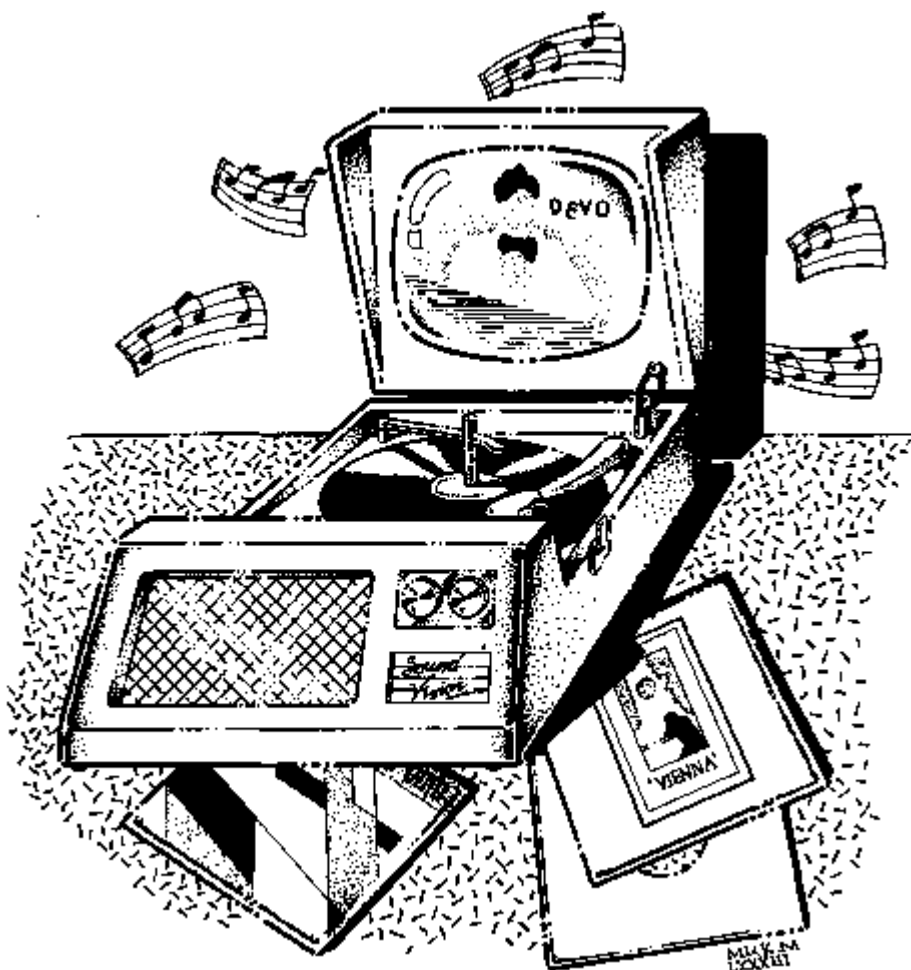


VIDEO AND POP Paul Morley



attention pop receives for multiples of wickedness, ridicule, discontent, eccentricity, desire to thrive importantly in a genuinely popular context. Pop music can play a large part in the way numerous young people determine their *right to desire* and their *need to question*.

It appeared that pop music's contemporary value was to be its creation or proposition of constant new values. Rock music — a period stretched from Elvis Presley to the last moment before The Sex Pistols coughed up *Carry On Artaud* — was easily appropriated by an establishment, the elegant apparatus of conservatism, that yearns for order. It was hoped that post-punk pop music, freed of the demands of over-excited hippies and usefully paranoid, would evolve as something abstract, fluid, careering, irreverent, slippery, exaggerated — not on a revolutionary mission, but non-static, not mean, a focus that supplies energy, as provocative and as changeable as essentially nostalgic twentieth century entertainment can be. A ringing variation. No destination, but a purpose.

The video dumps us back into the most sinister part of the pop music game. In terms of pop as arousal the video takes us back to that moment before The Sex Pistols bawled louder than all the surrounding banality. The moment of mundane disappointment.

The arrival, or at least the pop industry's misuse, of the video is a major reason, or indication, why pop music is ceasing to move at all and beginning to suffocate. If post-punk enterprise suggested that pop music could establish a fierce skittishness, an aggressive self-irony, that would enable it to transcend its manufactured state, video narcissism announces that pop has found an easy way to steal more cash from young people and damage their natural desires. The video becomes the flash symbol of what could be the final reduction of pop into the most artificial of confections, the most normal of conditionings.

Some of us try an often brilliant best to prove to outsiders and cynics that pop music — what used to be known as rock music, a loud novelty — can be something more than a pointless, artificial diversion. One or two of us can be pleasantly cunning when trying to persuade elders (outsiders) and 'sensible' contemporaries (cynics) that pop music is not just a clumsy mass fanaticism, connected to a deceitful enchantment totally lacking in moral rigour.

I'm convinced, and I try not to be too lenient, just a little melodramatic, that through pop music ideas, energies and

resources can emerge that can help the audience release themselves from the unrelieving confinements of environment. I know, or I dream, that pop music can search out limits, mock restrictions and divisions, exorcise cultural nightmares, contribute to revitalisation of people's thinking, disturb and inspire if only through its unstable mobility, its readiness to pursue apparently irrelevant links and private associations. It can somehow survive being inhibited and mangled by its harsh and stupid commercial chains, and there is surely irreducible potential because of the 'star system' and the volatile

Instead of becoming a liberating addition to pop activity, a major factor in its progression, a sign towards new possibilities — a trigger — it is another elaborate plaything. Record companies and their largely docile new signings drag in technically ingenious video directors who are handed padded budgets to, often condescendingly, construct quite complicated, accurately seductive video interpretations of usually underwhelming singles. The boy pop group's post-Bowie, vague aesthetic yearnings, their frantic incoherent need to appear experimental and challenging despite their resounding caution, is translated into sensationally senseless video dramas. A weak, forgettable, sensationally orthodox pop song — *Vienna* by Ultravox, *Musclebound* by Spandau Ballet, *Hungry Like The Wolf* by Duran Duran — is smoothly boosted into apparent epic glory by dazzling but deceptive video trickery. When today's conventional boy pop group — China Crisis or Belle Stars — laboriously assemble their warm wet hit single they will be considering the type of video that will accompany it.

The video champions the idea that the pop single is something purely to be sold, it destroys the lingering belief that a single can be composed and packaged because a few people feel a violent need for that song to be thrust abrasively into the world. The video claims that the pop song is a canned object, not any kind of event. The video removes pop music's need to be anything other than slightly whimsical. Video can offer to performers an exotic impression of superiority, covering up their powerful dullness.

We can see what has happened to pop music since The Sex Pistols dropped their last pair of shit stained trousers by viewing the standard pop video, the one colouring *Top Of The Pops* or early Saturday child shows or *Switch*. These videos exhibit how the promising post-punk shifts and twists are being tidied up. For me, an anxious pleasure seeker, pop music must mean chart, commercial, televised, popularly received singles. Pop music only exists totally, finally, as a popular event, as the cracking communication. Groups such as Yello, Fad Gadget, The Birthday Party, A Certain Ratio are terrible private excitements and the passive mass, droned into tedium by Duran Duran and Wham, is not touched. The dying ideal dream I have of clever, clear thinking, stimulating groups like Culture Club, Madness, ABC, Jobbers dominating the pop charts along with the sterner, obsessional Southern Death

Cult, A Certain Ratio, Yello can only be explained here as the idle indulgence of the pop writer, trapped in his small world — but if such a surprising mixture did happen the popular charts would take on a more interesting, provocative texture for outsiders, cynics and fans. As it is, video-protected pop begins to move between unprecedented 'extremes' of passivity and posing. Pop gets weak and selfish and sheathed by calculation. The likes of Southern Death Cult, The Birthday Party, even former chart regulars like The Beat, Elvis Costello and Siouxsie and the Banshees seem more and more alien within the chart context, and the possibility for listeners to cut themselves on protruding edges — that needn't necessarily be supplied by supposedly 'nasty' music — less and less likely. Video aids bores to pretend they take risks: video blocks true adventurers.

Ultravox, empty and ignorant, can hook themselves to the video and pretend to be masters of higher things. Orchestral Manoeuvres, who long ago used up their good ideas, anchor themselves to the video to appear cryptic and suggestive. Video should confirm today's boy pop group's extensive inadequacies. Instead, in a world grimly weighted by a careless undemanding media, video enhances their plain glamour and encourages their evasive pretensions. The video helps the boy pop group, docile and unimaginative, like Duran Duran to look down on their fans: and the fans look up, awe-struck for no good reason. And the video of Olivia Newton John's *Lets Get Physical* that unashamedly revels in its own transparency has more 'value' than the 1984 boy pop group cavorting through mist, shadows, forest, Boots, pretending in the most pathetic way that it is doling out purifying art. The video doesn't allow pop music to accept itself as 'entertainment' and subvert within that context: an 'art' orgasm must be faked time and time again.

It's not necessarily negative to consider visual imagery as much as song construction and content — its an aspect of the inevitable self-consciousness enveloping today's pop. Videos can be used within the chart context in a buoyant, insidious way — Devo, Grace Jones, David Bowie, Rip Rig And Panic, Madness have in their ways produced refreshing video packages that suggest how pop videos can bring disconcerting values to large audiences. Psychic TV, Cabaret Voltaire, 23 Skidoo have made brutally prosaic and scrappy investigations into how video can be used as confrontation.

The video should be used by pop groups to confess only that they know too much about the mechanics and techniques of pop music, not anything greater or smaller. Anything *more* will come with 'time'. We dreamers can hope that the video will end up something harder, faster and craftier than just an easy, expensive way to grab three minutes out of *Top Of the Pops*.

For now, the video hovers heartlessly in the industry controlled no-man's land, betraying the soaraway beauty of pop, betraying the sacred beauty of people's imagination, crowding their minds with useless images, ending up creating more wrong, still security. When we watch the pop promotional video we feel even more than just before The Sex Pistols cut progressive rock and 'adult' stability to ribbons ... we feel the moment of mundane disappointment.

SIR WILLIAM WALTON Malcolm Barry

The death of Sir William Turner Walton in March gives rise to one certainty — Michael Tippett and Alan Bush are now the Grand Old Men of British music. Yet Tippett remains one of the most eternally youthful in looks and preoccupations while Bush's perpetual search for renewals, in both music and personal senses, are a model to younger musicians. Walton, it seems, was the reverse — middle aged throughout his career, a span which embraced a childhood in Oldham and a graceful autumnal existence on a Mediterranean island. Like Gracie Fields, another Lancastrian who 'made it big', Walton's career demonstrates the power of accommodation — the *enfant terrible* or popular entertainer gradually becoming an establishment figure and, in the process, losing the bite and vitality of earlier offerings.

In the 1920s Walton's association with the Sitwells and his comparatively straitened financial circumstances made him eclectic and modernistically inclined. Whether orchestrating for a jazz band or composing *Facade*, Walton demonstrated at once the desire to 'ape the bourgeoisie', so characteristic of the 1920s, and the