of Cole Porter songs by among others Sinéad O'Connor, Annie Lennox, Debbie Harry, and Iggy Pop. A compilation album and a few singles were released. In 1991, Ann and Nancy Willson, with Paula Abdul and Pat Benetar, recorded a song for children with HIV, which economically supported The Paediatric AIDS Foundation (Gaar 2002: 356).

The same year, in "Let's Talk About Sex", female African American hip hop trio Salt-N-Pepa addressed free speech about sexual issues. In proclaiming open-mindedness, they were "positively peddling youth counsellors" (Reynolds & Press 1995: 300). The simulated performance video was provocative, and considering their gender and ethnicity, daring. It was introduced by talk about how embarrassing the topic is, but most of it

³ In 1988, Danish singers Sanne Salomonsen and Thomas Helmig collaborated with the song "Den jeg elsker, elsker jeg" ("The One I Love, I Love"), a cheerful dance track which recommended monogamy and mutual trust. In some embedded narratives, the video featured nudity, including a male couple standing close enough for their penises to almost touch. Like with Duran Duran's "Girls on Film", a censored version was made. The lyrics did not mention HIV, but profits supported education and research administered by Danish AIDS-fundet.

featured them self-confidently rapping and dancing. A few young men on a suburban parking lot joined in the chorus. Like “It’s Raining Men”, the video mainly took place at a broadcast station. It included a conflicting narrative (Osborn 2021: 69) in which a show host tied to a chair had his mouth gagged, with the word “censored” written on the tape. A few minutes in, a standing human skeleton, also with its mouth taped over, wore a red, triangular warning sign with the word “AIDS” on it. There were no such references in the lyrics.

Despite Salt-N-Pepa’s reminder, the new decade seemed open for new perspectives. But in November, Freddie Mercury passed away, which had dramatic aftermaths. He had been openly bisexual, but his HIV status remained unconfirmed until just days before his death. Queen’s penultimate video, “The Show Must Go On”, was released posthumously. It consisted entirely of embedded narratives, collected from some twenty previous videos, including above mentioned “I Want to Break Free”, but also “Bohemian Rhapsody” (1975), “Under Pressure”, (with David Bowie) (1981), “Who Wants to Live Forever?” (1986), “The Invisible Man” (1989), and “I’m Going Slightly Mad” (1991). Multiple stories take place in various environments and settings, showing enormous audiences, blissful moments backstage, weird costumes, various video effects, and a naughty camera angle or two.

Mercury’s demise induced a collective response, which indicated that moral panics towards these music videos were failing their cause. In April 1992, after just five months, The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert was held at the Wembley Stadium in London, with an audience of over 70.000. It featured several above-mentioned artists, but also George Michael, U2, and Axl Rose, with Liza Minelli performing the most fitting grand finale, “We Are the Champions”. A caring speech to the audience, and to youth at large, was given by Elizabeth Taylor. Profits supported the Mercury Phoenix Trust, which is still active.

Concluding Thoughts

To summarise, my account for these four historical phases addresses different aspects of a democratic process, in which artists, the media, and moral entrepreneurs played the main parts. First, sexual themes and genderbending was common in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but always transforming. Second, MTV played an important part in the dissemination of sometimes provocative music videos, which led to moral panics on behalf of the PMRC. Third, the AIDS-crisis was blamed on, among others, gay men, drug users, and prostitutes, while artists were organizing to support clinical studies and public education. And fourth, a need for free speech was expressed, a great star fell, and a tribute to him implied that the moral panic about AIDS was reaching its end.

Returning to Cohen’s model, moral panics started with excessive accounts of a perceived threat, in this case blaming artists for moral decay, and gay

men for AIDS. Moral entrepreneurs demanded retribution such as the PMRC trials, and various legal restrictions. Such interventions were characterised by accusations, demands of disproportional measures, and exaggerated examples (Gustafsson & Arnberg 2013: 21). Conservatives put blame on Folk Devils for luring youth and spreading HIV, while artists strived for solutions. These culture wars were based on participatory democracy on both sides, although using different resources. More than gaining attention in the media, conservatives wrote letters and prosecuted artists, while artists used music videos, most of which appeared on MTV. It is notable that explicit references to HIV almost never occurred, although artists were open about their political causes. Despite reacting against moral panics, these videos were not provocative, and thus, conservatives could not call for censorship.

Artists found various ways of using music videos belonging to different genres and carrying many messages. They were based on visual narratives showing common objects as well as innovative technologies, exploiting clichés and sexual imagery while spreading messages of social concern, using old subjects and new video effects, and telling multiple stories in ways that letters, public statements, and legal charges never could. In democratic participation, artists explored new ways to express sexuality, communicate political ideas, and help victims of disasters and crises. And as the show went on, times changed.

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